Solidarity and Women's Resistance in Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn’t Die*

**K. Sarah Yiu**

**Abstract**

*And They Didn’t Die* is a fictional novel that explores the role that rural South African women played within anti-Apartheid resistance. The author, Lauretta Ngcobo, demonstrates the challenges placed on black women to resist both gender subordination and racial subordination within the context of South African Apartheid. Through an examination of the characters and the struggles that they both endure and resist, Ngcobo demonstrates how women play an active role in mobilizing political resistance. She further demonstrates a need for a place where men and women can come together in solidarity, because the racial oppression that exists within Apartheid is gendered as well.

Since the late 1940s, the general focus of black South African literature has been “a commitment to the struggle of the proletariat against the forces of Apartheid, a predominantly urban setting, and a majority of male writers.” However, in her novel *And They Didn’t Die*, Lauretta Ngcobo disrupts this tradition by offering the perspective of a South African rural woman, and further explores how political struggles become contextualized through the eyes of black women, rather than black men. *And They Didn't Die* not only offers a critique of the Apartheid system, but also is equally critical of the traditional customary laws and how they interact to oppress women. Ngcobo demonstrates that the challenge for black South African feminists is to maintain a double-consciousness in confronting two political battles; one against the Apartheid system and the other against patriarchal customary laws. Through the careful examination of her protagonist Jezile, this paper will examine the multiple layers in which black women are oppressed within the novel. Specifically in regards to how the migrant system interacts with women's reproductive roles, the common site of oppression serves as a basis for political resistance amongst women, and that the exploration of gender oppression becomes crucial in dismantling racial oppression as well.

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1 Grant Farred, "'Not Like Women at All': Black Female Subjectivity in Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die*," *Genders* 16, (1993): 94.
In her introduction to *South African Feminism: Writing Theory and Criticism*, M.J. Daymond suggests that “cultural South African feminism does not form a single, coherent movement.”\(^2\) Specifically, obstacles may arise because “the issue of power has been so focused on race and has so seldom been gendered in South African writing.”\(^3\) This problem becomes apparent when considering that the dominant anti-Apartheid discourse had generally focused on a single struggle against racism and capitalism. Literature concerning the migratory labour system, a system in which black men from rural areas sell their labour within the city, has often focused on the oppressed lives of men. What feminism in *And They Didn't Die* offers, however, is an acknowledgement of intersectionality, which Baahati Kuumba describes as “a recognition that gender systems, which generally deprivilege women relative to men in society, interact with other systems of inequality... and thus have multiple effects.”\(^4\) Therefore, it becomes impossible to construct an anti-racist discourse without first considering how a racist system might be gendered as well.

In Ngcobo's novel, intersectionality is located by examining how the migrant labour system and the traditional customary laws interact to oppress women. This dualism must exist because the laws that create injustices towards men based on race are the laws that further oppress women based on gender. As Ngcobo explains in an interview:

> In South Africa, over and above the oppressive system, a black woman is oppressed by law, which has calcified around the old traditional customs. Under the Natal code, for instance, a woman is a perpetual minor who cannot perform at law even when her husband is dead. She's equally incapacitated socially, economically, all round.\(^5\)

This multilayered oppression is expressed through the struggle of her protagonist, Jezile, a black South African rural woman who is separated from her husband Siyalo, during the eleven months that he sells his labour in the city. Under customary law, she finds herself subject to the patriarchal authority of her husband's family. Because she is separated from her husband, her mother-in-law, Mabiyela, takes the position of “the guardian of morality in the absence of men,”\(^6\) ensuring that her son's best interests are looked after. However, what is in her son's best interest is to extend his family, thereby producing heirs to extend his family lineage. This pressures Jezile to produce children; however,

\(^3\) Daymond, xix.
reproduction is difficult within the context of the migratory system because the separation of the two spouses places a strain on their marriage. In regards to traditional rural custom, Jezile realizes that “the only thing that secured women a position in society were husbands, and the only thing that secured husbands were children.” The migrant system frustrates this possibility by allotting a very small window of conception. The migrant system also creates a situation in which Jezile must have children to secure their marriage, yet does not give her the freedom to do so.

Furthermore, as women are defined in terms of their positions as mothers and wives, the constraint of the migratory system places women in positions in which they are left powerless and trapped. As Ngcobo explains, “husbands leave them to go to the cities and it is the women who maintain homes for those husbands to get back to when they are old... through hard toil on the barren land; it is they who bring up the next generation of workers who will go to the cities.” Yet, given this responsibility, “women are left without the minimum rights in land” and therefore become completely dependant on their husbands. This position is very disempowering because whatever hardships affect their husbands will inevitably determine the survival of the rural women that they leave behind. Therefore, when their husbands are unable to provide for them, it is the rural women who suffer because they are dependant on men for subsistence. As Noiswe, a respected black doctor and leader within the rural women’s movement, notes in her speech, “[w]hen our men have failed to provide for us, they have taken their frustration out on us; when they have been put into prisons for a thousand possible infringements of the law, we have suffered.” It is in this common state of oppression that Noiswe is able to assemble the rural women in their Thursday meeting prayer group. Because the prayer group is a time when the women of the community come together to express spiritual solidarity, it is in this already established community that she is able to mobilize a women’s resistance. As Daymond would suggest, this common understanding of rural women’s oppression could be seen as a starting point for “a degree of coherence, of common purpose.” This “common purpose” comes from the understanding that the system that oppresses men will inevitably oppress the women that are left behind.

Within the framework of intersectionality, it becomes important to examine how the patriarchal nature of Apartheid functions as another institution in which gender roles are enforced. Within the structure of the migratory system, it becomes possible to examine how the separate spheres are created; women are confined to the reserves (the private sphere in

7 Ngcobo, 18.
8 Bush, 8.
9 Bush, 8.
10 Ngcobo, 43.
11 Daymond, xv.
which they perform their domestic roles), and men go off to the city (the public sphere in which they enact their role as breadwinner). However, these gender roles can be equally oppressive to both men and women, especially in examining the relationship between Jezile and Siyalo. In the novel, Jezile and Siyalo eventually produce two daughters to complete their nuclear family. However, when Siyalo becomes involved in the anti-Apartheid movement, he is fired and is therefore unable to provide for his family. He begins to feel the weight of his duty as breadwinner when he watches his children virtually starve to death; in this situation, he feels helpless and emasculated. Furthermore, it is in their positions as caregiver and breadwinner that lead to the point in which they both feel helpless in their state of poverty. Feeling trapped in her dependence on her husband, Jezile becomes hostile towards Siyalo because he cannot provide for them. This provokes Siyalo's to steal milk from a white farmer, a point in which the couple both recognize a universal oppression; that the system is destroying both their family, and that they must steal to survive.

When Siyalo is caught for stealing, he is sentenced to ten years in prison. In his imprisonment, the function of the procreative couple becomes subverted. Within both Apartheid and traditional customary laws, sexuality is confined to what Foucault describes as, the procreative couple, a means of regulating sexuality within the population. In the absence of men within the country, women are confronted by “fears about their sexual needs... and the ever-present temptations and attendant disgrace.”

In an effort to control women’s sexuality, the ideal of the monogamous couple becomes enforced by the social regulation of adultery; however, herein lies another site in which patriarchal customary law and Apartheid work to disadvantage women. Apartheid takes Siyalo away from Jezile, and leaves her in a position of single-motherhood. The same laws of Apartheid limit the type of work that Jezile is able obtain in order to provide for her daughters. Because these laws enforce gender roles, she is unable to receive a work permit and become a migrant labourer. As a woman, her only option is to take a position as a domestic servant for a white family. This, however, leaves Jezile in a vulnerable position in which she is raped by her employer, “indicating the structural and personal violence the state inflicts on African women.” As a result of this rape, she bears an illegitimate son. Although she was raped, the birth of an illegitimate child is seen as shameful and adulterous within customary law. Her trauma is ignored and the focus is placed on the disgrace that she has brought to her husband’s family. Whereas the Apartheid left her in a position where she had no choice but to accept employment that was unsafe, customary law punishes her for being in this position. Because she is seen as adulterous, custom permanently separates her from her

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13 Ngceobo, 17.
husband. Her children are then taken away because they belong to their father's side of the family. So, it is the face of white supremacy that effectively tears her and her family apart. It tore them apart when Siyalo was imprisoned for attempting to provide for his family. It tore them apart when she had no other option but to take a position from a man who would one day rape her. It tore them apart because as a woman, Jezile had to take responsibility for her rape and therefore lost her family.

When the face of a white man (in the form of a soldier) reappears in the future to rape her daughter, it is Jezile who must act as a defender of the family. In contrast to the woman who had helplessly watched her family fall apart, Jezile stabs him, reclaiming everything that had been taken from her. This time she would not sit passively as a white man attempts to destroy her family. When she later explains to her estranged husband, “We have to defend ourselves,” Jezile proves that women can enact resistance independently from men. Therefore, as Eva Hunter argues, “black women have to become emancipated into independence and self reliance in relation to their own men folk as well as to the Apartheid state.”

In *And They Didn't Die*, Ngcobo demonstrates how women’s resistance achieves its independence, and why women’s movements become important in re-evaluating the oppressive structures of the state. Independence from men becomes important in examining how women’s participation within the anti-Apartheid campaign had been somewhat limited. For example, women did not receive voting rights within the African National Congress until 1943, and even then, their movement was limited. As the pass system (which regulated the movement of blacks between regions) became extended in 1952 to include women, the Federation of South African Women emerged as a semiautonomous women’s group who organized several anti-pass campaigns. In 1955 for example, a mass group of women left over 2,000 pamphlets on the doorsteps of the Union buildings in Pretoria. These pamphlets read, “[n]ow you’ve struck a rock. You have dislodged a border. You will be crushed!” Because women’s political movements had been limited by male organizations, women sought independence from their men folk. This allowed for the development of many woman-centered strategies of resistance that are prominently discussed in the novel. As Noiswe tells the women, “[w]omen in many parts of the country are rising up against the issue of the passes. While men are away in the cities government officials sneak up on the women, hoping they will find them alone, weak, and defenceless.” However, in forging their own resistance, the novel reveals how women become a force to be reckoned with. For

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15 Ngcobo, 245.
16 Ngcobo, 114.
17 Kuumba, 508.
18 Kuumba, 508.
19 Ngcobo, 48.
example, when a line of policemen attempts to apprehend the women's prayer group, their plans are foiled by their confusion. Essentially, they cannot do anything because they can only catch the women singing; however, within this song is resistance: "they sang on and on until they felt strong and equal to any task." This solidarity only fuels their desire for militancy and as we see in later scenes, their strategies become more militaristic, and they burn their passes in defiance.

This notion of solidarity is discussed within Daymond's article. She describes how in Shireen Hassim and Cheryl Walker's paper, the pair concluded with the belief that "that if socially constructed differences are 'honestly and openly negotiated' then women can achieve 'solidarity on the basis of common goals.'" This belief in 'solidarity on the basis of common goals' becomes evident, as Ngcobo outlines how urban women and rural women's struggles become closely allied. When Jezile visits Siyalo in the city, she witnesses the political activities enacted by the urban women: "A group of women had gone to the beer hall in the centre of the city, soon after work and had assaulted a whole crowd of men drinking beer... Jezile laughed to herself thinking how similar their situations were." Like the rural women's revolt against the pass system, the assault on the beer halls signifies a resistance to the patriarchal nature of Apartheid. As Siyalo explains, "they build us beer halls, not clinics; they build us churches, not places to live in." This serves as another function of control, as the men, in their inability to provide for their children properly, take their frustrations out by wasting their wages in the beer halls. Again, this leaves women helpless because what little wages that their husbands have to take home are squandered, leaving them to starve.

Women's solidarity becomes further compounded when Jezile and a group of rural women are sent to jail for initiating a pass burning protest; however, this also includes an acknowledgement surrounding the issue of various subject positions. The problem of difference becomes addressed when Jezile initially feels threatened by the presence of urban women within the prison. As contextualized through the eyes of Jezile, there is a sense of "us" versus "them"; "The city women were their traditional rivals. They were the women who took their men, or so they thought." Yet, the tension between various subject positions becomes resolved with the knowledge that the women face a common oppressor. Coming together in unity, the women begin to sing through the walls. Even the politicized women share their ideas with the non-political prisoners because "[t]hey believed that they were all reacting to the same problem, but in different ways." Again, solidarity forms based on an understanding of a "common purpose."

20 Ngcobo, 49.
21 Daymond, xxi.
22 Ngcobo, 30.
23 Ngcobo, 32.
24 Ngcobo, 102.
As Ngcobo depicts "how country women cope and resist the pressures of the law" and "how the laws of the country disadvantage them," she also illustrates how women's resistance to the gender system criticizes the racism within Apartheid as well. As demonstrated through the assault on the beer halls, women were not opposing men; they were opposing a structure that separated women from men. As Ngcobo admits, in this system “[o]ur men are perhaps worse than many in their treatment of women, precisely because they are oppressed- their incapacity and their general frustration makes it possible.” That is why when women oppose oppression based on gender, they are opposing the oppression of black men as well. It is at the point in which women are able to maintain independence and resist gender oppression, that it becomes necessary for men to join the women. As Jezile witnesses in Durban, the men walk alongside the women in their protest against the beer halls. As the struggle against the pass system suggests, it becomes necessary for men folk to take a position alongside women, allowing them to join in solidarity.

The rural women in And They Didn't Die demonstrate a fierce resistance to the state that oppresses them as both gendered and racialized citizens. This double standpoint of oppression creates an awareness of how systems of power become interrelated. Therefore, to enact social change and social justice effectively, the battle against oppression cannot be seen in terms of a single opposition. It is not enough for anti-Apartheid campaigns to address the issue of race and capitalism, because gender inequality is hidden beneath the multiple layers of Apartheid power. Ngcobo effectively depicts how the mobilisation of women's resistance becomes essential in unravelling these multiple layers of power, especially through the eyes of rural women, who are left trapped in multiple forms of patriarchy. It is in resistance to this sense of helplessness that women begin to fight back. Yet, when these women come together by what Daymond calls, a “common purpose,” they are no longer just women, but a strong united front of political actors. This demonstrates that women not only need to be included in anti-Apartheid movements, but men need to fight gendered oppression as well. Ngcobo illustrates the strength of women's solidarity, and the forcefulness in which women fight to defend themselves. As a white farmer in the beginning of the novel states, “it is these women we've got to deal with, not those far away men in the cities.”

25 Ngcobo, 104.
26 Bush, 8.
27 Bush, 8.
28 Ngcobo, 2.
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