

Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini

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Summary

Autobiography, in exposing how the meaning of a life is constructed in language and through the writer's interaction with cultural codes, helps in creating the understanding on which a society may be built. But making meaning from within an oppressor's language may imperil as well as empower the subject. The meanings chosen by Kuzwayo and Mashinini as they present themselves as wives and mothers in their autobiographies, expose the problems of living and writing between two competing but unequally matched cultural codes. Their writing also affords glimpses of how family relationships are being given new force: the creative resistance to hegemony, which western women writers and theorists have sought in the presentational processes of autobiography, may be seen to be occurring in the life depicted in black women's autobiographies.

Opsomming

Outobiografie ontbloom die manier waarop die sin van 'n lewe in taal gekonstrueer is. Hierdeur, en deur die skrywer se interaksie met kulturele kodes, dra dit by tot die skep van dié begrip waarop 'n gemeenskap kan berus. Om egter betekenis te skep vanuit die taal van die verdrucker sou die onderwerp tegelyk kon bedreig en bemagtig. Die betekenis wat Kuzwayo en Mashinini kies as hulle hulleself voorhou as vroue en moeders in hulle biografieë, lê die probleme van lewe en skryf tussen twee kompeterende, maar ongelyke kulturele kodes bloot. Hulle skrywe gee 'n blik op die manier waarop gesinsverhoudinge nuwe krag gegee word: die kreatiewe teenstand teen hegemonie, wat westerse vroue-skrywers en teoretici najaag in die aanbiedingsprosesse van outobiografieë, tree te voorskyn in die lewe soos uitgebeeld in swart vroue se outobiografieë.

Call Me Woman by Ellen Kuzwayo and *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* by Emma Mashinini are the life-stories of two black women activists in South Africa. My responses to their narratives are those of a white academic woman; I have formulated them in an attempt to contribute to the bridge-building that has been given as the focus of this conference in Nigeria. My right to give my responses at this conference has been challenged by several speakers who have suggested that currently the primary role for white academics is to facilitate the empowerment of black women, and that, rather than someone like me, a black woman should be 'speaking for' other black women. While I agree that the processes of liberation properly entail a certain standing-back so that racially subordinated women can be heard to speak with authority for themselves, and while I fully accept that part of my responsibility as a teacher is to see that black women take their rightful places in, and enjoy the structural support of national institutions such as universities, I find the argument that empowerment entails the silencing of those who have hitherto enjoyed the privileges of speech to be a dangerous one. Although my position needs lengthy discussion, I will say briefly here that empowerment means being able to require due respect and understanding; this comes, I

think, from dialogue. Silencing one speaker so that a new monologue may be heard will not necessarily produce freedom. In voicing my responses to the autobiographies I have chosen, I had envisaged involving the other women at this conference in my dialogue with the writers of these texts. Probably this assumption of dialogue is simple-minded on my part, for the racist hierarchies we have been part of will take more than goodwill to dismantle; nevertheless, I hope that you will accept this paper in the spirit of dialogue in which it was written. It is offered, not as a ‘speaking for’ other women, but as a listening and speaking to the women whose writing I am reading, as a dialogue between a black writer and a white reader, between an activist and an academic.

My choice of autobiography was made because dialogue, bridge-building, calls for as precise a grasp as possible of how various women understand themselves and the conditions in which they live. Besides providing such information, autobiography has a special value in the search for dialogue because, rather than picturing a life as a final product, it foregrounds the processes by which the writer has come to understand her being in the world. It enacts, in the narrative, the process by which, in life, the autobiographer claims her power to mean (Eakin 1985: 226). In doing so, autobiography also exposes the wider cultural sources of meaning. For example, the African saying, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” offers a very different basis for selfhood from the singularity, the uniqueness, that is emphasised in western cultural traditions. Autobiography’s exposure of the constructedness of personal identity, and the direct and rapid access to the cultural conditions of meaning that it allows the reader, is why James Olney, for example, says that he reads African autobiography (rather than fiction) in order to begin to understand African cultures (Olney 1973: 6).

There are as yet very few autobiographies by black South African women. The material reasons for this are sadly clear: during the long years of white rule, oppressive conditions such as poverty, the denial of civic and political rights, censorship, the control of education and of markets have made it difficult for black people to gain access to writing. These prohibitions have affected black women particularly severely,¹ so that for Ellen Kuzwayo and for Emma Mashinini to have written their life-stories and for them to have done so in English, one of the languages of their oppressors, is in itself a triumph. But it is not only in the overt obstacles to writing that the problems of seizing the right to make one’s meaning through language reside; it is because language is permeated by the oppressor’s ideology that speech and writing may be threatening as well as liberating for those who seize it in order to create a counter-discourse. When ‘ideology’ is understood as “a generic term for the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, transformed” (Barrett 1985: 73), then the dialectical complexity and the dangers of meaning-making from within a ruling and hostile ideology, should be clear. As these autobiographers consciously undertake the construction of counter-discourse, of new meanings for womanhood, Michèle Barrett’s general point that while a text does not provide “reliable knowledge of directly inferrable ideology”, it can indicate “the bounds within which particular meanings are

constructed and negotiated in a given social formation", is a useful reminder of the broad changes that may be recognised. Producing a counter-discourse is a matter of entering and contesting the processes of "stereotyping, compensation, collusion and recuperation" (Barrett 1985: 80) by which an ideology works; over and above this are the problems that Kuzwayo and Mashinini face as they live and write between two unevenly interacting cultures. To demonstrate how they position themselves as they take up the simultaneous promise and threat of an ideology-bearing language, I will discuss three aspects of Kuzwayo's and Mashinini's meaning-making: the black subject's problematic appropriation of the oppressor's language; the writer's contradictory positions within the interactions of traditional and western ideologies of motherhood; and, lastly, some indications that, in the contradictory gaps between experience and ideology, writing is becoming a self-empowering act for black South African women.²

Since the advent of white settlers in South Africa, black women have had no control over the meanings given to their lives; these have long been decided for them, as Thandabantu Nhlapo says, by the interactions of African custom and colonial rule. He points out that when an attempt was made to codify this interaction, the result was "neither customary nor law" (1991: 112). Thus to create the meaning of their lives for themselves in the act of writing, Kuzwayo and Mashinini have had to resist the power of the oppressor's culture without the support of a consistently functioning traditional culture. Theirs cannot be the comparatively simple task of recovering a position that women once filled. In this respect they are not unlike the writers of slave narratives who, "staring into the heart of whiteness around [them] . . . must have felt as though [they] . . . had been flung into existence without a human purpose" (Baker 1980: 31). In recent years, the relative absence of a sustaining culture has been partially counteracted for black South Africans by Black Consciousness, the outlook which proposes for the black subject a liberating reversal of the oppressor's racist attitudes.

It is a reversal of attitudes which promises the black subject an empowering relation to the oppressor's language, but this promise may be illusory, as is illustrated in American slave narratives. The claim for liberation is evident in Frederick Douglass's account of the moment when he chose to seize his master's language. He recounts how Mr Hugh Auld had rebuked his wife for beginning to teach the young slave to read; the grounds for his objection were that, once literate, "there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave" (Douglass 1973: 36). Douglass reports that the insight into "the white man's power" that these words gave him released a determination to pursue the very course he was being denied. He says:

What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn.

(1973: 37)

As his rhetoric suggests, Douglass looks back on this moment as he writes and feels that it began a process which now enables him to control the meanings that he and his ex-master (Mr Auld) are given: “the ‘otherness’ of Auld. . . is both repudiated and controlled by the narrator’s balanced antithesis” (Baker 1980: 34). He records a moment which seemed then to offer the exhilarating freedom to construct his own meaning at will, but, as women slaves have testified in their narratives, matters are not this simple; there are dangers in appropriating the master’s language. In Harriet Jacobs’s account of her slavery, for example, her interest in her master’s language actively imperils her:

One day he [Dr Flint, her master] caught me teaching myself to write. He frowned, as if he was not well pleased; but I suppose he came to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favourite scheme. Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand.

(Jacobs 1988: 49–50)

Jacobs’s literacy does not give her even the illusion of liberty; it makes her all the more vulnerable to her master’s attempts to add sexual possession to his other means of controlling her.

Harriet Jacobs’s letters show that when, some years later, she came to write the story of her sexual victimisation, she felt herself threatened all over again by the gender codes that inhered in the language she had to use, for she feared that she would be harshly judged for having fallen from the standard of purity that was set for women (Washington 1987: 10). It would seem that, being a woman, she knew from the beginning that participation in the game of meaning-making would entail being threatened by the values that are structured into the language she had to use. By contrast, and perhaps because he desired for himself the male myth of autonomous being, Douglass seems not to have seen that despite his apparent freedom in the North, he was still controlled by the “public discourse about slavery” (Baker 1980: 43); it was a discourse which was to allow him only the identity of permanent ex-slave.

The ambivalence that Jacobs experienced as she entered the language game is central to a feminist theory of why autobiography is a particularly difficult literary form for all women, white as well as black, to use:

“the very forms and language of cultural stories of selfhood are populated – over populated – with the intentions of others” in the sense that they carry in them those cultural expectations and systems of interpretation through which a culture makes palpable its effort to understand and makes durable its power to name the world, itself, and others.

(Smith, quoting Bakhtin 1987: 48)

In the autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini the encounter with a language that is the vehicle of the “cultural expectations and systems of interpretation” of the oppressor is not located in a single outburst of “anger, outrage, obstinacy” which Washington claims is a “moment of real triumph in [a slave woman’s] text” (1987: 11). But their stories do abound with recognitions matching those that are so starkly given in slave narratives:

if taking on the culture embodied in an oppressor's language offers the power to name, it will certainly also continue the peril of being named. For example, Emma Mashinini says that when, as a trade union representative, she addressed her employers about the workers' problems, she would have to do so standing up.

In all the nineteen and a half years I worked at Henochsberg's [a clothing factory] I was never once asked to sit down. You just accepted that that was the order of the day when you spoke to the white boss – standing, in uniform, hands behind your back, completely deferential.

(1989: 26)

Despite her position as a trade unionist, she is still named, the white/black hierarchies are still firmly in place.

Mashinini's autobiography also reveals another aspect of the problems in working within the oppressor's language. She recounts how, when she was released from jail (she had been inside for six months, much of the time in solitary confinement), she went to a clinic in Denmark to recuperate; as part of the healing process she was encouraged by her Danish doctor to recount her "torture" (1989: 92), but this proved extremely difficult. Besides her fears that the South African authorities could still reach out and punish her simply for speaking about jail,³ Mashinini found it difficult to trust a white woman. "But for me I was speaking to a white doctor, and I had spent so much time with white police, surrounded by white people. . . And it was hard, very hard, to trust her, this new white woman" (1989: 92). In the act of writing, Mashinini takes care to explain that it was a mystery-mongering story by a black South African journalist which actually put her in danger while she was in the Danish clinic; she also stresses her admiration for her doctor, but the fact remains that for some time she could not see past the woman's whiteness. She could not speak her suffering because she was held by the structures of thought (self/other: white/black) perpetuated in the language she had to use. Despite the promise of empowerment through language, and through the reversal of the values in the white/black binary, the 'othering' that is so brutal in racism was still with her.⁴

The contradictions of living and writing between two unevenly ranked cultural codes confront Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini most sharply as women who have had considerable success in public life: Kuzwayo as a social worker who has campaigned tirelessly and often successfully for her peoples' civic rights while teaching many women the principles of self-help, and Mashinini as an early leader in the trade union movement and, more recently, as Director of the Anglican Church's department of Justice and Reconciliation. But, while the ideologies of womanhood may be challenged most obviously by life in the public arena, it is in domestic life that the most difficult battles may have to be fought. The problems that women in most cultures experience when domestic circumstances demand that they break the code of motherhood are much increased when a degree of competition, or of collaboration, between two codes also has to be negotiated. The codes governing women in western and traditional African marriages are comple-

mentary to the extent that they both sprang from a desire to control a wife's bearing of children, especially male children. In both cultures, marriage contracts were originally thought of as securing alliances between families, as strengthening those families' power and influence and, above all, as securing a strong line of (male) descendants (Obbo 1981: 34).⁵ These original similarities have now moved from the realities to the myths which sustain marriage, and so it is the discrepancies between African and western codes which are most strongly recorded in the accounts that Kuzwayo and Mashinini give of the failure of their first marriages and of the different rescue and resolution mechanisms on which they could call.⁶

When their marriages first strike trouble, each woman goes to stay with her mother-in-law. Emma Mashinini explains:

In our tradition. . . a girl married. . . into the family of her husband. After the wedding. . . all the elderly women. . . would convene a meeting where she was told what to do when she got to her new home. All the taboos were spelt out – how to behave to her husband, her parents-in-law. And especially she was told never to expose the dirty linen in public. This is why it was always to my mother-in-law that I would go when things got really bad between Roger and me, because wife-battering was regarded as dirty linen. . . And his mother would be furious, and even when he'd calmed down and wanted me to come back she'd say, 'No', but she didn't mention divorce. That wasn't the language we spoke. For her, the way to get away from him was to stay with her.

(1989: 12)

The “bounds” (Barrett 1985) within which Mashinini understands her life are evident in the delicate poise of her attitudes towards traditional and newer ways of coping. While she values the role of the older women, her sense of the coercion in traditional practices emerges in her use of “taboo” for the instruction that she actually elaborates as being constructive advice rather than prohibition; her sense of the limitations of traditional practice is also evident when she identifies the absent option, divorce. Later in the same passage, she contrasts recent western ways of assisting battered wives with traditional practice in which a woman would have had to

suffer [battering] in silence and never admit to a doctor what was the real cause of her injuries. Only nowadays, and this I am pleased to be able to say, this practice has been exposed to such an extent that we have refugee centres in our townships, something that was unheard of a few years ago.

(1989: 12)

Mashinini's comment glosses over the interchange between cultures that has led to these refugee centres, presenting these developments simply as what is happening “nowadays”. It is a sign that in order to assert the value of her community's actions, she has had to resist any hint of “connivance or collusion” (Barrett 1985: 81) with the oppressor's culture.

In a similar way, Kuzwayo's narrative is pervaded by her conscious opposition to the State's control over her; it is probably why she separates her account of how apartheid legislation governed her actions as mother from her indications of what she suffered through her husband. After her flight, her

younger son was refused permission to live with her in Johannesburg because he was not born there. This she places in an early chapter, entitled "Hunger Knows No Laws", in which her main focus is on the way in which laws which nominally uphold maxims such as 'thou shalt not steal' actually serve to disaffect black people from moral codes altogether. Her account of her husband's cruelty and her flight from him is given much later, in the central, more personal section of the narrative, and under the neutral title "Return to Johannesburg". By separating the racial and gender elements of her experience of constraints, Kuzwayo enables the narrative to suggest that her husband's behaviour was a single, personal aberration while the law's inhumanity enacts the deliberate, systematised intentions of an oppressor.⁷

In other aspects of her narrative, however, Kuzwayo cannot fully control the consequences of living between two systems; her position prevents her, for example, from consistently fulfilling the ideal of motherhood on which she chooses to rest the meaning she gives herself. Her central claim is that her children, "were, are and will remain, my hope, my joy, my love, my strength and for them I would fight to the bitter end" (1985: 132). Her rhetoric conveys her sincerity, but other details of her narrative indicate how difficult it was for her to live up to this claim. Conflict is evident when she says that, at the time of her flight, thought of her abandoned children led to "challenging moments of guilt, charged with endless questions I could not find adequate replies to" (1985: 132). It is also strong in her account of why, when her husband brought her desertion before the (white) courts, she could not bear to "wash [her] dirty linen in public" (140) and therefore argued for an out-of-court settlement. In doing so, she denied herself the court's power to ensure that she had free access to her children. Her traditional, wifely sense of what must remain private (for which she and Mashinini use the same domestic metaphor – "dirty linen") conflicts with her maternal guilt, compelling Kuzwayo to ignore an opportunity to ensure the access to her children which her ideal self-as-mother would seem to demand.⁸

When Kuzwayo argued for an out-of-court settlement, she chose to ignore her own (white) lawyer and deal directly with her husband and his (white) lawyer. Her explanation for taking matters into her own hands is that on the day of the hearing, the lawyer who appeared for her wore clothes which were "shabby, dirty and creased" and had a manner that was "timid and apologetic" (140). But, even more revealing than her anger at being insulted in this way, is Kuzwayo's response to his being a stranger. Her shock can be inferred from the way her narrative moves directly from references to the invaluable support of friends (whom she names), to her surprise, on the day of the hearing, at finding that "my legal representative was a totally different person from the man I had spoken to previously when I had visited my lawyer's office" (1985: 140). The cultural basis of her shock, her inherited sense of how human relationships should operate, is not something that Kuzwayo actually explains, but from sources such as Bessie Head's story "Kgotla" (1977) a western reader can surmise what she misses. She does not find in her lawyer's actions the formal but highly personalised conduct of disputes; the embodiment of wisdom in a dignified presence and speech; the confidence that the

system of debate will allow due attention to the precise circumstances of the people (not the “parties”) involved; the confidence that the resolution of the conflict will meet with the community’s approval and that that approval will be what protects the settlement that is reached. Out of her heritage comes Kuzwayo’s resistance to a strange lawyer and to the court’s adversarial exposure of “dirty linen”; it leads, paradoxically enough, to her speaking for herself with an autonomy which would probably not have been granted her in her traditional culture.

Her dismay also stems, of course, from her experience of the law as an instrument of oppression. Her will to resist such means of oppression raises the third aspect of these autobiographers’ relation to language and ideology that I wish to discuss – the signs that they, and other women like them, are finding a mental space for themselves which lies outside that of the ruling ideology, or its simple reversal, and which may lead to new ways of being and writing as the “fractures along [the] fault lines” (Smith 1987: 51) of the oppressor’s ideology finally open. In South Africa, one of the most notorious of these “fault lines” is the discrepancy between the State’s official dogma of the sanctity of marriage (and the integrity of the family) and the effects of other legalised practices, such as migrant labour, which have done so much to destroy marital relationships and family life. Neither Kuzwayo nor Mashinini have been subjected directly to the effects of migrant labour, but when Kuzwayo has to recognise that “black children are not children in the eyes of the government” (1985: 18) and when her family’s farm is appropriated for use by white farmers (1985: 56), she is in the same realm of experience.

What is evident in these autobiographies is that such political practices are forcing black women, and their families, to be creative and not just reactive. When Kuzwayo first asks the combative question “Who is robbing whom in this country?” (1985: 19) she considers only the damage, chiefly the moral damage, being done to her community which is “lost between its old heritage and that of its colonisers” (1985: 16). But later, when her son is arrested, that is when her own family is directly threatened, her response to oppression is to challenge it, to be creatively assertive. As the police take her son away, Kuzwayo’s words of farewell seize on the moment’s heroic (not its fearful and tragic) potential:

You have been involved in a very noble engagement. . . literacy classes for the under-privileged. . . You are now taken to task by the powers that be and you can easily be locked up for an effort which could have earned you recognition, honour and special respect in a normal, sane-minded country. . . Remember nobody ever kicks a dead dog. This action by the state should never dampen your spirit. On the contrary let it inspire you. . . Wherever they take you, be calm, never forget the values, standards and all that our family has stood for in the past and will stand for in the future.

(1985: 188)

Kuzwayo trusts that the heroism she invokes will be sustained by something beyond a simple reversal of racist categories. She does use the power of reversal to remind her son that in a sane world his actions would be acclaimed as noble, but then she goes beyond this strategy to call up the folk wisdom of

“nobody ever kicks a dead dog”, as well as the support of family tradition. In addition, by casting the elements of her speech into an heroically ordered written form for her autobiography, Kuzwayo demonstrates how the act of writing, of re-creating such moments of anguish, becomes in itself empowering and liberating. The double process evident here, of speech and of writing, shows how cultural strength is being created. Writing, with all the composure that it allows, becomes an act of cognitive restructuring, of forging a new basis for selfhood.

Kuzwayo’s narrative does not record, as a result of this recreation of confidence, the emergence of markedly new forms of living; it reveals rather that traditional relationships can be invested with new force. This happens at her son’s wedding in Mafikeng, the remote town of his banishment, when the local women defy police orders to shun the ceremony; instead, they house, and feed, the visiting families according to traditional codes of hospitality. When Kuzwayo herself is arrested for honourable, civic activities as a member of the Soweto Committee of Ten, it is again as a mother that she chooses to think of herself. It is as a mother that she is greeted by her people when she returns from jail (1985: 217); it is as a mother who “understand[s] the life of the Soweto child” (1985: 226) that she overcomes her reluctance to appear in court and agrees to testify about the role of Black Consciousness. It is as “this mother who carries so many burdens” (1985: 246) that she herself praises Albertina Sizulu, one of the “heroines” of her final chapter. Above all, it is as a mother who has taken on herself the suffering to which her children had been subjected, that Ellen Kuzwayo is most at peace with herself.

In Emma Mashinini’s narrative too, there are suggestions that relationships are being invested with new force as the changes which begin with women spread. For example, through her trade union work, her second husband, Tom, becomes more than a protective male presence when he helps her to distribute leaflets to the workers in the street – this had to be done outside the factory gates because it was illegal to canvass union members on the shop-floor (1989: 34). When she is in jail, Mashinini chances to see a newspaper photograph of Tom, standing alone, carrying a placard demanding the release of his wife and other detainees. Fully aware of the ironies of her husband’s following a lead she has created, she comments that although he had always been “strong and conscientious. . . this Tom was [now] a person to speak out which he hadn’t been before” (1989: 82).

Early in her narrative, Mashinini says that politicisation means being able to assert “I am human. I exist. I am a complete person” (1989: 24). Much as they would agree with her in spirit, it is a claim that many western women autobiographers and feminist theorists have felt cannot be made in an unproblematic way in the act of writing. Sidonie Smith indicates the ties which entangle women: to write a life of achievement is to create a “figure of male-identified selfhood” (1987: 54) which may, nevertheless, be subverted by the subject’s private, suppressed story of womanhood. Alternatively, if the success story is read as a woman’s story, it will be understood through the cultural fiction of woman’s “‘natural’ narcissism” (1987: 54), and so the act of

recording public achievements may, paradoxically, serve to reinforce the stereotypes of femininity. Either way, “for her as for all colonised people, the act of empowerment is both infectious and threatening” (Smith 1987: 54). This is where we began – the oppressor’s language is a dangerous tool. In recognition of the perils of language, western feminist critics have recently been celebrating the woman writer who “confronts self-reflexively the process of her own autobiographical storytelling” (Smith 1987: 57) by responding critically, as she narrates, to the cultural sources of her narrative. While the presentational process in Kuzwayo’s and Mashinini’s autobiographies exhibits few signs of this analytical, reflexive relationship to the gender codes which affect narration, it is clear that the racism of daily life under apartheid has forced them to inhabit an equivalent gap between ideology and experience. In turn, this has affected marital practices, and, almost imperceptibly, the gender ideology that underpins marriage. While Western feminists may still find it best to write in a speculative mode about the separation of marriage and motherhood (Margolis & Margolis 1981), for black South African women this split has been forcibly made a reality. Now, in the glimpses these autobiographers give of an active re-shaping and re-thinking of family roles, lies the possibility that women’s strategies for change in South Africa need not be registered only in a self-reflexive narration. Their writing reflects, even as it creates, positive developments in their own ways of being in the world.

Notes

1. Miriam Tlali, for example, has said that when she wrote her first novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan*, she “had not [had the opportunity to] read much” (1989: 71) and that in her writing she has “struggled to remove the cobwebs of tradition, custom and the colonial mentality” (1984: 84).
2. Space does not permit discussion of the problems of form in writing autobiography: as with language, form can compel writers into certain meaning structures. The western life-shape, for example, with its preference for a causally connected past, present and future, may not be congenial for people from African cultures.
3. “Legislation in terms of the Police Act [7 of 1958] and Prisons Act [1959] largely precludes the possibility of publishing information about activities of police and prison personnel.” (Foster 1987: 172)
4. Later, Mashinini recounts how this ‘othering’ was diminished. At the grave of a fellow trade unionist, Neil Aggett, who died in jail, she found that shared suffering and grief enabled her to surmount the oppositions of apartheid. “Here we were two women together: myself, a black woman, and Liz Floyd [Aggett’s friend], a white woman I’ve always respected and honoured. But with this friend we shared, this dead friend, we became as one.” Sharing led to the “psychological release” she had sought in Denmark: “I started emptying and talking, and it was a great relief.” (1989: 105).
5. In western societies, these controls over marriage and motherhood also control the inheritance of land as private property.
6. Another recent autobiographer, Sindiwe Magona, records how, when deserted by her first husband, she was unable to seek the assistance of either her family’s or the court’s resources. Her absconding husband, however, in sending her flowers on the birth of her second child, knew perfectly how to use western customs to hurt his helpless wife (Magona 1990: 178). In view of the argument that a creative response

to ideological oppression is emerging, it is interesting that she says that it was this blow “that contributed the most to my growth” (1990: 182).

7. Driver suggests that Kuzwayo sometimes “elides male oppression of women into the oppression of women by the white patriarchal state” because of the demands of Black Consciousness ideology (Driver 1989: 245; 249–50).
8. Mashinini’s account of her divorce suggests, but does not describe, similar struggles. Of her children she says simply that they “came afterwards. My people had to go and fetch them. It was not possible to do it any other way”. (1989: 12)

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