Review


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In *Why Read the Classics*, Italo Calvino (2001) notes that ‘Diderot had worked out that actually the most rigidly deterministic conceptions of the world are the ones which generate in the individual will an urge to move forward, as though will and free choice can only be effective if they carve out their openings against the hard rock of necessity’. In South Africa, women anti-apartheid activists found themselves in a politically schizophrenic world of rigid conceptions. On the one hand, women formed a key constituency in the struggle against the racial determinism of the apartheid regime; on the other hand, issues important to them as women were seen as divisive to the national liberation cause.

The fact that there is now a comprehensive gender machinery in place including a Women’s Charter for effective equality, proportional quotas for women in government and an independent Gender Commission is testament to women’s creativity and determination to take up the challenge against some of the most deeply embedded conceptions in the world. The ways in which women struggled to vociferate their needs and to organise themselves as a viable political constituency is the subject of Shireen Hassim’s book, a much needed tract on the consolidation of democracy from a gender perspective.

The book focuses on two key moments in the history of women’s organisations in South Africa: the first begins in the late 1970s with the inception of the civics movement and women’s involvement at the local level. The second part focuses on the shift from apartheid to democracy, and
in particular women’s involvement in the machinery of the state.

Throughout this trajectory there is a constant tension between the need of women’s organisations to maintain a degree of autonomy while forming part of wider political alliances. However, rather than set up a polar debate between the struggle for autonomy and political dependency, Hassim fruitfully interrogates the tension between these. She finds that nationalism provided spaces for the politicisation of women, even when it oppressed them. This was particularly evident during the years of exile where women had to compete with the ‘heroic masculinity’ ideals of political involvement. For women relegated to the kitchen or to the role of helpers and auxiliaries in the struggle, it became obvious that there was a need for transformation not only in the formal political system, but also in the notion of the political itself.

Similarly, with the rise of the civics movement women become increasingly involved in bread and butter issues at the grassroots level. Criticised for addressing concerns specific to women such as rape and abortion, women pointed out that it is them that feel the pain. From this ‘pain’ an indigenous feminist consciousness emerged. Women demanded not only a regime change but also a revolution in gender relations.

The theme of a revolution within the revolution reaches a climax at the end of the 1980s, when, for the first time, women openly employ feminist discourse, and agree that there is no liberation without women’s liberation. However, the transition to democracy is replete with dangers for women’s organisations. In all other liberation struggles they have either been marginalised or co-opted into political elites. The South African case is no exception. Women’s voices are represented by political elites rather than by a bottom-up process of participation. At this juncture Hassim mobilises a feminist framework to interrogate what democratic participation in the new South Africa means. She finds that though there are significant gains in formal equality this has often been at the expense of substantive equality: women’s political inclusion is not tantamount to transformation. Indeed, gains in formal equality are largely at the expense of a transformation in the social and economic conditions that produce gender inequality.

Despite South Africa’s national gender machinery, which has sought to mainstream gender in the political system, its political leverage is fragile. Moreover, its ties to the grassroots have become negligible. This is partly due to the dangers inherent in the transition from liberation movements to democracy, a period in which grass-roots organisations are particularly
vulnerable to cooption and a loss of autonomy. One means of addressing this is to keep alive a dynamic and autonomous women’s movement. As Hassim’s closing chapters clearly demonstrate, a visible political constituency of women is crucial to ensure a sustainable gender responsive democracy.

That the book may be criticised for lacking emotion, even at the height of some of the most exciting events in history, does not detract from its importance as a timely warning that there is no linear development in gender equality; its victories are fragile, and must be constantly guarded and renegotiated. Hassim has written not only a fascinating historiography of women’s organisations during one of the most momentous periods of the twentieth century, but also a vital source book on how best to institutionalise political gains for gender equality.

Reference