

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

How Jacob Zuma Revitalized Feminism in South Africa

Shireen Hassim 

Carleton University, Canada, and University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
Email: ShireenHassim@cunet.carleton.ca

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On August 6, 2016, the week of the South African public holiday Women’s Day, an extraordinary protest held the nation spellbound. Then president Jacob Zuma was announcing the results of local government elections live on national television when four young women walked out of the throng of election officials and politicians. They stood in front of the president, silent but visible on the televised screen. They held up placards: “I am 1 in 3,” “Ten Years Later,” “Khanga,” “Remember Khwezi.” Although the protesters stood for the duration of the broadcast, they were forcibly removed by security agents immediately after Zuma left the stage and the cameras moved offscreen. Hustled to the back of the room, they were lambasted by senior women leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) for their “inappropriate” action. This was a spectacular demonstration: silent and nonviolent, its tactics and timing pierced the performance of presidential authority and made visible a new form of feminism.

The demonstration was rooted in a massive change in feminist politics in the two decades since the ANC became the ruling party and marked a refusal to play by the rules of party loyalty. Prior feminist gains had been tied to working with the ANC, a key ally of the demand for gender equality. The negotiated settlement reached in the early 1990s favored many of the demands of women’s organizations. These included an equality clause in the constitution and a bill of rights requiring that equality be favored over traditional custom, if and when these come into conflict. New laws were enacted that protected women’s sexual and reproductive rights, and government departments were created to advance gender equality. Under the presidencies of Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, women were visible in positions of power in parliament and in the cabinet. In the early 1990s, it seemed that the work done to build an alliance with the ANC had paid off.

But feminism had become tied to governance in ways that disabled radical demands. Appointments of women to government positions were tied to their

loyalty to factions within the ruling party rather than their commitment to shifting inequalities through the use of policy instruments. As a result, representational gains did not improve conditions for ordinary women: women remained the majority of the poor and unemployed, and violence against women reached the highest levels in the world (Gqola 2022). By the end of the Mbeki presidency, feminists were growing increasingly distant from those who ostensibly represented them, and especially from the political positions taken by the ANC Women's League, which was a gatekeeper for all positions in the government (Govender 2008). But it was the Zuma presidency that made the stakes of party power visible and galvanized feminist rage in productive ways. Outside the state and the ANC, from a space of opposition rather than alliance, feminists reconstituted radical politics.

The Language of Feminism: Theoretical Dilemmas

Under Zuma, the fragile carapace of constitutional democracy cracked. Was feminism itself also fragile? Despite the centrality of gender equality in South Africa's democratic design, until the 1980s, academic feminism was a small and marginal field. Pamphlets, posters, and secretive conversations outside the gaze of the state constitute some of most important and yet most neglected archives of South African feminism. Feminism and feminist theorizing in South Africa was complex, not least because even the term "feminist" was out of bounds for many, as it was seen to denote affiliation with a Western liberal ideology (Hendricks and Lewis 1994). The term "gender activist" was used instead of "feminist," even when the content of debates was indubitably about the gendered inequalities of capitalism and apartheid. The distinctly South African concept of "triple oppression" was coined as a placeholder for feminism. Triple oppression grasped the intersection of class, race, and gender, poignantly significant in a context in which white supremacy folded white women into hegemonic status over Black men and women. The concept signaled that patriarchy worked in tandem with other systems of exploitation with the implication that women could not be defined as a homogeneous social group. Various iterations of the ways in which race, class, and gender constituted each other led to different theoretical approaches to gender, sometimes even within an alliance of organizations (Gouws 2017; Hassim 2006, 32–34; Salo 2007).

In practice, women were drawn into politics by the powerful appeal to motherhood. This appeal was attractive as a language of commonality, with both the material and affective aspects in the responsibilities of care acting as a readily available discursive frame. Positioned as aspects of social and political status rather than an essential attribute of individual women, motherhood successfully drew millions of women into political movements. Some scholars foreground maternalism as the central distinctive (also, distinctively Black) form of African feminism (Gasa 2007; Healy-Clancy 2017; Magubane 2010). These are not inaccurate readings, but they do obscure those parts of the archive showing that women also made demands that could not be encompassed within a maternal frame (Hassim 2006, 75–81).

Maternalist politics muted the claims of child-free women, reinforced heteronormative binaries, and presented the politicization of the private sphere and sexuality as part of an abnormal effect of apartheid rather than as systematically rooted in capitalism. For instance, when issues such as sexual violence were raised by women in unions and political organizations, they were minimized by arguments that these were not “political” issues but rather “familial” matters. In this scenario, building campaigns about sexual violence was positioned as distracting from the central struggle against the racist state. This narrow discursive space also excluded queer demands in women’s organizations. A radical position on sexuality was only fully articulated when a younger generation, born after the formal end of apartheid and protected by the constitution, took to the center of gender politics and disabled the nationalist frame. That was the generation emblemized by the four young women protesting against Jacob Zuma.

“Dear History. This Revolution Has Women, Gays, Queers, and Trans. Remember That”¹

The tipping point was the 2006 trial of Jacob Zuma, in which he was accused of rape by Khwezi, the pseudonym for the daughter of his old friend and ANC comrade. Defending himself against the allegation, Zuma claimed that Khwezi had silently signaled her sexual availability by wearing a traditional wrap known as a *kanga*. During the trial, Zuma chose to speak in isiZulu and based his defense on the ways in which he interpreted Zulu culture, against Khwezi’s invocation of the rights accorded to women in the constitution. The court found that Khwezi was an unreliable witness (in part because she was bisexual and had been previously raped, and was therefore considered to be confused). Zuma was found not guilty.

The trial’s outcome outraged feminists. Khwezi’s experiences resonated with many activists working in organizations dealing with sexual violence (Motsei 2007), especially because some of the violence was driven by homophobia. Black lesbian women were particularly targeted by men for what was termed “corrective rape.” The One in Nine Campaign rallied around Khwezi, determined to use the case to break the silence surrounding rape and sexual violence within families. Meanwhile, despite the condemnation of individual members, the ANC Women’s League openly sided with Zuma, including standing alongside Zuma supporters who were shouting “Burn the Bitch.”

The trial changed the landscape of politics in significant ways. It marked a decisive break between the “respectable” maternal politics articulated by the ANC Women’s League and radical Black queer politics that embraced nonbinary sexual identities. It spurred a new lexicon of intersectionality that went well beyond “triple oppression.” This new framing, rooted in decoloniality, made visible the ways in which sexuality, gender, race, and class mutually constitute each other in the formation of subjectivities *as well as* in positioning people in the economic hierarchy. It also unapologetically challenged the radical Black consciousness movement—seen by feminist, queer, and trans activists as *violently*

male centered (Mailula 2020; Matandela 2017; Vilakazi and Mkhize 2020). What would, or could, come from foregrounding radical humanness?

New technologies of political mobilization and communication, including social media, allowed activists to frame collectivities in new ways outside the older forms of nation and class. They offered the ability to instantly share examples of harm through social media and, in so doing, to make clear the structural (rather than individual) basis of those harms. Their claims work from positions of resentment, rage, and pain, and they were prepared to use their bodies as weapons of protest. On university campuses, young women bared their breasts to protest sexual violence, challenging men who sought to control political spaces. At the University of Cape Town, queer activists formed the Trans Collective during the students' protests against high university fees. The Trans Collective, led by Black nonbinary and intersex people, was concerned with articulating the intersections between race and patriarchy. The collective was focused on long-term change, even if it meant breaking with the leadership of the student movement (Dlakavu, Ndelu, and Matandela 2017).

In evoking the protest of the four young people a decade after the Zuma trial, this essay shows the extent to which the unresolved issues of gender identities and sexualities in the South African political sphere challenged the respectable politics of maternalism and nationalism. With the trial, the law as a guarantor of rights and basis for policy development lost some credibility. Moreover, it showed that the idea that formal rights guaranteed by law were not a settled matter. The trial showed that legal arguments could be used against victims of violence; yet, it also showed that new forms of politics had to be crafted that would recognize non-normative identities as valid, worthy, and independent of political parties. The political context, of course, continues to be challenging since religious bodies, traditional leaders, and political parties converge around conservative gender positions. While there has not yet been a backsliding in the legal sphere as there has been in the United States and Eastern Europe, there is anxiety among feminists that there are no political parties that are reliable allies for sexual and reproductive rights. Yet there is also hope in the ability of young people to mobilize, drawing on tools that convene publics in new and radical ways.

Note

1. Sign on a UCT TransCollective Poster, 2017.

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Shireen Hassim is Canada150 Research Chair in Gender and African Politics at Carleton University (Ottawa) and Visiting Professor at WiSER, University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg): ShireenHassim@cunet.carleton.ca

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