Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In our Lifetime

by Elinor Sisulu

Walter grew up knowing that his mother and her family had a high regard for his biological father... Walter has vague memories of being shown photographs of his father and his father’s sisters... but... (His) father remained on the periphery of Walter’s consciousness, but played no part in the upbringing of Dyantyi Hlakula, the main father figure in his life... Walter identified completely with the Hlakula/Sisulu family and it was their philosophical outlook and way of life that shaped his worldview.

A more powerful statement of the social construction of identity will be hard to find. In response to suggestions that he could utilize his phenotypical characteristics, especially the lightness of his skin colour, to evade prosecution under pass laws (as many others had taken on so-called colour-identity documents), Walter described his own identity in the following unambiguous manner (p.72):

I am a black man, I am an African, I am subject to all the laws that affect my people... because I never want my colour to determine my race. I was a African in every sense of the word. No less, no more.

Elinor Sisulu makes the following observation (p.73): “Having grown up in the warm embrace of his extended family and guided by the powerful paternal figure of Dyantyi Hlakula, who he worshipped, Walter was stable and secure in his identity.” Part of this security, no doubt, was due to the fact that, “Walter would grow up knowing that he came from a clan that was part of the powerful Thembu chieftainship, which could trace its genealogy back 20 generations to King Zwelethu (p.57).”

Besides the biological accident of his birth, Walter Sisulu grew up precisely in the same manner as other young boys in the village, herding livestock, playing the favourite game of stick fighting and listening to the stories of the elders as the oral traditions were transmitted from generation to generation. The contexts within which Walter and Albertina Sisulu were raised are almost identical rural villages in the Transkei with the extended household as the nurturing unit for both. In contrast to the boys’ upbringing though, Albertina Sisulu, in stereotypical fashion for her gender, tended the cultivated fields, collected firewood and cared for younger children in the extended family. Her subsequent elevation into politics was the catalyst to unite these traditional gender roles, a far cry from the servile-hostess described in Ellen Kuzwayo’s Call me Woman. But Albertina was special from a much earlier age. On her dying bed, her father entrusted her (instead of her elder brother) with the domestic responsibilities did not confine her to domestic labour but played a vital leadership role in public life. Walter was clearly very important in her political awakening and the manner in which she embraced the struggle for liberation. Elinor Sisulu uses her illustrious subjects to tell the story of the structures of and struggles against apartheid. She does this with a sobering account of their uniqueness and about the many qualities that make them such special people. While she catalogues the horrors of the migrant labour system and the atrocities of apartheid, she does not forget to mention the joys in the village when a migrant (Walter himself, for example) returns laden with all sorts of scarce edibles for people in the village. This is a nuanced picture of the happiness and strife of life under apartheid. Her characters are not one-dimensional stereotypes, but complex and multi-faceted real people. Having said that I must also mention that the reality of their story is somehow unreal. The heroes and heroines, their commitment and humanity revealed in these pages would make even the staunchest supporter wonder. Could they really be that good, so extraordinary?

In contrast to this moving relationship of love and struggle, Njabulo Ndebele has written an insightful piece of faction on the life of Winnie Mandela, entitled The Cry of Winnie Mandela. The story of her experience of separation from her husband, Nelson, somehow appears more ordinary embodied in the stories of myality and her involvement in kidnapping and assault of young activists. She goes without saying that Albertina Sisulu would lose all respect for Winnie Mandela (p.564). Elinor Sisulu portrays the strained relationship between the two big women of South African politics in a candid manner. In many ways they represent polar opposites. Winnie Mandela was flamboyant and charismatic with an unanny knack for articulating the concerns of a movement which generated a prodigious fount of popular (or populist) appeal. She became a folk heroine in the townships notwithstanding the fact that she was guilty by the ANC for her alleged involvement in ilicit violence against members of the community. Albertina Sisulu on the other hand, was the exact opposite of the demagogue as she worked quietly, systematically and honourtably against apartheid. At the tender age of sixteen Walter Sisulu left Engcobo deep in the heart of the Transkei for work on the mines. His transformation from an independent rural dweller working as a peasant on the family fields to an urban dweller stranded by the experience of millions of South African youth. But this transformation did not happen for a solitary one way affair. It was complicated by apartheid which compelled many prospective urban dwellers to return annually to the rural reserves. This to and fro movement of people was coupled with a radical shift in the consciousness from the central institutions of the state. The systematic disenfranchisement of the majority was the major grievance of the oppressed and it is not surprising that it stimulated such concerted opposition. Walter and
Mandela’s (p.99) remarks are also telling: “most formidable intellects of the time”.

Govan Mbeki states (p.80) that lack of formal education (he left school in cleaning and acting as a waiter. Despite his subsequent jobs included domestic work, consciousness was shaped by such events. His employer to collect him” (p.58). These were the ordinary, everyday racist experiences of the mistreatment of black workers in his life under apartheid and responding through the ANC was the means to effect change in South Africa, the repository of black hopes and aspirations. Sometimes one can judge an organisation by the people who belong to it, and I knew that I would be proud to belong to any organisation of which Walter was a member.

Albertina Sisulu’s life experiences reflected these broader processes in the country. They were ordinary South Africans coping with life under apartheid and responding through organised agency in the African National Congress.

Walter experienced a typical example of the mistreatment of black workers in his second job on a dairy farm on the outskirts of Johannesburg, after it was decided that he was far too young for undergraduate work in the mines. His job was particularly arduous. He had to start at 2am and regularly worked a 12 hour day. After working on the farm for 8 months he was involved in a quarrel with his boss who whipped him until he bled. He decided to report the matter to the police only to be “...clouted across the face by a policeman. In addition to handing over verbal and physical abuse, the policeman detained and sent a message to his employer to collect him” (p.58). These were the ordinary, everyday racist experiences of an oppressed people and Walter’s consciousness was shaped by such events. His subsequent jobs included domestic work, cleaning and acting as a waiter. Despite his lack of formal education (he left school in standard four, ie after merely six years of schooling) Govan Mbeki states (p.80) that he was “…able to hold his own among the most formidable intellects of the time”. Mandela’s (p.99) remarks are also telling:

more and more I came under the wise tutelage of Walter Sisulu. Walter was strong, reasonable, practical and dedicated. He never lost his head in a crisis; he was often silent when others were shouting. He believed that the African national Congress was the means to effect change in South Africa, the repository of black hopes and aspirations. Sometimes one can judge an organisation by the people who belong to it, and I knew that I would be proud to belong to any organisation of which Walter was a member.

Albertina Sisulu’s work experience as a nurse in Johannesburg was also shaped by the endemic racism of the time. One particular event had a profound impact on her. After a major accident at Park Station, the hospital was flooded with seriously injured people, but there were not enough beds in the black section of the hospital. “Meanwhile, beds in the ‘European’ section of the hospital were empty as only a few of those injured in the accident were white. Senior black medical staff appealed to the hospital authorities to allow black patients into the white section, as an emergency measure. Their appeals fell on deaf ears” (p.87). It was out of their familiarity with the everyday experiences of ordinary South Africans under apartheid that the Sisulus constructed their political awakening and their deeply-felt commitment to transform the society. Albertina was the only woman present at the inaugural meeting of the Youth League, the body that eventually transformed the ANC into a mass movement. In a speech at their wedding, the Africanist philosopher, Anton Lembede “...warned Albertina that she was marrying a man who was already married to the nation” (p.104). Elinor Sisulu mentions the various factors involved in Walter’s decision to join the South African Communist Party in 1955, immediately prior to the Congress of the People - his affinity to Marxism, his overweening travel, his respect for communists such as Rusty and Hilda Bernstein, Jack Hodgson, Michael Harmel, JB Marks, Yusuf Dadoo, Moses Kotane and Brian Bunting and his unwavering dedication to the cause of economic and political liberation (p.181). Walter Sisulu was banned in 1955 when he was secretary general of the ANC. Professor ZK Mathews responded very eloquently to ban anyone from the ANC. As far as the ANC is concerned, these sons of Africa are still members of our organisation, as the ANC is a member.

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The book deals with the many debates in the struggle against apartheid, especially around the questions of class and national-ism. Walter Sisulu came into his own as a pragmatic strategist and tactician. The most memorable occasion for his skill in this respect is the fact that he was the chief wit-ness for the defence at the Rivonia Trial and Bram Fischer led his evidence. It is testi-mony to his stature that the more formally educated members of the accused, even those with legal training, placed their trust in Walter Sisulu. It was the trust of their lives because the spectre of the death sentence hung ominously over the entire trial. The book covers the intricate details of the trial and Walter Sisulu was the undoubted pro-tagonist in this crucial moment in the his-tory of the struggle in South Africa. While in prison, Walter’s humanity shone through the correspondence with his beloved wife. While his concerns revolved around the struggle and the trials, the depth of feeling between them comes through their letters to each other. These were love letters with a difference. It is obvious that Walter Sisulu had a genu-ine personality. He felt for others, most notably those nearest and deartost. Elinor Sisulu does wonderfully well in capturing this humane side of the great man. But she does so, while also revealing her own admiration for his wife and her increasingly important public role.

Albertina Sisulu went on her first overseastrip in 1989. She was ambassador for both the UDF and the ANC, meeting with presidents and prime ministers in USA, France, Sweden and Britain. She was given a special 31 day passport to make this sig-nificant trip during the dying days of apart-heid when reform and repression were the twin orders of the day. Walter’s release from prison in 1989 after 26 years was part of the reform, but it happened in a climate of political repression marked by the state-in- spired violence in KwaZulu-Natal, contin-ued detentions without trial of political op-ponents, police and army occupation of towns, deaths in detention, killing of youth activists, lack of freedom of move-ment or association and so on. When Walter and Albertina embraced each other after his return to their Soweto home, “That embrace marked the end of a long and painful era for the Sisulu family” (p.589). As if to ce-ment their love for each other, they both threw themselves into the very many po- litical crises of the time. The public and the private were united in their partnership.

Elinor Sisulu paid meticulous attention to the detail and accuracy of her story but she committed one error concerning the fate of the PEBCO Three: Sipho Hashe, Cham-pion Gabela and Qaqawuli Godolozi (p.465). Her claim that they disappeared after a UDF meeting and that their bodies were found a few weeks later fly in the face of the evidence that has emerged. The cur-rent version of events is that at the height of apartheid repression, the PEBCO Three were abducted from the Port Elizabeth air-port by the security police, killed and then tossed into the Fish River. Their re-mains were never found.

The titles for the five parts in the book vividly capture the unfolding chronologi-cal story: Beginnings (1912-1939), The Forging: Marriage and Politics (1940-1964), The Scattering: Detention and Exile (1964-1977), Riding Out the Darkness (1978-1989) and a New Dawn (1990- 2002). But this is no mere narrative. It is instead both a vital document of the libera-tion struggle in South Africa and of the spe-cial relationship of equality, love and re-spect between Albertina and Walter Sisulu. I was moved by this book because it is such a poignant reminder of what it took to get rid of apartheid and how, notwithstanding incredible odds (including a 26 year separa-tion), they maintained a loving relation-ship. All those interested in South African history from the inside should read this book.