

Crusaders for Human Rights and Dignity

Fred Hendricks

Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In our Lifetime

by Elinor Sisulu:

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Elinor Sisulu has written an epic and moving book on her parents-in-law. It is different in two important respects to the flood of political biographies that have surfaced in South Africa since the demise of apartheid. In the first instance, Elinor Sisulu had unparalleled access to her subjects and secondly, it is the biography of two people rather than a single hero or heroine. These differences have profoundly shaped the nature of the biography. Elinor Sisulu was driven to write the book by a boundless admiration for her parents-in-law, and by the urge to document the social history of black South Africans. Her admiration is not misplaced. Albertina and Walter and Sisulu lived exemplary lives together and the book does great justice to their monumental contribution to the ongoing struggle for justice in South Africa. But it does much more than that. It provides insight into the minutia of their political and personal decisions and it highlights the intended and unintended consequences of these. The political and personal are linked in powerful ways in this book largely because Albertina and Walter Sisulu were jointly such a consummate embodiment of the struggle against apartheid. There are simply insufficient superlatives to describe their roles in the struggle and their lives as partners and it is possible to disentangle these only when offering a grossly distorted version of their lives.

The story is captivatingly told from the intimacy of an insider. It is honest account of enduring love, despite incredible odds, between two very remarkable people. I think it would have been just about impossible to tell the story of Walter without that of Albertina and vice versa. The connection between them, despite the many years of separation, is uncanny. Yet, the physical separation has one great advantage for the author - it makes the identification of agency relatively easy. Since this biography is written in narrative style, the attribution of agency is all the more important. The book moves seamlessly between the separate and connected stories of Albertina and Walter Sisulu. While she was part of the women's movement in the 1950s already, Albertina only really emerged as a major figure in the politics of struggle after Walter Sisulu was banished to Robben Island. We may wonder what it would have been like if he had not gone to prison, but such counterfactuals are, in the end, not very helpful.

Writing a biography of a couple poses a whole range of special challenges. How to ensure that each subject is accurately portrayed, how to represent the line of influence between them, how to place them separately and yet together within a social context, how to understand the gender relations in such a special partnership are just some of the difficulties that a joint biography encounters. Elinor Sisulu succeeds in meeting these challenges. She does so eloquently as she traces the separate but connected lives of her subjects. She captures the intricate details of Walter's emergence as a national protagonist in the African National Congress and in liberation politics more generally, but she does not ignore the inestimable role played by Mama Sisulu before and after the formation of the UDF during the long years of his incarceration. While the bulk of the narrative deals with Walter, she keeps the balance between them by cementing the story with a candid account of their marriage and partnership. The biography neatly sums up the story of their lives in the following terms (p.17):

Theirs is a story of persecution, bitter struggle and painful separation. It is also one of patience, hope, enduring love and

ultimate triumph. It is an epic saga of two people who rose from humble beginnings to become two of the most influential South Africans of the 20th century - in short, a biographer's dream.

Walter Sisulu was born in 1912, the same year as the founding of the ANC and his life was inextricably bound with its unfolding history and the quest for national liberation in South Africa. His father was a white man named Albert Dickinson who worked as a civil servant in the Transkei during the early stages of the twentieth century. The biography mentions his role thus (p.27):

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...(H)is father remained on the periphery of Walter's consciousness, but played no part in his upbringing. Dyantyi Hlakula was 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 coloured 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 an African in every sense of the word. No less, no more.

Elinor Sisulu makes the following observation (p.73): "(H)aving 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 chiefdom, which could trace its genealogy back 20 generations to king Zwibe" (p.27).

Besides the biological accident of his birth, Walter Sisulu grew up in precisely 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 fire wood and cared for younger children in the extended family. Her subsequent elevation into politics was the catalyst to untie these traditional gender roles, a far cry from the tea-serving hostess described in Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call me Woman*. But Albertina was special from a much earlier age. On his dying bed, her father entrusted her (instead of her elder brother) with the enormous responsibility of taking care of the three younger children when she was a mere fifteen years of age. "I know you are strong," said her father (p.50). Albertina took this role very seriously indeed. In fact when Walter proposed marriage she mentioned that "I have children". To which a stunned and confused Walter replied, "How many?" (p.102). This momentary misunderstanding was quickly resolved with Walter being hugely impressed by Albertina's sense of responsibility over her siblings. In addition he took on the role of guardian over these children himself.

While loosening the traditional gender roles, Albertina Sisulu's elevation into national politics as a leading figure in the struggle for liberation in her own right did not automatically obliterate her domestic responsibilities. For example, prior to receiving her first washing machine at the age of 54, as a present from her children, she did all the laundry for her extended household by hand. The early gender stereotypes were real, and they persisted in an uneven manner during Walter's incarceration. Albertina Sisulu's statement that "I got my

freedom the day I married" (p.622) stands in stark contrast to Simone de Beauvoir's famous remark that marriage reduces men and almost always annihilates women. Their marriage and partnership confounds de Beauvoir's pessimism. Albertina's domestic responsibilities did not confine her to domesticity. Instead, she 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 national liberation.

Elinor Sisulu uses her illustrious subjects to tell the story of the structures of and struggles against apartheid. She does this with a depth of sensitivity about their uniqueness and about the many qualities that make them such special people. While she catalogues the horrors of the migrant labour system, so central to the idea 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. Hers is a nuanced picture of the happiness and strife of life under apartheid. Her characters are not one dimensional zombies following a pre-determined path, but multi-faceted real life people. Having said that I must also mention that the reality of their story is somehow unreal. The honesty, loyalty, determination, commitment and humanity revealed in these pages would make even the staunchest supporter wonder. Could they really be that good, so exemplary, so true each other?

In contrast to this moving relationship of love and struggle, Njabulo Ndebele has written an insightful piece of fiction 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 her deceit, criminality, disloyalty and her involvement in kidnapping and assault of young activists. It 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 uncanny knack for articulating the concerns of the downtrodden in a manner which generated a prodigious fount of popular (or populist) appeal. She became a folk heroine in the townships notwithstanding the fact that she had been censured by the ANC for her alleged involvement in illicit 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 honourably to dismantle 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 proletarian mirrored the experience of millions of South African youth. But this transformation did not happen as a solitary one way affair. It was complicated by apartheid. In fact, territorial segregation drove a wedge between the processes of urbanisation and proletarianisation through the system of migrant labour and pass laws which compelled many prospective urban dwellers to return annually to the rural reserves. This to and fro movement of people was coupled with the political exclusion of blacks 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

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 underground 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 our 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 overseas 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 as well as 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 the banning (p.180):

It is of course impossible for any Minister to ban anyone from the ANC. As far as the ANC is concerned, these sons of Africa are still members of our organisation with their names written indelibly

not on paper, but in the hearts of our people, where they are beyond the reach of government interference.

The book deals with the many debates in the struggle against apartheid, especially around the questions of class and nationalism. 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 witness for the defence at the Rivonia Trial and Bram Fischer led his evidence. It is testimony 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 protagonist in this crucial moment in the history of the struggle in South Africa.

While in prison, Walter’s humanity shone through the correspondence with his beloved wife. While his concerns revolved mainly around family and education matters, 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 genuinely warm personality. He felt things for others, most notably those nearest and dearest to him. Elinor Sisulu does wonderfully well in capturing this humane side of the great man. But she does so, while also revealing his own admiration for his wife and her increasingly important public role.

Albertina Sisulu went on her first overseas trip 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 significant trip during the dying days of apartheid 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, continued detentions without trial of political opponents, police and army occupation of townships, deaths in detention, killing of youth activists, lack of freedom of movement 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 cement their love for each other, they both threw themselves into the very many political 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, Champion Galela and Qaqawuli Godolozzi (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 current version of events is that at the height of apartheid repression, the PEBCO Three were abducted from the Port Elizabeth airport by the security police, killed, burnt and then tossed into the Fish River. Their remains were never found.

The titles for the five parts in the book vividly capture the unfolding chronological 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 liberation struggle in South Africa and of the special relationship of equality, love and respect 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 separation), they maintained a loving relationship. All those interested in South African history from the inside should read this book.



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