

CHAPTER FOUR

Feminism and Women in South Africa

An Assessment of the
Experiences of Women in
Contemporary South Africa

Chapter Four discusses the current position of women in South Africa. A reading of historic and current standpoints of feminism will be undertaken and African Feminist views will be discussed in comparison to Western perspectives.

This research is used as a backdrop when examining the specific position of women in South Africa and will be used to inform theoretical and programmatic approaches to design.

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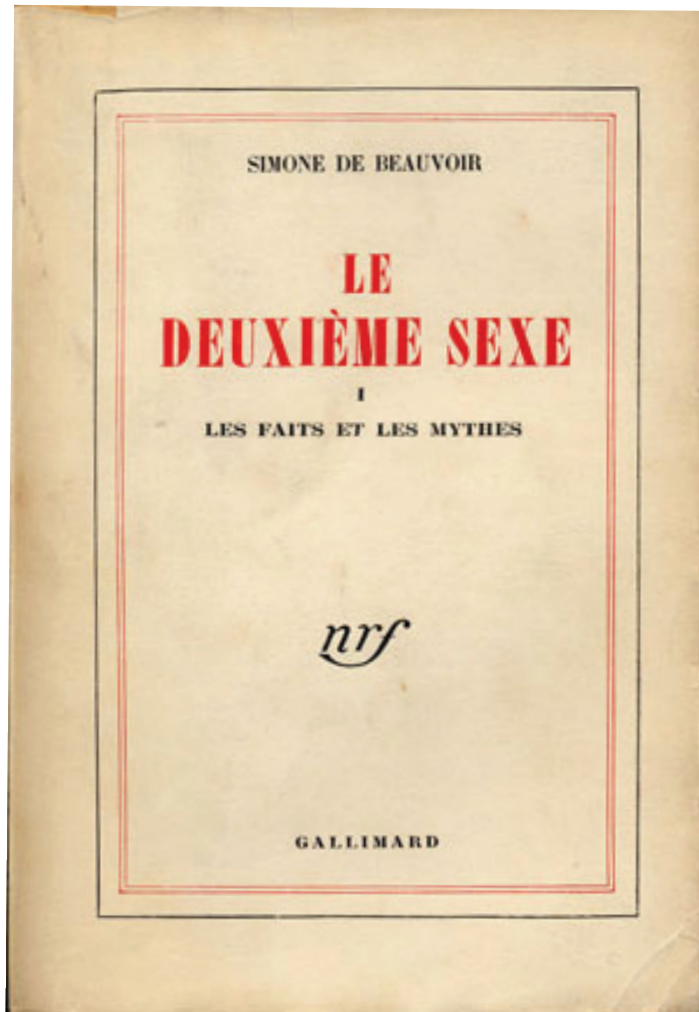


Figure 4.1 *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex) by Simone de Beauvoir discusses the fundamental principles of Feminism. (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Second_Sex)

FEMINISM AND THE 'OTHER'

'[T]he task of feminism is to examine the particular ways in which power operates within and between the political, social and economic spheres of specific societies – in effect, it is a political project of transformation.'
(Hassim 2004:2)

In her book *'The Second Sex'* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir discusses the philosopher Hegel's theory that reality is made up of the interplay of opposing forces. To Hegel, the creation of an individual's identity is subject to this interplay of opposites: In order to define oneself, one must define something in opposition to oneself. While this is a natural process used by humans to define themselves, de Beauvoir (1949) claims that it is flawed in its application to gender issues. The 'Other' is presented in her book

as a term to describe women's secondary position within society. De Beauvoir explains that in society, women's identities exist only in relation to that of men. Man has asserted himself as the subject within society and the identity of women is created only in opposition to or as the 'Other' of the subject, man. The imbalances of power that lie at the heart of both African and Western Feminist theory are hinged on ideas of the 'Other' which provide a fundamental theme that underpins this dissertation.

AFRICAN FEMINISM AND WESTERN FEMINISM: A DISCUSSION

It is important to acknowledge that there is a difference between Western feminism and African feminist issues. Female identity differs between cultures and the histories and value systems of each society create conditions for gender issues that are specific to local contexts.

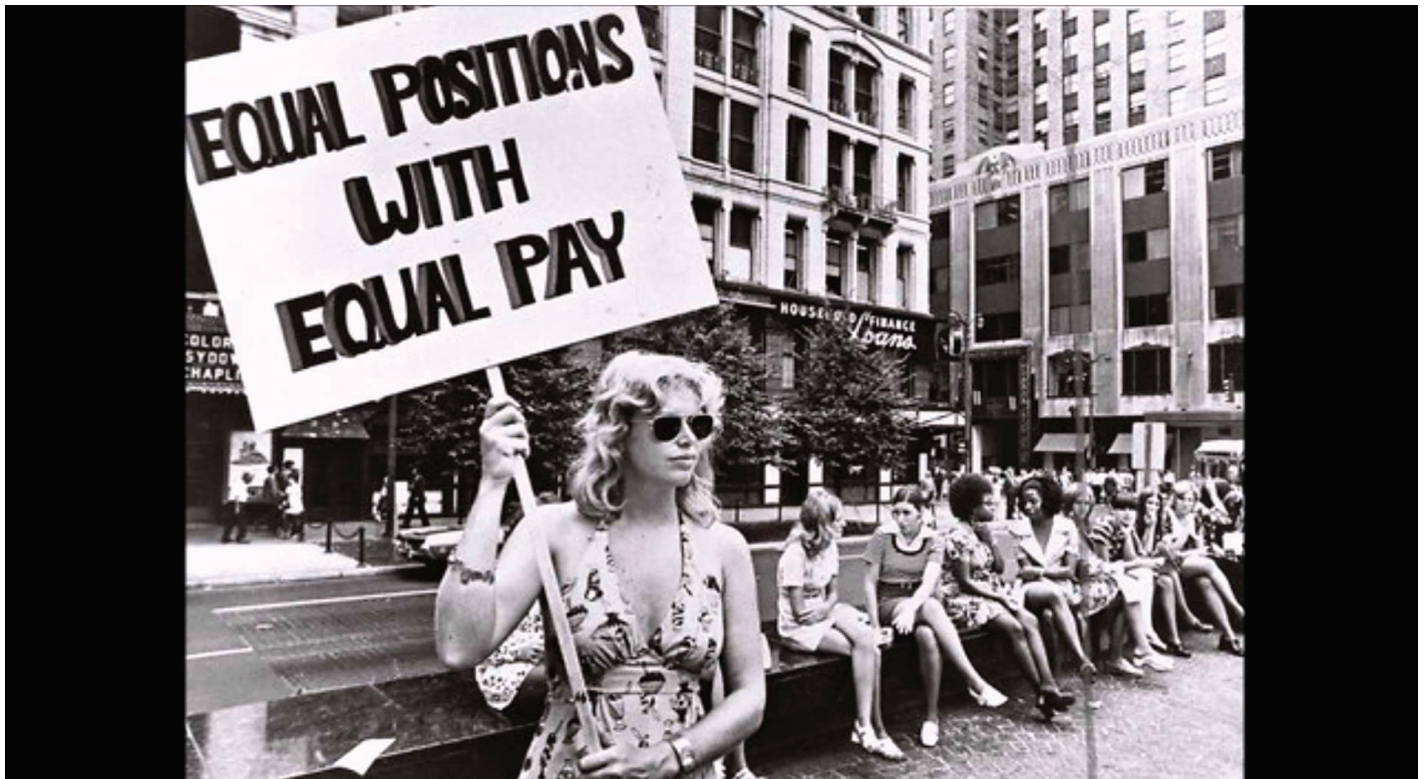
In the West, Feminist movements occurring in the United Kingdom, USA and countries across Europe found their roots in theoretically inflected politics occurring at the time and thus pursued similar concerns simultaneously (Lewis, 2002:1). These movements can be arranged into three chronological waves, each addressing a different agenda. The first wave in the 19th and 20th centuries addressed overturning legal inequalities, with women's suffrage as the fundamental issue to be addressed. This movement found expression in the UK and USA simultaneously, having originated in the Australasian colonies and

culminated with women being granted the right to vote in the UK and USA in 1918 and 1919 respectively. The second wave occurred from the 1960's to 1980's and it saw Western feminist movements address cultural, societal inequalities and gender norms in Western countries. The third wave from the 1990's onwards addressed more diverse issues as well as failed aspects from the second wave (Lewis, 2002:2). Western Feminism is thus understood as a single movement that addresses issues occurring simultaneously across western cultures.

Figure 4.2 The first wave of Feminism in the West addressed women's suffrage. (Source: www.borgenmagazine.com)

Figure 4.3 The second wave of Feminism in the West addressed societal inequalities faced by women. (Source: fightland.vice.com)

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However, in Africa it has been rarely possible to address gender issues specifically and separately from other issues affecting society. This is because gender issues have mostly been identified as sub-themes within the larger context of racial, colonial or imperial domination that occurred in Africa (Lewis, 2002:2). Due to these various forms of oppression, gender issues have also not been able to operate as a unified movement, operating instead as smaller, localised movements that address local issues within individual countries. Patriarchal systems are also still very prevalent in Africa and African feminist theory is now beginning to address these issues:

In the post-colonial context, writers, activists and academics spoke out over women's subordination during the years of nation-building that followed the fight against colonialism. African women experience a more extreme case of 'othering' due to their race. This, in combination

with cultural, political and economic differences, means that Western feminism is not able to fully understand feminist issues in Africa. In order to create a definition that is specific to the particular case of subordination of African women, many African gender theorists have adopted the term 'Womanist'. This is also in reaction to the belief that much Western Feminist terminology does not understand the experiences of women in Africa (Lewis, 2002:3).

'African women and feminism are at odds because despite the adjectives used to qualify feminism, it is Western feminism that inevitably dominates. ...The term feminism usually refers to historically recent European and American social movements founded to struggle for female equality. ... but the term feminist has a broader reach ... it describes a range of behaviour indicating female agency and self-determination'

(Oyewumi, 2003:43).

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Figure 4.4 Feminist issues in Africa have had to contend with other forms of oppression than in the West. (Source: [http://www.anselm.edu/academic/history/courses/Web/Hi399Web%20\(Men%20and%20Women%20Colonial%20Africa\)](http://www.anselm.edu/academic/history/courses/Web/Hi399Web%20(Men%20and%20Women%20Colonial%20Africa)))



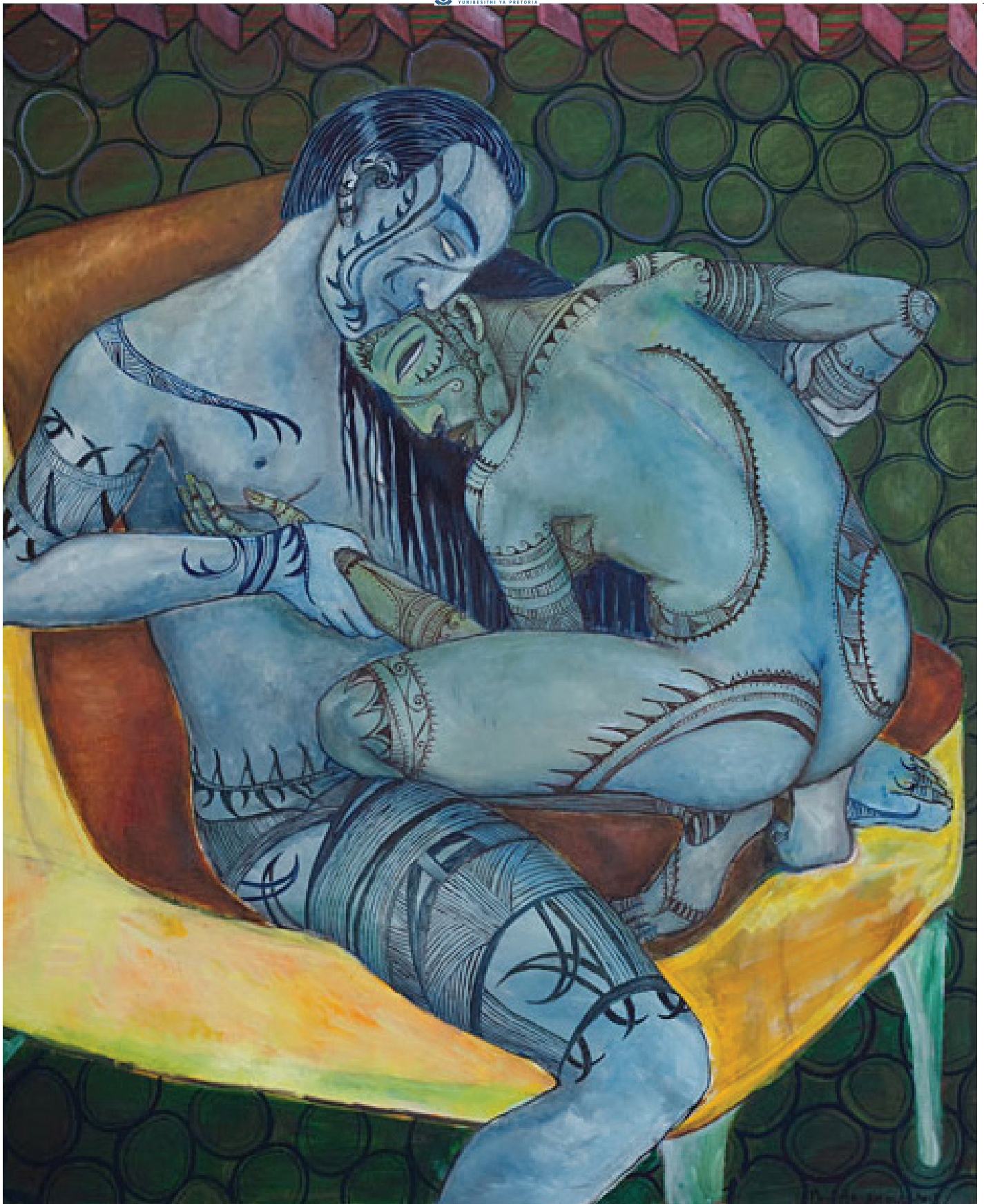
Figure 4.5 Contemporary African Feminism addresses the specific experiences of African women rather than adopting a global stance. Tim Okamura, "I Love your Hair". (Source: timokamura.com/)

The Paintings of Manuela Sambo: African Feminist Art

In most imagery, *'men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at'* (Berger, 1990:89). In the paintings of Manuela Sambo, a different dynamic is represented. When a male subject appears in her work, they exhibit a tenderness but gender roles are not reversed. What is shown is how a man can be in tune with his feminine side and a woman with her masculine.

The perspectives illustrated in Sambo's art provide an understanding of the basis of Feminism. Despite the popular beliefs of what the movement stands for, Feminism is not about being dominant. It is instead about creating a balance and equality of power between men and women.

Figure 4.6 Manuela Sambo, *Changing to Danger*.
(Source: <http://africanah.org/manuela-sambo-angola/>)



BLACK WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THEIR SPECIFIC CASE OF 'OTHERNESS'

As has been discussed, black women have experienced a double disadvantage due to society's outlook on race and gender, which is evident in our history. Apartheid systems furthered this disadvantage and exaggerated the dichotomy between male and female through legal structures. The discovery of gold in Johannesburg led to the recruitment of thousands of migrant labourers who were brought to work in the mines for eighteen months and then sent to work on the reserves and neighbouring British protectorates (Smith, 2014). The worker's wives and children were actively discouraged from following them. This feeling found expression in widespread attacks on the integrity and personhood of these women: From 1910 to 1950, newspaper articles, testimonies at commissions of inquiry, legislative debates, letters from concerned citizens, deliberations by well-intentioned missionary conferences, minutes of town-hall meetings and council minutes are littered with references to native women as prostitutes, beer brewers, carriers of disease, licentious threats to the purity of the white race, and as potential

contaminants of "white" towns (Smith, 2014).

Pass laws dictated that unless a black person (male or female) had legal employment within a city, they could not live there. This law inevitably meant that women who did not find work in the same cities as their husbands could not live with them and families were split up, leaving the responsibility of looking after the family on the women (Smith, 2014). In addition, during Apartheid, South Africa's common law deprived black women of guardianship and various economic rights.

The Women's movement during Apartheid sought to address many of these inequalities and the inclusion of gender issues in South Africa's Constitution can be seen as a direct result of their efforts (van der Westhuizen, 2015). This is stated in Section Nine of the Constitution:

'The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth' (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

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Figure 4.7 Black women in their homes in Soweto, 1958. (Source: www.theguardian.com)



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CONCLUSION

Despite the advances that are articulated in South Africa's Constitution, black women today are still economically disadvantaged: They make up a disproportionate section of the unemployed and tend to occupy more of the lower-paid jobs as domestic and farm labourers. In these positions, women's salaries often tend to be less than men for the same tasks. South African women also have to contend with extremely high rates of rape, work-place sexual harassment and domestic violence (Women's Rights, 2007). The effects that migrant labour had on families is still prevalent today. While the restrictive laws are no longer in practice, many families are

still split between cities due to the difficulties in finding work. Customary law in rural areas still allocates fewer rights to women and in extreme cases, provides women with the same rights as children (van der Westhuizen, 2015).

Women therefore occupy an in-between position in society; finding neither full representation nor entire disregard within the current societal and constitutional systems in South Africa. This in-between zone, the void, that is occupied, provides the conceptual approach for the design as it seeks to create a space of representation for women where these concerns can be addressed.