Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa, edited by Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2021.

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Writing the Self, Re-telling and Positioning

Surfacing is an anthology that unravels, expands and rebuilds feminist practices as we know them. The book highlights the realities and thoughts of South African feminists and actively makes use of "writing the self" (Baderoon 2015) as a literary tool, but is not limited to it. *Surfacing* challenges its readers to consider ways their own distinctive and intersecting identifications may hold multiple contradictions, and how they shape our lives, experiences and environment. The compilation also explores shifting power structures and ways feminists in South Africa resist and diagnose normative capitalist and patriarchal dominance.

According to Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon (2021), the book is motivated by a need to address omissions and fractures in knowledge, especially within the feminist literature of black South African women. This collection gives feminists the space to "recover" narratives of iconic women figures while identifying themselves within a "range of possibilities of blackness" (Lewis and Baderoon 2021, 3). The book begins with Sisonke Msimang's (2021, 15-27) essay on "Winnie Mandela's Archive", explaining the patriarchal hijacking of Winnie's story and Msimang's mission to redeem her history through the biography. Msimang's piece focuses on what women lose when sexist narratives strangle our real-life stories and categorise us as monolithic instead of complex beings. Hence, embarking on the journey to redeem Winnie Mandela's narrative is her way of recovering history.

Following Msimang's essay is a re-telling of the story of Sara Baartman,[1] in a conversation between Zoe Wicomb and Desiree Lewis (2021, 28-46). Wicomb addresses the contested representations of Baartman amongst different groups. The conversation centres around the 2018 University of Cape Town protest

against the disrobing of a statue of Baartman by a librarian after a group of black women students had clothed her with a kanga and head wrap during public ceremonies in 2015 and 2016 (BAC Womxn's Collective 2019). In the dialogue, Wicomb remarks that it is disingenuous to say Baartman, the abused and poor woman, represented the collective pride and shame of privileged 21st-century women (Wicomb 2021). Wicomb expounds the complexities of "pride and shame" concerning the interpretation of Baartman's sculpture and her disrobing. She points out that people who are comfortable with their identities have no reason to invoke "pride" or the flip side of it, that is "shame" (Wicomb 2021, 32). Regarding the narratives on Baartman, Wicomb explains that the sculptor's use of metal scraps was not intended to represent "human flesh"; thus, the sculpture is not Sara Baartman, but an artistic representation that invites us to reflect on her history as an abused woman. The conversation between Wicomb and Lewis leaves us with critical views on the idea of shame and pride regarding enrobing and disrobing. On the one hand, the black caucus believed in reclaiming the humiliation of Baartman by enrobing her. Yet, Wicomb's critique forces us to consider why her naked body is considered a "shame" in the first place.

The first part of the book introduces concepts that prepare us for an in-depth examination of structural violence and oppression explored through photography, personal essays, and experiences.

Subsequently, *Surfacing* reconstructs gender in religion by depicting ways in which masculinity, through religious practices and beliefs, justifies patriarchal violence**.** Fatima Seedat (2021,90-99) and Sa'diyya Shaikh (2021, 119-129) both theorise and challenge the masculine definition of Allah[2] and identify the harm caused by such patriarchal theologisation of religion. While Seedat expresses the links between gender-based violence and masculine divinity and proposes a gender-fluid re-theologising of Allah, Shaikh furthers this proposal by rereading Islamic texts beyond ideas of God as a "father" or the Arabic connotation of ***Huwa*** (He). Shaikh's point of entry into feminist religious analysis is her experience of a female-led prayer, a practice that Seedat considered not enough in our attempts to deconstruct patriarchal religious practices.

On the other hand, they both highlight the point that while Islam does not explicitly present God as "father", it still utilises gendered and patriarchal language and interpretations. Shaikh further analyses her experience with Islam as a non-gendered practice and explains that the religion is gender-fluid. In this

way, Seedat and Shaikh attempt to break down our normative construction of religion and work towards a non-gendered understanding of Allah and religious practices.

Existing anti-queer rhetoric has relied on similar justifications of a masculine God to criminalise people's right to exist. In Seedat's and Shaikh's view, religion is an essential subject of feminist critique, analysis and theorisation because gender, sexuality and religion exist at a locus of power, where they intersect and influence each other. Seedat remarks that feminist work finds it easier to ignore or simply dismiss religion, preferring a secular orientation (2021, pp. 90-99). She explains that broader feminist movements have found ways to ignore religion, resulting in an uncritical acceptance of male divinity. For example, Seedat (2021, 91) observes that a phrase such as "God the Father" has found its way into women's/feminist marches like #TotalShutdown. Organisers of such protests are not able to manage the masculine representation of the divine for their women-identifying and non-binary crowds (Seedat 2021). She uses this point to examine the contradictory practice of prayer to a male God at a protest that challenges patriarchal violence.

Seedat's critique of gender and religion helps us understand that the idea or belief in "God" as male is associated with patriarchal authorities and often linked to violence. When Allah and all religious divinity are strictly categorised as male, it leaves us with the question of how people who are not cisgender heterosexual men come to relate to the sacred. By equating masculinity to a Divine Being through patriarchal language, we also witness how men remain the gatekeepers of the soul and desires (Salami 2021). Hence, when men gatekeep a part of us that reflects our deepest desires for meaning, that is, the soul, their definition of who we are becomes essential in our daily lives and experiences (Salami 2021). Seedat expresses similar sentiments through a reading of the story of Qabila, the protagonist of the novel *Called to Song*, who regained her connection to divinity once Allah "became" Feminine.

While the women's march was unable to consider an inclusive identity of God, Seedat also explains that they omitted the existence of African religions and maintained colonial binaries of Islam and Christianity. Seedat and the other contributors to *Surfacing* help us understand that gender-based violence is disciplinary power that is validated through patriarchal religion. She challenges

feminists to imagine a Divine Being beyond masculinised and patriarchal ideas, as a way to break down patriarchal power. Sa'adiyya Shaikh (2021,119 -129) adopts an alternative approach to the subject by delving into rereading scriptures in the Qur'an against gendered language where she refers to Allah as They and moves between He and She at various points in her essay. She argues that language crafts narratives and informs belief and one challenge is how the Arabic language is deeply gendered. Nouns and pronouns are either masculine or feminine and the gender-neutral *it* does not exist.

Shaikh and Sadeet's essays in *Surfacing* argue very controversial and often ignored topics regarding religion. They challenge our notions of what is normal, hence inciting discomfort among many. The theme of religion, gender and feminism "unmake" by venturing and questioning the "untouchable" idea of God and religion within the African context.

It remarkably draws out practical and theoretical contestations in feminist conversations moving between religion, feminism, gender, sexuality and power.

For instance, Gertrude Fester-Wicomb's (2021,73-89) essay, "Querying the Queer", examines the lives of prominent figures like Richard Rive, Sally Gross, and herself as people who resisted and challenged heteronormativity to trace how queer struggles under apartheid were embedded in their intersectional experiences. While Fester-Wicomb speaks to the traumatic experiences of living a queer life in an inherently oppressive and violent state, I am more interested in the role of Richard Rive's story in understanding the complexities, fluidity of power, oppression, internalised homophobia and vulnerability of being a queer person in apartheid South Africa.

fester-wicomb (2021) describes Rive as an Oxford University-educated teacher and a writer. He never publicly identified as gay, was a colourist despite being dark-skinned and had internal struggles with his sexuality due to his investment in patriarchy and misogyny. She (Fester-Wicomb) recalls Rive as a boisterous and rowdy individual who undermined the work of his colleagues. After a few encounters with Rive, fester-wicomb observes that he eventually became a more subdued personality. However, tragically, he was murdered at 58, an incident that was attributed to his pattern of "picking" young men.

Rive's life depicted a certain paradox and shifting power that is important to understanding one of the book's central themes: assemblages. Throughout his life, he had access to patriarchal and masculine power and privileges that he relied on. Simultaneously, he was an object to the apartheid system that was racist and homophobic. Rive internalised homophobia and leveraged his access to masculine power to assert himself in places where he perceived power. Meanwhile, this power did not shield him from being a victim of violent homophobia, eventually leading to his death. On the other hand, fester-wicomb described Rive as a personality that is occasionally conscious and subdued, with deep pain and loneliness. Rive was also invested in social justice and anti-apartheid causes.

All experiences in Rive's story challenge our idea of stagnant power, or the lack thereof, especially when it comes to queer identities. It shows how a person's position in a space, place or time provides them with power. As a gay man, Rive accessed masculine power, and people like him understand how to use such access at the expense of others. In this way, fester-wicomb's "Querying the Queer" serves as a thorough diagnosis of power, which distinctly connects with Panashe Chigumadzi's (2021, 226-237) "Hearing the Silence". In her work, Chigumadzi (2021) helps us understand that what is not said is as important as what is said. She (Chigumadzi) uses a specific form of resistance and explains that silences also come from forced situations. Rive might have been silent about his homosexuality, because of internalised homophobia, fear of violence, or both. Still, the questions Chigumadzi invites us to ask are: "What can we learn from queer and black people's silences?" "How do our histories of violence and power come into play in what we choose to share or not share explicitly?" "What stays unsaid by force of resistance?" and "What stays unheard by force of repression?" (Chigumadzi 2021, 235).

Concerning the idea of queerness, patriarchal violence, and power as a theme central to this anthology, it is worth citing Gabeeba Baderoon's piece, "'I Compose Myself': Lesbian Muslim Autobiographies and Self-Crafting in South Africa" (Baderoon 2015), which criticises the universalisation of "coming out" without considering the context of black people in South Africa, specifically Muslim lesbians.

What fester-wicomb, Chigumadzi and Baderoon argue is that silences are complex, sometimes coming as resistance, and often, for people like Rive, representing internalised homophobia, or unwillingness to give up their power or force of repression.

Remaking and Decoloniality

Surfacing concludes with narratives on eco-feminist practice by Yvette Abrahams and Patricia Mcfadden. In her essay, "Bringing Water to Krotoa's Garden: Decolonization and Direct Action", Abrahams (2021, 274-283) argues that most people are complicit in retaining environmentally harmful practices. Abrahams takes direct action to "restore one hectare of land to its decolonial state" by practising indigenous farming techniques through the "labour of her hands and brains" (Abrahams 2021, 276). By tending to the hectare of land, she hopes to rejuvenate it from exploitation and over-ploughing. Abrahams' "bringing water to Krotoa's Garden" is as literal as it is metaphoric: she has actively restored the land and resisted capitalist practices, but she also uses the phrase as a way to connect structural oppression to that which happens to our lands and people. Abrahams states, "Even if we lock up every single individual who commits violent acts today, the system will continue to produce violent individuals who will take out their impotent rage on those closest to them and the most vulnerable in society" (2021, 279). Patricia Mcfadden (2021, 284-301) follows similar steps in interrogating the systems that make patriarchal and capitalist violence possible. Throughout her essay, "Living a Radical African Feminist Life: A Journey to Sufficiency through Contemporality", Mcfadden (2021) also moves from complicity within a capitalist and consumerist system to living self-sufficiently. She tends for herself on a hill while practising feminist love-politics and community with her neighbour, a woman from a lower economic status.

Abrahams, Mcfadden, and all other contributors to *Surfacing* do well in depicting how feminists move from "unmaking", where we interrogate, learn and unravel systems, norms and practices that produce pain and violence, to "positioning" our selves, thoughts, imaginations and discomforts as resistance, and finally, "remaking" our spaces and world through practices of joy, collective care for people and land, and community building.

Surfacing is crafted as a continuation, re-telling and critique of existing feminist work, theories, life and practices. It uniquely draws from various literary expressions, such as reflections, critiques, storytelling, art and photography, which also makes it somewhat difficult to follow. However, as a continuation and interrogation of feminism, it would be most useful for knowledgeable and expert readers who have extensive experience in studying and engaging with feminist work.

As a reader, *Surfacing* has become for me a reference and reflective resource on how feminists have grappled and reconciled with similar issues on religion, sexuality and gender, and the difficulties in navigating the life we desire within a capitalist and patriarchal society. In some parts, it is sobering; in others, it is validating and challenging; but collectively, it provides one with a clear pathway towards shaping one's African feminist life.

Endnotes

1. South African Khoikhoi woman exhibited in "freak shows" in Europe.
2. In this section, I use God and Allah interchangeably.

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