

## Chapter 52

# Women and South Africa's Anti-Apartheid Struggle: Evaluating the Political Messages in the Music of Miriam Makeba

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Credit for South Africa's liberation from the apartheid system of government under the National Party usually goes to forces within the country, especially the African National Congress under various leaders, from Oliver Tambo to Nelson Mandela. Also mentioned in the struggle for the abolition of the racist philosophy of government are the activities of independent, black-ruled countries in Africa and sympathetic nation-states, especially in Europe. Rarely highlighted are the activities of indigenous black women who operated within and outside the apartheid-ruled enclave. This chapter uses textual analysis to explore the political agitation of one such woman, Miriam Makeba, who used her music to communicate political messages that challenged the apartheid government. Makeba produced anti-apartheid songs and held performances that mobilized suppressed black South Africans to overthrow the internal colonialism imposed by the Afrikaner ruling elite. Now dead, Makeba lived to see an independent South Africa with Nelson Mandela as its first black president.*

### **MIRIAM MAKEBA AND ANTI-APARTHEID MUSIC**

Black women in apartheid South Africa experienced and shared a disadvantaged, dual heritage and history of marginalization. Their culture and tradition considered them as subordinates to men because of their gender. An all-white government that dogmatically practiced apartheid as a philosophy colonized them and their male folk, and regarded them as belonging to an inferior race.

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Not all women, though, succumbed to, or accepted this cultural subjugation or apartheid-induced marginalization. Miriam Makeba, the subject of this chapter, was one of them and in this chapter, the authors attempt to show how Makeba through music fought fiercely against apartheid and for the liberation of black people. Our analysis is organized under four themes that capture the socio-political functions of Makeba's songs.

Although black women in apartheid and pre-independence South Africa experienced the marginalization described above, we argue that their fate had not always been bleak. In pre-colonial South Africa, black women held positions of power in society alongside men (Ndlovu, 2008). Basing his contention on historical records, Ndlovu (2008) also shows that Zulu women in what is now known as KwaZulu-Natal, a region in the southeastern region of South Africa, gallantly led in *izigodlo* or the army during inter-ethnic wars and were advisors to kings, while others were respected community leaders.

Scholars such as Hudson-Weems (1993) and Moemeka (1998) also argue that male colonialists who were probably inspired by how they subjugated their women in Europe bequeathed an overbearing system of patriarchy to Africa. Gambahaya and Muhwati (2009) contend that several mythologies in African oral and written history and culture suggest that during human creation god made men and women and put them into the world at the same time. Muwati and Mguni (2012) also explain the concept of "balance between sexes" by referring to the Zulus in South Africa who also believe that at creation men and women emerged as twins. Gambahaya and Muhwati (2009) tell a similar story about creation in Mali, West Africa.

In pre-colonial times, gender roles differed in Africa, but were generally more flexible than rigid, as women had defined leadership roles in various indigenous societies in the continent. Colonialism however introduced strict gender roles and women began to be relegated to certain roles, duties and expectations such as strictly being mothers and keeping the home. Men's roles were to fend for their families, and also defend and protect their households against intrusion (Hudson-Weems, 1993; 2004). This westernized notion of strict role segregation between men and women in African societies helped to create and sustain the dual marginalization of women in colonial and apartheid South Africa.

It was under this condition of dual heritage of subjugation that a number of women rose to confront the apartheid regime. Examples of such women include Charlotte Maxeke, Rahima Moosa, Fatima Meer, Albertina Sisulu, Winnie Mandela, Motlalepula Chabaku and Lillian Masediba Matabane Ngoyi. In fact, Lillian Masediba Matabane Ngoyi became the first woman elected into the executive committee of the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC, the first democratically elected governing party in South Africa, was at the forefront of fighting the apartheid government.

While examining the role of women in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, Mompoti (1982, p. 112) noted that black women and men fought together for "human dignity." For black South Africans therefore race rather than gender was a key organizing principle in their fight against racism or apartheid. Even in the immediate post-apartheid South Africa, black people continued to organize along racial, not gender, lines. Lockett (1996), for instance, determined that black women aligned more with black men rather than with white women in fights against women's subjugation. In other words, rather than form alliances with white women who did not experience oppression under apartheid but were active in feminist movements, black South African women continued to focus on ensuring the dignity of the black race.

Miriam Zenzile Makeba, aka *Mama Africa*, who was also known as the Empress of African song, epitomized this effort to restore the dignity of black South Africans, and black people all over the world. When Makeba died in 2008, the London *Guardian* newspaper described her as:

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