Book review: "Not either an experimental doll"

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Marks, Shula, (1987). Not Either an Experimental Doll. Durban and Pietermaritzburg, Killie Campbell Africana Library and University of Natal Press. Pp. 217 ISBN: 087980 542 8 R17,95.

One could well question of what relevance a review of a history book is to a psychology journal. However, Shula Marks' "Not Either an Experimental Doll" is an unusual and multi-dimensional documentation of the correspondence of three women which offers a fascinating insight into the personalities and relationships between these three central figures. In her introduction, Shula Marks describes how she came upon the correspondence by chance in going through some of Mabel Palmer's papers at the Killie Campbell Africana Library. With painstaking research and a remarkable integration of material concerning this particular period (1948-1951) in Natal/South African history, Ms Marks creates a context in which to situate and to some extent analyse the communications between Mabel Palmer, Lily Moya (a

pseudonym) and Sibusiswe Makhanya. The letters themselves, which form the bulk of the text, tell an intricate and compelling story, but it is Ms Marks' thorough and imaginative use of both archival material and verbal interviews that illuminates and enhances the reader's understanding.

In essence the book documents the correspondence between a young 15 year old Xhosa girl, Lily Moya, who writes to Mabel Palmer, an elderly woman involved in "Non-European" education at the University of Natal, Durban, begging her assistance in helping her to complete her high school studies. Mabel Palmer is so taken by Lily's unusual command of English and her unfortunate position that she becomes involved in educating and supporting Lily at some personal expense. However, Lily and Mabel Palmer appear to have a different understanding and need of their relationship and a progressive alienation becomes apparent in their letters. As Shula Marks writes, although they both shared a strong commitment to a "common western cultural inheritance which the Christian educated elite of South Africa had by this time made their own, there were hidden assumptions on both sides, and chasms in experience, which decisively divided them." Lily was desperately seeking a more intimate parenting relationship which Mabel Palmer resisted fiercely and uncompromisingly. Lacking support and facing contradictions in values and experience concerning sexuality, Christianity, discipline, etcetera, Lily eventually becomes very depressed and seemingly paranoid. She runs away from Adams School and writes in her last letter to Mabel Palmer: "For congenial reasons I had to leave Adams, due to the fact that I was never meant to be a

stone but a human being with feelings not either an experimental doll ..." (p. 42), hence the title of the book. From interviews with Lily and her family during the writing of the book it becomes apparent that Lily's condition deteriorated further and despite consultations with traditional healers and western doctors she was to be admitted to Sterkfontein psychiatric hospital, diagnosed as schizophrenic. Lily became a chronic patient, was transferred to Randfontein and spent approximately 25 years of her life in these institutions before being released into the care of her sister.

The third correspondence in this interchange is a woman called Sibusiswe Makhanya, an intelligent and extremely competent Zulu woman, well-respected and powerful in her community and yet an emancipated woman in terms of her American education and her independence. In her concern for Lily's lack of integration into Adams School, Mabel Palmer requests Sibusiswe to take an interest in her protegee. Lily appears to have spent some happy weekends and holidays at Sibusiswe's home but still does not seem to find the attachment she so much desires. Although Ms Makhanya's contributions to the correspondence are much fewer and less central the contrast in the three women's lives "the English Fabian, the Zulu social worker and the Xhosa schoolgirl" (p. 2) is fascinating and informative.

The text raises issues of concern to historians, educationalists, feminists, psychologists, sociologists and others. The reconstruction of history through oral tradition provides a compelling exploration of the relationship between the personal and social. Shula Marks'

comprehensive background and postscript to the correspondence display a subtle and intricate understanding of the manner in which the personal is shaped by the political. As she herself writes, "The correspondence moves us beyond the aridity of an unpeopled political economy to the ambiguities of everyday life. Yet through it we see the overarching constraints of social structure on human agency, and the complex relationship of individual psychology with a culture-bounded social order. If what is precious in the letters is the personal and the ideosyncratic, it is nonetheless possible through them the show that the 'private lives, even (the) obsessions of ... individuals, far from being simply psychological quirks or even aberrations, flowed directly from the social situation of these ... individuals.'" (pp. 1-2).

Ms Marks' ever-conscious interposing of the social with the personal is what serves to make the text both eminently readable and instructive at the same time. The correspondence and the background material are a superb example of how this style of documentation can serve to illustrate the dialectical relationship between individuals and their social circumstances. In my first reading of the book I became so absorbed in the story/plot that I had the same avid reading experience as when reading a good novel. On second reading, however, I became much more cognisant of the more general issues highlighted by the text, particularly issues concerning education in South Africa in the fifties and some of the particular pressures experienced by women by virtue of their sex. Again from the text, "Problems of sexual 'purity' and identity run as a leitmotiv through the history of the

three women in this correspondence : a reflection of the dominated and distorted nature of sexual relations for both black and white women in the twentieth century" (p.24).

There is little speculation in the text. Throughout, Shula Marks remains rigorous to the correspondence and what information can be found through documentation of the time. However, one retains a feeling of personal warmth and sympathy of the central 'characters'. As a psychologist, particularly a clinical psychologist, there were points at which I felt frustrated at the lack of information, particularly about Lily's progressive psychological alienation and pathology which seems to have been largely related to the life stresses she was experiencing. However, the disciplined level of analysis was a salutary lesson in that all the information presented is based on reconstruction or interposing of factual information and any hypothetical statements are acknowledged as such. The discussion of Lily's diagnosis and treatment (pp. 200-204) is an example of this. Shula Marks makes clear the complexity of analysis in this area. "Lily's tragedy raises in acute form one of the central questions for the social scientist : how to relate individual psychology and psychopathology to social structures and the realities of a specific social order" (p. 202). A psychologist writing about the same material may have extrapolated further in this area from the case information presented, but I recognized the possible degree of supposition in such an approach in acknowledging the historical accuracy of the text as is.

What makes the text of as much relevance to a psychologist as a historian is Ms Marks' ever-constant acknowledgment of the importance of individual psychology. "Structural preconditions do not, of course, explain personal psychology. The delicate chemistry between the individual and his or her social context can never be reduced simply to that social context. At the same time, however, individual psychology is a profoundly historical phenomenon, the product of multiple determinations which in the final analysis shape the forms and meanings of experience" (p.24). That the text is such a cogent illustration of this synthesis must be attributed to both the three remarkable women correspondents and Shula Marks' skillful editing.

One can only appreciate the documentation and sharing of such information with a wide range of readers through the publication of this text. In a sense this is a real illustration of the old cliche that 'history becomes alive' or this correspondence would have remained seldom read in the archives of the Killie Campbell Africana Library. The quotation chosen to introduce the text perhaps most succinctly illustrates what one serves to gain in reading the text: "I turn to history not for lessons in hope, but to confront my experience with the experience of others and to win for myself something which I should call universal compassion - a sense of responsibility for the human conscience." Zbigniew Herbert (quoted in Marks, frontpiece).