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Book Review

Not either an experimental doll (1987)
edited by Shula Marks

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The country is South Africa, the year 1948. In response to an impassioned letter from a deprived Xhosa girl (Lily Moya), pleading for assistance with furthering her education, Dr Mabel Palmer an educationist known for her substantial contribution to and interest in black education in Natal, and earlier work with feminist issues eventually arranges and pays for Lily's travel, board, plus schooling at Adams College - (a leading black school in Natal). Having attempted the matriculation examination in less than optimal conditions at Saint John's College in Umtata, Transkei and failed to gain university entrance, Lily was convinced that given a different set of circumstances she could do better. Her written appeal charmed and enthused Mabel Palmer sufficiently to afford her that second opportunity. At a superficial first glance this scenario all looks humane, touching and straightforward enough.

Shula Marks having recognised the richness in quality and value of the correspondence between and surrounding the two women, lets their letters speak for themselves. In the introduction she prepares the stage with her illuminating construction of the social context with respect to issues pertinent to the smooth reading of the letters and lends the necessary historical and social perspective.

As the correspondence moves back and forth over a three year time span, it becomes apparent that the relationship between these two women is far from straightforward however. Things culminate to a point where it becomes blatantly obvious that these two individuals have slightly different expectations

of each other and their situation.

Lily for her part expects a benefactor who is also emotionally supportive and affectionate towards her. She in fact seeks a parental figure in Mabel. Dr Palmer on the other hand expects a diligent and grateful protegee who is keen to get ahead but otherwise unassuming in any way other than financially.

They both misunderstand and mistake two issues, that of kindness and material provision. The two are not interchangeable yet both Mabel and Lily make that mistake. When sent money for linen and bedding by Dr Palmer for example Lily writes "Your love has tongue-tied me". Lily becomes demanding and presumptuous in her need for parental guidance in addition to the financial assistance she is being afforded. Although sometimes inappropriate in her hints at the existence of a mother-daughter relationship between them, one cannot entirely blame Lily for at least hoping for such a development, since she was living with relatives, and not her own parents and went so far as to describe herself as orphaned. She at some level perceived herself as emotionally unprovided for.

In her rejection of Lily, Mabel Palmer's detachment belies and contradicts her material generosity: yet she uses the word "kindness" when referring to how much material provision she has given the "ungrateful" Lily. At best Mabel is only comfortable with being mildly affectionate from a distance and on paper. Later on she candidly writes to Lily that her kindness "...does not necessarily involve any personal or intimate friendship". Here Mabel in a typically liberal fashion commodifies the concept of kindness and at the same time uses it to maintain her distance from Lily.

Dr Mabel Palmer is as much a victim of her society as Lily Moya. She brings into sharp focus the pitfalls of white liberalism in South Africa which hold very true even to this day. She is "sincerely" condescending if that is at all possible - prepared to give Lily the change of a lifetime without getting involved, without rocking the boat and without threat to the maintenance of the status quo. As the editor comments "Despite Mabel's liberalism this . . reveals her racially stereotyped thinking: black people should automatically find their friends amongst other black people, whatever their cultural or class differences". Mabel does not believe that she can have an intimate relationship with a young black woman "Even if you were a European girl of your age it would be nonsense". She invests nothing of herself in relating to Lily. Mabel Palmer exposes her covert racism.

As perhaps the title (which comes from Lily's own words) suggests, the manner in which Mabel relates to Lily is abhorrent. It is as though Lily is indeed a doll, an inanimate object. On several occasions she refers to Lily as the "little thing". Mabel Palmer, guardian of black education on the one side,

is on the other a typical representation of what many white South Africans are even to this day - complacent in their paternalism. She does not question or challenge her society's social order at all in relation to herself and Lily. In other words she accepts it and therefore tacitly supports it. As a result when Lily becomes more needy emotionally Mabel responds by introducing the third major figure Sibusiswe Makhanya. In doing so she is "passing the buck", and shifts the responsibility by providing a substitute black mother figure for all that is not material and writes to Sibusiswe of Lily "I feel she could be more effectively helped by a woman of her own race ... I would gladly pay any charges necessary for her ...".

Sibusiswe Makhanya is perhaps the most logical choice Dr Palmer could have made. One of the first black social workers and a woman of remarkable achievement in her own right, this person had access into both the black and white worlds of South Africa's artificially constructed racial reality. Acceptable to whites because she was a professional and a travelled individual, confident enough to interact with white liberals yet at the same time being black, Sibusiswe possessed an appreciation for the essence of black experience. Despite this not much more is known about Sibusiswe's character or why she chose not to do more to help Lily.

Lily's story is a series of flights from one unbearable situation to the next. She repeatedly showed initiative however. One example was when she was sent to teach for a quarter of the school year at a recently established institution with an enrollment of 35 children, in a rural Transkei village far from civilization. Lily insisted on and provided sound educational structure for her unenlightened pupils. Another incident was when she was threatened with the prospect of being married off by her guardian uncle to a man she found objectionable. Lily took herself off to Durban using communication and transport systems she had never been exposed to before.

She had internal resources which eventually fail her when (and not totally because) Mabel also withdraws her assistance and support of her. Lily despite having attended the same school for well over a year was not able to form any lasting relationships with other youths. One's deductions of her character from her inability to relate to peers is not positive. She then runs away a day early from the much hated Adams College, to visit Sibusiswe at Umbumbulu. After a short spell Lily leaves abruptly and disappears to Sophiatown in Johannesburg where she is supposed to visit relatives. Following two cryptic notes to Mabel and one to Sibususwe nothing more is heard or seen of Lily.

Shula Marks then goes about tracing Lily and after approximately five years unravels the mystery, to reveal a tragic end to Lily's missed opportunities which evidently led her to the depths of despair. Marks came into contact with Lily and her family in Soweto and found out that soon after arriving in

Sophiatown in 1951 Lily became confused, incoherent and had a mental breakdown. The family sought the help of both traditional healers and Western medicine to no avail, until it was seen fit to admit her to a psychiatric institution where she spent the next twenty-five years of her life.

In the epilogue the editor not only picks up on the, by now, glaring issues but sensitively discusses the broader issues raised as a consequence of Lily's story. Amongst others she discusses the contribution of social factors in the deterioration and breakdown of the individual psyche; the interpretations African cosmologies give to psychiatric illness and its aetiology and describes the grossly inadequate psychiatric facilities available for blacks in South Africa in an effort to help the reader appreciate what those twenty-five years could have meant - without losing sight of Lily.

Although Shula Marks makes mention of Lily's personal frailty and shows an acutely sensitized awareness of the interaction of both social and personal factors, she almost unwittingly falls into a similar trap as Mabel Palmer did regarding Lily. Perhaps being a black South African gives me more licence to criticise the black heroine and the editor's portrayal of her. It would seem that the temporal factor between Marks' and Palmer's perception of Lily has only served to alter the form in which it manifests. Both are actually the same. Yesteryear's colonialism took a somewhat cruder form than it does today. The pressing questions to ask are: Does Marks represent today what Palmer represented in the late 1940's? What present day forms of colonialism exist in South Africa? I tend to agree with Ivan Evans (1989), who in his article entitled, "Intellectual production and the production of intellectuals in the South African racial order", discusses the dominance in research of the academic left as a new form of colonialism.

Marks' view of Lily is over idealised. This over idealisation of the "underdog" blinds her to Lily's shortcomings. There was nothing outstanding about Lily who lived and grew up at the same time and in the same area as my own mother. Many young women with a similar background could easily have made much more of the whole situation if they had had access to opportunities like Lily's. Indeed Lily's most distinguishing feature was her relationship with Mabel Palmer and little else. She, unlike Sibusiswe, was a failed product of missionary education. In addition the editor does not give any indication that Dr Palmer's unconscious motivations and sources of generosity must be questioned. Clearly Lily was sick in her latter years but nobody picked this up sooner. If anything Mabel colluded to some degree in the process. Was it just a case of extreme paternalism on Mabel's part or could she have been fulfilling other personal needs? Her tunnel vision regarding Lily is both lacking in insight and singularly inconsonant with the background, history and orientation (Fabian and feminist leanings) that Mabel had. We are all aware of the old phenomenon of colonialism

"experimenting in the uncivilized world". I do not believe that the descendants of colonialism have stopped experimenting in the third world. Only that today's forms are more subtle.

Ultimately one has to ask oneself why Shula Marks found it important to write this book. In attempting to answer that question, the fact that she is a white South African born historian provides a lead. The editor reveals her broad view of history in the way she responds to the exchange of letters in her book. This outstanding correspondence is without doubt an authentic form of documentation that is alive, vibrant, interesting and accessible today. The letters provide a way of bringing history to life. They do not only enable Marks to describe what that particular era was like but they also allow her to illuminate what that meant for these women. It is a bit disappointing however that Marks does not develop the obvious alienation of these three women and the issues surrounding the emancipation of women to a greater extent. In fact it is interesting that both Marks, and Eagle in her review of the book in **Psychology in society - 10** (1988, 92-97) fail in their writings to elaborate on women's issues in an exploitative society. I find myself asking how the relationship of class exploitation today compares with what occurs in the book. It is surprising that Marks, an established Marxist scholar who is obviously aware of firstly, exploitation and being South African, secondly, of race, fails to clearly raise a class-race debate. This argument only vaguely emerges and is masked in a liberal mould. In fact Marks presents us with only a critique of the liberal.

In her book she does two very important things. Firstly she introduces us to three representatives of women living in South Africa in that epoch. Mabel the well intentioned white liberal, Sibusiswe the upwardly mobile black professional crossing barriers (and viewed with the potential of building bridges) and lastly Lily, heroine turned victim, the black underdog. Secondly, by providing this book, she invites us to review and perhaps join her in the re-interprettion of South African history. A worthwhile read!

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