

*Beauty of the Heart: The Life and Times of  
Charlotte Mannya Maxeke* by Zubeida Jaffer.  
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Questions of lineage mark much contemporary writing by Black women, from Nomboniso Gasa's *Women in South African History* (2007) to Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2017), signaling a longing for beginnings and continuity in the face of the vast silences and abrupt severing which mar so much of South African history. In *Beauty of the Heart: The Life and Times of Charlotte Mannya Maxeke*, the journalist and anti-apartheid activist Zubeida Jaffer uses her biographical pen to place a singular woman at the heart of anticolonial and antiapartheid struggles and, in doing so, claims for women the authority to shape the kind of country we are creating today.

Today, South African politics are in ferment, and the country is suffering from increasing structural and interpersonal violence, a stark divide in political views, deepening inequality, and a growing despair about the project of post-apartheid liberation. Amid an escalating sense of crisis, there is nonetheless the sense that *ideas* hold a real power to shape our vision for the future of the country. One idea that is finally attaining national consensus is that the relentless violence toward women in the contemporary period is the central social crisis of the country. Both the scale and intensifying forms of violence have helped to bring attention to the phenomenon but feminists have long argued that destructive gender relations have afflicted the country from the colonial to post-apartheid periods and have resulted in grave levels of aggression against women. To change this reality means to unlearn the ideas about gender that have made contemporary South Africa a deadly place for women and imagine a new way to live together.

It is in this terrain of making the self, of unlearning toxic models of gender, of seeing our beginnings anew – terrain in which the stakes are

extraordinarily high – that I believe *Beauty of the Heart* makes an important contribution. The book portrays the life of a singular woman, Charlotte Maxeke (1871-1939), the first Black woman in South Africa to earn a university degree, a BSc from Wilberforce University in Ohio. She was among a generation of intellectuals, Christian women and anti-colonial activists who, at the turn of the twentieth century, tenaciously resisted colonial laws and embodied a new vision of African leadership and liberation. *Beauty of the Heart* reclaims Maxeke, who is little-known today, as a foundational figure for women activists, intellectuals and leaders in South Africa and beyond, and creates a lineage of women’s political leadership that reaches back to the nineteenth century.

Women’s absence from central moments in South African history, especially in the area we most venerate – leadership in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid – has grave consequences for our current conception of women’s roles. Jaffer’s biographies of two notable women, Charlotte Maxeke and Bibi Dawood, as well as Jaffer’s autobiography, are interventions in ideas about gender and the erasure of women from South Africa’s past. Jaffer has therefore been engaged in an important archival quest – to claim women’s proper place in South African history and consequently to reshape the ways we conceive of our present.

In *Beauty of the Heart*, we learn about Maxeke’s life through her own words, recovered from the archives of newspapers like *Abantu-Batho* and *Umteteli wa Bantu*, as well as admiring essays written by Sol Plaatjie and A.B. Xuma. We also learn about organisations in which Maxeke played a formative role, such as the African Methodist Episcopalian (AME) Church in South Africa and the Bantu Women’s League. Jaffer also drew on Thozama April’s recent doctoral thesis on Maxeke and the words of Maxeke’s beloved sister Katie Makanya, who was the subject of a “collaborative autobiography” published by Margaret McCord in 1995, based on several long interviews the latter conducted with Makanya in 1954. Jaffer, a writer-in-residence at the University of Free State, was assisted by several student researchers in conducting her careful, thoughtful account of Maxeke’s life. The resulting book illuminates the narrative of a remarkable woman whose life spanned the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, a crucial period in South African history.

Combing the archives, meeting with Maxeke’s descendants, visiting her home in Kliptown, even fortuitously conversing with Gogo Hilda Seete, a

106-year-old woman who had met Maxeke in person, Jaffer has created a rich and empathetic portrayal of Maxeke's life. Jaffer includes many details of interest to feminist readers, such as the insistence by John Mannya and Anna Mancini that their daughters as well as sons should pursue an education; the way Charlotte's gifts in singing gave her the chance to study further; the tender relationship between Charlotte and her sister Katie, two gifted women who pursued different choices and whose lives illuminate our understanding of their times. We learn how Anna taught Charlotte and Katie how to find grasses to create pads to use during menstruation.

Born in 1871, Maxeke's life straddled two centuries and many worlds. She faced the violence of colonial wars and the devastation of the Native Land Act, as well as the new wage economies that critically shaped the lives of Black South Africans. In the face of these intensifying efforts to reduce Black people's rights and freedoms, Maxeke responded with undaunted and farsighted forms of resistance. She was the eldest child and the second generation of her family to receive missionary education: in her case, primary school in Uitenhage and upper school in Port Elizabeth. Illustrating the constraints she encountered, she had to enter domestic service in order to receive further education in Port Elizabeth. Charlotte flourished as a student, and, in 1890, the Mannya family moved to Kimberley, where Charlotte became a teacher.

Jaffer succeeds as biographer in weaving Maxeke's life story into a compelling narrative by finding the quotations that illuminate the character of this gifted woman. Facing the "constant tension" of navigating between tradition, the promise of Christianity and the reality of life under colonialism, the Mannya family debated how to reconcile the word of God brought by missionaries with the actions of white people who flagrantly transgressed Christian beliefs.

"How can you tell which of the white people are really Christians and which are Satan's messengers?" asked her sister Katie.

"By prayer", said her mother.

"By study", said Charlotte. (Jaffer, 2016: 24)

Charlotte's resolute faith in education indicated by this answer was reflected in her unprecedented intellectual accomplishments. Maxeke's personal gifts as a singer and scholar, her educational achievements, her role as a teacher and social worker, her church work and her activism are her lasting legacies. In all the arenas in which she was active, she insisted on the significance of women's

roles. She tirelessly advanced women's place in the church and in politics. In fact, she carefully nurtured the independence of women's organisations, such as the Bantu Women's League, which she was instrumental in founding in 1918, so that they could critique weaknesses where they found them and initiate political action themselves. At the same time, Maxeke worked effectively in solidarity with dominantly male political organisations such as the South African Native National Congress (later, the African National Congress). She understood acutely the power of collective work. Jaffer quotes members of the US-based AME Church on the prolific efforts of South African women in raising funds for schools, who despite the challenges facing them, exceeded the donations from the US-based church. Maxeke reflected the intense commitment of this generation of Black women to education as a path of individual and political advancement.

How does Jaffer deal with the complexities of Maxeke's life? Respectability, devout though critical Christianity, transnational religious solidarity and an investment in Black-white alliances formed a significant part of Maxeke's work. These are strategies that some today regard with ambivalence, and even find conservative. But to judge Maxeke in this anachronous way is to profoundly misunderstand the strategic insight and nuance with which she confronted the challenges that she encountered, and the effectiveness of her strategies.

Three examples provide evidence of this. In 1913, Maxeke led outspoken protests against the violent and much-feared pass laws, which were first introduced under colonial rule in 1779, with dire effects on Black people's mobility and freedom. Later, the pass laws exemplified the cruelty of apartheid. Maxeke recognised their danger and, in 1918, led a Bantu Women's League delegation to petition Prime Minister Louis Botha against the application of the pass laws to women in the Orange Free State. She pointedly argued that these laws were the same ones used to terrorise Black people under slavery. "The pass system today was but an improvement from the pass that was introduced by the slave master years ago" (123). As Jaffer notes, the BWL meeting with Botha "resulted in some relaxation of the laws for a while", but the continuing impact of the law meant that Maxeke "doggedly continued to keep her focus on this issue" to the end of her life. She worked with men in the anti-pass struggle, but insisted on the need for independent political action by women. "How can men liberate women from the pass laws", she asked, "when they themselves are subjected to them?" (117). Always

navigating the need for cross-gender solidarity while protecting the rights of women as political agents on their own, she advocated, “Let men and women cooperate against these pernicious laws”, yet also insisted that “in this building up of the nation, women must lead” (ibid.).

A second example of Maxeke’s strategic insight concerns the vote for women. The cause of women’s franchise had been close to Maxeke’s heart from the turn of the century, but she and the BWL refused to support the proposal by Prime Minister General J.B.M. Hertzog to grant the vote to white women in 1921. This decision was the result of careful analysis. Maxeke understood all too clearly the intent behind the Bill – after realising that white men would utterly resist giving the vote to Black women, white women’s organisations shifted from calling for the vote for all women at the turn of the century to white women only. As a result, Maxeke and the BWL reacted with “very grave alarm” at the proposed bill to extend the suffrage to white women in 1921, “fear[ing] that the added women’s franchise and influence would... seriously jeopardise Bantu interests” (139). Maxeke’s insight regarding white women’s abandonment of the universal franchise meant that the BWL could not support extending the vote to white women only, and instead they chose to protect the limited franchise available to Black men. History showed that Maxeke and her compatriots were right. The granting of the vote to white women in 1930 was followed in 1936 by the removal of the qualified franchise from African and coloured men at the Cape.

My last example is about Maxeke’s relationship with Christianity. Like the great poet Nontsizi Mqwetho, Maxeke was a devout Christian, but she also criticised the contradictions of white Christians and the limited opportunities available for Black women in the church. In 1925, Maxeke gave a powerful talk about Black people’s experience of Christianity, noting that old-time missionaries had lived amongst Black people. However, she pointed out, “when people visited missionaries now and knocked on the front doors, someone told them to ‘go to the kitchen’” (144). Maxeke emphasised this painful point. “Well, as a matter of fact we did not want to ‘go to the kitchen’... Don’t you think it is a shame for missionaries to come out of the kitchen door to see one of his members instead of inviting him inside?” (144). As she noted, “your ‘go around to the kitchen’ drives [Black people] still further away..., do you wonder that our people... call this Christianity a ‘white man’s Christianity’ and not theirs?” (144). Maxeke argued that Africans held a profound spirituality even before the arrival

of Christianity, proclaiming at the Women's Mite Conference of the AME in the US in 1928, that "we were not godless people when the missionaries came; we were worshipping God in our way" (147).

Jaffer's biography places Maxeke among a wider network of educated Christian Africans whose achievements and writing shaped Black people's views of the future. These include Tiya Soga, the first Black South African to earn a university degree and Nontsizi Mgqwetho, the great woman poet who wrote poems in Xhosa about Maxeke, weaving together the strands of this broader lineage into a denser, richer skein of history. Maxeke's achievements, set within these networks, fill in the bleak absences of our history and make for a vivid and evocative biography.

Despite facing extraordinary barriers, Maxeke forged a life of unparalleled achievements and a consistently moral and courageous political struggle. After recounting a life of unimaginable attainment, the biography turns toward an ending that was sad and heartbreaking. After her husband died, Maxeke could not receive a salary from the church because its rules prevented women from becoming elders or ministers, and she faced increasing financial pressure toward the end of her life. Jaffer's biography has moments of agonised contemplation. Reflecting on Maxeke's visionary work in the church, as a teacher, social worker and political activist, Jaffer wonders what might have been if...? What might our history have looked like if...?

Both Maxeke's unequalled achievements and the neglect and lack of support she faced towards the end of her life hold lessons about the possibilities for women in the world. Envisioning the world differently is at the core of *Beauty of the Heart* and Jaffer dedicates the book to "all the young women of South Africa". Maxeke's extraordinary achievements at a time when almost all educational paths were foreclosed for Black women points to her enormous symbolic meaning for South Africa. Through her we see a different set of possibilities in our own times. And yet, despite her highly visible role in the leadership of anti-colonial resistance by Africans and in advancing the cause of women in twentieth-century South Africa, Maxeke is little known today. *Beauty of the Heart* will help to overcome the contemporary neglect of Maxeke's life.