

Keeping Herstory silent in learners history textbooks

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Abstract

Purpose: The representation of women within the sub-section South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 in nine South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks is the main focal point of this study.

Design/methodology/approach: An intersectional feminist lens guided this qualitative study that focuses on the depiction, description and interpretation of women regarding the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 in nine South African CAPS-approved grade 10 learners' history textbooks. Two themes, Sexism, and Exclusion and minimal inclusion based on race, were derived from the historical text examination and analyses.

Findings: The findings revealed that women are misrepresented and under-represented in this sub-section compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, this form of denial has remained unchanged and uncontested. Hence, presently, prominent female figures are still silenced in these history textbooks.

Originality/value: The introspection of women's representation within South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks adds to the existing literature on history education by providing an analysis of how women are depicted, described and interpreted in these learning resources. This is crucial because history textbooks have the potential of contributing to sexist and racially prejudiced mindsets that can lead to negative effects in schools and communities surrounding the school/s.

Keywords: Herstory, History textbooks, Women, South African War and Union

Introduction

What was the role and experience of women in the South African war?

... during the war they helped to support the Boer commandos with weapons and supplies as well as with moral support. They stayed on the farms and maintained them while the men were away at war.

– South African Grade 10 Learners History Textbook.

The silencing of women ^[1] in South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks has continuously remained unchecked and unchallenged. This is due to statements such as the one expressed in the above excerpt, which purposefully omits the participation, roles and contributions of women in the South African War and Union of 1899–1902. Moreover, statements similar to the one in the above excerpt lead to questions such as, What is history? And who chooses the people that are considered to be important in historical events? The answers to these questions are crucial, especially in countries such as South Africa. *Iningizimu Afrika*, *Suid Afrika* or *Mzansi*, as it is affectionately known by South Africans, gained full democratic leadership in 1994 after going through half a century of brutal trauma caused by segregationist apartheid laws (Rotich, Ilieva, & Walunywa, 2015; Maistry, 2023). These laws

were based on race, ethnicity and classism. The depictions of South African history in school learners' history textbooks and archived historical texts have previously relied on European recollections of precolonial wars, liberation struggles during colonisation and post-colonial psychosocial segregationist policies (apartheid) (Rotich *et al.*, 2015; Maistry, 2023). Currently, Afrocentric depictions of South Africa's brutal and traumatic history have been annotated and published globally at a large scale and rate. However, these recollections have made men the lead starring characters of South Africa's revolutionary past, whilst sidelining and misrepresenting the significant contributions of women. The denial and omission of women's roles in historical events is prevalent in the sub-section *South African War and Union of 1899–1902* in South Africa's numerous grade 10 learners' history textbooks.

The South African War stirred life in women's movements, which barely existed beyond the home before the war. The social construct of women as purely domestic figures, who were only stationed to operate in the private walls of their homes, slowly began to change. Numerous conflicts or battles that led to the war started in November 1880 due to numerous factors, such as the Boers ^[2] belief in the righteousness of their case against the British, which many of the Boers viewed with a mixture of hate and contempt (Donaldson, 2018). This was due to the unfinished struggle against British imperialistic power that firstly forced them out of the Cape and Natal colonies (Belfield, 1975; Porter, 1981; Donaldson, 2018). The second important factor arose out of the discovery of vast quantities of gold near Johannesburg during the late 1880s; this transformed the Transvaal colony into a rich territory (Belfield, 1975; Porter, 1981; Donaldson, 2018). The immediate point of dispute was the extent to which British men residing in the Transvaal (Uitlanders) were to also be granted political rights (Belfield, 1975; Porter, 1981; Donaldson, 2018). However, the real issue was Britain's determination to maintain its status as the paramount power in Southern Africa due to the discovery of more gold deposits in the Transvaal colony in 1886 (Riedi, 2013). The war was fought in parts of the Cape Colony (now known as Western Cape province) and Natal (now known as KwaZulu-Natal province), which were both British colonies (Belfield, 1975; Thompson, 2014; Laband, 2020). The war also made it to the outskirts of the independent Boer republics of the Orange Free State (now known as Free State province) and the Transvaal Colony (now forming part of the Gauteng, North West, Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces) (Belfield, 1975; Thompson, 2014; Laband, 2020). According to Belfield (1975), the war consisted of a series of battles that resulted in the British forces being defeated at Majuba Hill on the Transvaal-Natal border in March 1881.

The war recommenced again in 1899 and ended in 1902 between the British and Boer forces, and thus the unification of South Africa was initiated (Belfield, 1975; Wessels, 2013). Due to historical annotations and existing evidence from that period or era, it was concluded that other ethnicities were also involved in the war (South African War 1899–1902) and the foundation that led to the unification (Union of South Africa 1910) of South Africa (Marks & Trapido, 2014; Simpson, 2021). Thus, these two history topics are merged in South Africa's history curriculum and currently referred to as the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 in grade 10 learners' history textbooks. However, women's contributions have been misrepresented and under-represented in the depiction, description and interpretation of the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 in these textbooks.

Literature review

The production of textbooks from conception to distribution, and their use in South African history classrooms, is a politically and educationally contentious activity. History textbooks have been studied as powerful forms of educational tools that have the ability to shape the

views and consciousness of learners (Bertram & Wassermann, 2015; Morgan, 2015; Grever & Van der Vlies, 2017). They act as a tool to infiltrate notions that the leading government wants the future generations to know regarding the various issues that are depicted within the text. These notions contain the administration's ideologies relating to the numerous history topics that are contained in the textbook (Morgan, 2015; Grever & Van der Vlies, 2017). Thus, they represent and define knowledge deemed as legitimate, portray acceptable social standards, and reveal acceptable and desired social identities. Similarly, Schoeman (2013) argues that textbooks have the potential to influence the development of learners and contribute to sexist attitudes at a subconscious level.

The language used within South African learners' history textbooks enforces subtlety in order to influence learners with regards to sexist mindsets pertaining to gender and history (Schoeman, 2013). Convictions such as these are prevalent in recently published South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks that feature the South African War and the Union of 1899 to 1902 sub-section. Moreover, women in these textbooks are largely portrayed in stereotypically traditional feminine roles and in domestic environments (Chiponda & Wassermann, 2011). They are rarely depicted in roles that are or were traditionally assigned to men (Chiponda & Wassermann, 2011). Moreover, Fardon and Schoeman (2010) believe that the role of women in the necessary task of rationalising war, and making it acceptable to the community has been largely ignored by international and South African historians writing on women and war. The involvement of women within issues that are deemed to fall in the spectrum of masculinity is excluded, and their participation within the South African War has been overlooked, unlike their male counterparts (Shekhawat, 2015). This gender blindness is common in most studies of war; women are widely cast in the role of the protected and the defended, often excluded from military service and almost always excluded from direct combat (Van Heyningen, 1999; Chiponda & Wassermann, 2011; Shekhawat, 2015). Van Heyningen (1999), Fardon and Schoeman (2010) further note that women's contributions are viewed as unimportant due to bias prevalent within history textbooks, which work towards emphasising the achievements and contributions of men.

The gendered character of the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 has operated at two levels – both then and now the war has been seen almost entirely as a masculine experience (Van Heyningen, 2008; Chiponda & Wassermann, 2011; Shekhawat, 2015). Moreover, the recollections of the South African War involving women have also excluded the experiences of Black ^[3] women and have thus regarded them as non-existent within this part of history that's presented in South African history textbooks (Van Heyningen, 1999; Theron, 2006; Teeger, 2015). Women are defined by their natural role even within historical texts; hence their contribution, involvement and experiences are suppressed in history textbooks (Pamuk & Muç, 2021). Moreover, textbook analysis has identified general biases of commissioned omission in the representation of minority groups. The main biases of omission are failure to note positive contributions, qualities, contemporary condition and the persecution or discrimination against these minorities (Dean, Hartmann, & Katzen, 1983; Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010; Fryberg & Eason, 2017). These biases are another gap that Bertram and Wassermann (2015) claim minimum attention has been focused on regarding the composition of knowledge that appears in learners' history textbooks. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Van Heyningen (2008) regarding how the involvement of women within the war featured actions that may be regarded as unimportant and miniscule compared to their male counterparts. Likewise, Williams and Bennett (2016) stipulate that women's inclusion lacks depth, especially since learners' history textbooks tend to emphasise men as military and political winners. Thus,

historical writers tend to omit historical figures that are socially considered important in less dramatic and noticeable ways during wars or political civil rights movements.

It seems possible that unless history textbook publishers hear from their prospective customers that an essential change in historical philosophy is warranted, materials used in history classrooms in the future will not differ radically from what is already there (Delaney, 1996; Cauvin, 2016; Nokes, 2022). What can be concluded at this stage is that unanimity exists amongst the authors of South African history textbooks and their publishers regarding the misrepresentation and under-representation of women in South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks concerning the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902.

Methodology

An intersectional feminist lens guided the examination of the selected historical texts regarding women, and their existence in the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902. Intersectional feminism recognises how social categories such as race, ethnicity, social class and gender intersect to create new modes of bigotry for women (Crenshaw, 2010; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). Moreover, intersectional feminism purports that different power structures also exist for women based on their race, ethnicity and social class (Crenshaw, 2010; Cho *et al.*, 2013; Carbado *et al.*, 2013). Hence, this framework is able to demonstrate how these social categories (gender, race and ethnicity) enact an integral role in how the depiction, description and interpretation of women, and their experiences are misrepresented and under-represented in South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks regarding the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902.

This qualitative research study was guided by the question: How are women depicted, described and interpreted in the sub-section South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 in South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks? Nine South African CAPS-approved learners' history textbooks were selected to answer this question through a critical examination of the selected historical texts regarding women and their existence in the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902. Content analysis was used to examine the selected historical texts. The extracted data was organised into the following two themes: *Sexism*, and *Exclusion and minimal inclusion based on race* were derived from the analyses. The generated data was analysed using a deductive form of analysis whereby categories were firstly developed for organising or classifying the data from the textbooks before examining for patterns and connections (Yin, 2011; Vaughn & Turner, 2016).

I critically examined the depiction, description and interpretation of women in the sub-section South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902, which is included in the nine South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks that are listed below:

1. Via Afrika (Publisher: Via Afrika; Year of publication: 2013; Edition: 1st)
2. Focus (Publisher: Pearson Education; Year of publication: 2013; Edition: 1st)
3. New Generation History (Publisher: New Generation; Year of publication: 2011; Edition: 1st)
4. Shutters Top Class History (Publisher: Shuter & Shooter; Year of publication: 2014; Edition: 2nd)
5. In Search of History (Publisher: Oxford University Press; Year of publication: 2014; Edition: 1st)

6. Spot On History (Publisher: Juta and Company Ltd; Year of publication: 2014; Edition: 1st)
7. Viva History (Publisher: Vivlia; Year of publication: 2011; Edition: 1st)
8. Ace It! History (Publisher: Shuter & Shooter; Year of publication: 2017; Edition: 1st)
9. Shuters History (Publisher: Shuter & Shooter; Year of publication: 2005; Edition: 1st)

These nine South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks were purposefully selected, because they met the set criterion which was:

1. South African grade 10 learners' history textbook that is written in the English language.
2. South African grade 10 learners' history textbook that is published in South Africa.

Data was only extracted from the nine history textbooks that are listed above. Moreover, the nine learners' history textbooks were selected because they are written by an assortment of authors and exclusively published in South Africa. Thus, this further demonstrates that extensive research regarding the prominence of women in the depiction, description and interpretation of the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 has remained stagnant with minimal interest in changing the current existing narrative about women in South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks. Content relating to women and the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 seems to be consistently repeated from one textbook to the other with minimal amendments. The results presented in the following themes are direct quotations from the selected textbooks.

Results and discussion

Sexism

The results obtained from the data reveal that South African learners' history textbooks are used as a tool to infiltrate notions that contain the government's ideologies relating to historical topics. However, sexist language and the manner in which it is used within the learners' history textbooks are utilised in a subtle manner in order to influence learners with regards to gender and history. Some of the women's experiences are omitted, and they are annotated as merely only serving a domesticated wife role during the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902:

What was the role and experience of women in the South African war?

Women played a vital role in the South African war, during the war they helped to support the Boer commandos with weapons and supplies as well as with moral support. They stayed on the farms and maintained them while the men were away at war. (Focus pp. 250–270; New Generation History pp. 164–229; Spot On History pp. 280–340; Viva History pp. 278–351; Via Afrika pp. 278–351)

Emily Hobhouse was a wealthy British lady who came to South Africa during the War.

She was horrified at the conditions in the concentration camps.

She became very unpopular with the British government as she campaigned and raised funds for better rations, sanitation and facilities in the camps.

Because of her tireless effort, the death rate in the camps did come down. (Focus pp. 250–270; New Generation History pp. 164–229; Spot On History pp. 280–340; Viva History pp. 278–351)

Lady Sarah Wilson was the first woman to be appointed as a war correspondent. (Via Afrika pp. 278–351; Top Class History pp. 207–210; In Search of History pp. 10–15; Ace It! History pp. 164–175; Shutters History pp. 230–250; Focus pp. 250–270; New Generation History pp. 164–229)

The findings reveal the stereotypical manner in which women are represented within South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks, and their involvement within issues that are deemed to fall in the spectrum of masculinity are sidelined. Their participation within the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 is overlooked, unlike their male counterparts. Intersectional feminist theory defines this form of discrimination as legitimised misrepresentation and suppression that is fostered by patriarchal institutions, which regulate the discourses of historical narratives (Crenshaw, 2010; Cho *et al.*, 2013; Carbado *et al.*, 2013). Van Heyningen (1999) and Schrader and Wotipka (2011) describe the minimal inclusion and omission of women within learners' history textbooks as being perpetuated by history writers that refuse to acknowledge the existence and contribution of females in any war.

Moreover, the excerpt above reveals that masculinity has been used as a measure of participation within war. Women and their contributions are viewed as unimportant due to biases prevalent within textbooks that work towards emphasising the achievements and contributions of men. These viewpoints are encouraged by the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women, which does not place them within the physical procession of the war, mainly because this action would diminish their femininity (Blumberg, 2008; Dawar & Anand, 2017; Bachore & Semela, 2022). The mere acknowledgement of women being part of the war in a physical manner would place them on an equal spectrum with men, and as a consequence, this would challenge the current existing gender dynamics (Crenshaw, 2010; Cho *et al.*, 2013; Carbado *et al.*, 2013). Thus, history textbooks as defined by both Schrader and Wotipka (2011) have changed from those depicting women primarily in a contributory manner to now including women in a compensatory and bifocal manner. Hence, their domestic contributions are mostly highlighted, because they are depicted as having little or no effect at all on the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902.

Exclusion and minimal inclusion based on race

The recollections of the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 involving women have excluded the experiences of Black (African, coloured and Indian) women and have consequently regarded them as non-existent within this part of history that is described in South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks. The roles and experiences of Black women are not outlined separately as those of the Boer women in the selected nine textbooks. Their experiences are derived from those of the Boer women even though it is not explicitly stated within the textbooks:

What was the role and experience of black South Africans in the South African war? The South African war was known as the Anglo-Boer war for many years, this was due to the fact that it used to be called a “white man’s war” however, recent research has shown that many blacks – Africans, coloureds and Indians – participated in the war on both British and Boer sides. (Focus pp. 250–270; New Generation History pp. 164–229; Spot On History pp. 280–340; Viva History pp. 278–351)

What was the role and experience of women in the South African War?

Not all Boer women were taken to concentration camps after the British burnt their farms.

→ Some women and children evaded the British and wandered in the veld for the entire duration of the war.

→ They were often accompanied by their black servant.

→ They would seek shelter in caves or anywhere else that could provide shelter and remain hidden from the British. Most women's suffering in the veld made them more determined to continue supporting the Boer commandos in their fight to maintain their freedom. (Focus pp. 250–270; New Generation History pp. 164–229; Spot On History pp. 280–340; Viva History pp. 278–351)

The role of women and blacks in the war

About 100 000 blacks thought that if they joined the British

They would get the vote when the British won.

They were very useful to the British (The blacks that worked for the Boers did the same jobs): they knew the territory well

they acted as spies and messengers

they performed jobs such as cooking, looking after animals and doing other camp chores. (Focus pp. 250–270; New Generation History pp. 164–229; Spot On History pp. 280–340; Viva History pp. 27–351)

The omission of such historical content within history textbooks can be attributed to the apartheid government, which promoted segregation amongst ethnicities in South Africa. According to Dean *et al.* (1983) and Teeger (2015), a fairly comprehensive study of history textbooks used in the Transvaal was carried out in the 1960s; the findings revealed that historical research conducted during the forty years prior to the analysis had not been incorporated into textbooks. The conclusion that was derived from this comprehensive study was that the South African education system was being used to divide the citizens of the country (Dean *et al.*, 1983; Teeger, 2015). Hence, the experiences of Black women during the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 descended from the Boer women. Through an intersectional feminist lens, we can conclude that race and ethnicity contributed to Black women's experiences being disregarded, neglected or erased, and in a racist South Africa, their Black experience was of little interest to the white keepers of records (Crenshaw, 2010; Cho *et al.*, 2013; Carbado *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, apart from a few statistics, Black women's existence during the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 has been almost entirely removed from the files (Van Heyningen, 2008). Their presence was recorded along with the livestock brought into the camp; in some cases their names were included, but the relevant pages have been removed from historical texts (Van Heyningen, 2008). Yet ironically, they appear in pictures that were photographed when they were in the concentration camps with the Boer women that they worked for (Dampier, 2013; De Klerk, Wright, & Manaka, 2023). Thus, South Africa's brutal traumatic past does not only divide its citizens based on gender, but it also separates women based on race and ethnicity as well. Hence, the reason why South African

history textbooks that comply with CAPS (Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement) history educational resource requirements and are approved by the Department of Basic Education possess minimal material relating to women and the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902. Even in the new democratic South Africa, post 1994.

The participation and experiences of women in the war highlight the non-conformity of women to their traditional roles during that period, yet such experiences are disregarded as important history. Some of the women that also had a significant role within the procession of the war are not mentioned within the nine selected learners' history textbooks. In addition, if they are mentioned, they are not afforded a broad depiction of their life story. Women such as Sarah Raal, Lady Sarah Wilson and Millicent Garret Fawcett all played a significant role during the procession of the war, even though their experiences and involvements were completely different. Sara Raal's experiences as part of the Boer commandos for a short period and as an inmate of various concentration camps prove that the war was not only dominated by males (De Reuck, 1999; Dampier, 2005, 2013). Lady Sarah Wilson was one of the correspondents that worked in highlighting the processions of the war within towns that had been besieged, such as Kimberley, Ladysmith and Mafikeng (Krebs, 1999; Van Heyningen, 1999; Clarke, 2018). Moreover, she was also a prisoner of war because she was held captive twice by the Boers during the war, under suspicion of being a British spy and for reporting about the progression of the war (Krebs, 1999; Van Heyningen, 1999; Clarke, 2018). Millicent Garret Fawcett, the head of the lady's commission, was appointed with the members of her commission to investigate the situation within the concentration camps, as was previously done by Emily Hobhouse (Krebs, 1999; Van Heyningen, 1999; Dampier, 2005; Seibold, 2011). The conclusions derived from the lady's commission prompted the leaders of the camps to pay more attention to the situation than before.

Conclusion and recommendations

The participation and experiences of women during the war emphasise how some women were not inclined to remain within their traditional roles. This proves that in other parts of the country, women, besides Sarah Raal, might have also been conducting similar actions (De Reuck, 1999; Dampier, 2005, 2013). Similar to Lady Sarah Wilson, she was the first female war correspondent during the time when female and male roles were defined by both physical strength and biological reproductive organs (Krebs, 1999; Van Heyningen, 1999; Clarke, 2018). Yet such experiences are disregarded as important within South African learners' grade 10 history textbooks. The depiction of Emily Hobhouse ^[4] as the only woman that was significant throughout the procession of the war is misleading and shows the extent to which the omission of vital knowledge has hindered the acknowledgement of many women that had a vital role during the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902. These biases are another gap that Bertram and Wassermann (2015) claim minimum attention has been focused on regarding the composition of knowledge that appears in the South African learners' history textbooks.

Introspection of such issues concerning female representation within South African learners' history textbooks also confirm that textbooks in detail have the potential to influence the development of learners and contribute to sexist attitudes at a sub-conscious level. The language used within South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks enforces subtlety in order to influence learners with regard to sexist attitudes pertaining to gender and history. The inclusion of Sarah Raal, Lady Sarah Wilson and Millicent Garret Fawcett would explicitly highlight the true meaning of statements such as “women played a vital role in the South

African war”, as annotated in some of the nine selected learners' history textbooks. Moreover, the greatest limitation for this study was obtaining enough data regarding prominent Black women, and their experiences during the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902. Through an intersectional feminist lens, it is clear that the intersection of race, ethnicity, social class and gender renders both Boer women and Black women as invisible or non-existent in this part of South African history (Crenshaw, 2010; Cho *et al.*, 2013; Carbado *et al.*, 2013). However, these social categories also highlight the hierarchy that exists between Boer women and Black women based on each of their miniscule historical acknowledgements by South African grade 10 history textbook writers. The accurate depiction, description and interpretation of women within South African grade 10 learners' history textbooks regarding the sub-section the South African War and Union of 1899 to 1902 would ensure that all South African learners see themselves represented within the learning material that they use in the history classroom.

Acknowledgments

The author expresses his gratitude to: the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF) Postgraduates (Honours: History Education) Scholarship, and the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria.

Notes

1. In this paper, the terms woman/women are used by the author to describe biological females. The author does not in any way intend to intentionally offend any other marginalised group that also now uses these terms.
2. An Afrikaner individual/person whose ancestry can be traced back to the Dutch and Huguenot population that settled in Southern Africa–Cape of Good Hope (in the province currently known as Western Cape) in the 17th century.
3. Before the apartheid government ruled South Africa, coloured and Indian individuals were classified as Black. It was only after the National Party (a South African political party that was founded in 1914 and ruled South Africa from 1948 to 1994) implemented the segregationist system called apartheid that racial segregation was formalised through legislation which resulted in South Africa's current four racial classifications (Black, White, coloured and Indian).
4. The most visible humanitarian that critiqued Britain's neglectful and mismanaged imperial policies concerning the treatment of Afrikaner families (women and children) in the concentration camps during the procession of the war.

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