

Thandi Modise, a Woman in War

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Thandi Modise, a woman in war

Senior ANC woman, THANDI MODISE, breaks the silence around life in ANC military training camps during the apartheid war. As a female commander in Umkhonto we Sizwe, Thandi Modise fought two wars – one against apartheid and another against the misogyny of many of her male comrades. She spoke to ROBYN CURNOW about this time of her life and about present attitudes towards women who were on the front-line

They also fought as women, constantly having to protect and justify their sexuality, their gender and their bodies

‘When it comes to men, it’s heroism. When it comes to women it’s almost like you should be ashamed. Why otherwise do we not accept that women played a part in the [armed] struggle?’ (Former Umkhonto we Sizwe commander, Thandi Modise)¹

After being trained in African National Congress (ANC) camps in Tanzania and Angola, Thandi Modise worked inside South Africa as an Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) operative. She was eventually arrested and subsequently jailed for 10 years. Today she is the Deputy President of the ANC Women’s League and the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Defence.

Hers is an impressive ‘struggle’ history – but Thandi Modise’s biography reveals more than just the struggles of one woman fighting an unjust system. Instead, her narrative touches on a social reality that many South African women have experienced. The difference is that while most have remained silent about their apartheid experiences, Modise has spoken out.

Modise’s narrative highlights how women in the struggle didn’t only fight one war against the South African apartheid state; instead the women who bore arms in the name of racial freedom had to fight a two-pronged battle. They also fought as

women, constantly having to protect and justify their sexuality, their gender and their bodies. In her experience she was a **woman** soldier and a **woman** political prisoner. During military training, despite Modise’s high rank, there was gender antagonism and competition. Women had to constantly ‘prove’ they weren’t the weaker sex. Modise talks of deep strains between the male and female platoons in the camp she commanded before returning to South Africa.

Unlike many women whose lives have been assigned to the private sphere, Modise’s adult life has been conducted within the boundaries of the ANC’s **public** battle to end apartheid. In Modise’s case, this is not a personal narrative because it goes much wider than a single oral history. It deals with the perceptions held of masculinity and femininity in the context of war. This story is important because it breaks a silence that surrounds South African women’s lives in the armed wing of the liberation movement: it helps to subvert the male-centric versions of the struggle.

An oral history

Modise arrived at ANC headquarters in Tanzania on a wave of revolutionary zeal. It was 1976, thousands of angry students, like her, were driven by the prospect of joining

MK and taking up arms against the apartheid state. According to Modise, their fervour and enthusiasm took the ANC by surprise.

We were these children who were coming in and flooding the ANC, I think at that point the ANC was really caught off guard, didn't know what to do with us – too many young people coming in, some of them too energetic.

The energy of the early days of exile belied an innocence and naiveté. Modise remembers receiving much needed political education while sitting in open classrooms, under the trees, in Dar es Salaam. In the early days, there was an emphasis on politics rather than military training. Today, she reflects on her ignorance of the historical roots of the struggle. Although Modise and her comrades had been called 'communists' by the South African state, many hardly understood what that really meant.

And that is where really I started reading in politics, for the first time. I mean, when we were in the Botswana prison, people would be speaking about Bismarck and I wouldn't have a clue who the hell this person was. People, the Botswana guys, would say to us, 'Are you Leninist?' And I would say to myself, 'Who is this Lenin?' So you can understand the group of us in 1976, you'd find us under the trees, reading everything trying to understand and there was a chap who used to go around with this thick Das Kapital volume, trying to read this thing. And so we started.

While the political and military education had begun, Modise was also learning about the realities of being a **female** freedom fighter. While waiting for military training in Tanzania, (there were about six women and about a 100 men), the female group decided to take karate lessons.

There was this idea that we needed to be super-fit. Against the enemy, the South African state then, and against men who just wanted to take advantage of us. Because right there in Tanzania there had been an incident, there had been a terrible

fight, something, I mean, which before 1990 we had been keeping quiet about. But there had been a fight one night over girls...because there had been a feeling among some men that because there are these five, six women there, 'Why should they be sex starved?' and there were others who said, 'No, they are not here to be sex slaves, if they want to have affairs they will have affairs, if they don't want to, then you are there to protect them'...

And so, from the beginning of her military training Modise was aware that she had to protect herself – not just from the apartheid forces, but also from her own comrades.

This became even more evident when Modise was sent, along with other comrades, to the Angolan camp, Nova Catenga.

By the time we started training in Angola, there were about 20 or 22 women – girls, we were really girls – to about 500 hundred boys or men.

The Angolan government had given the ANC a dilapidated building that had been used as a boarding school or a military barracks which was, according to Modise, 'in the middle of nowhere'. In the hot, Angolan bush the recruits spent most of their days digging a criss-crossing network of trenches around the buildings to secure the camp. In a camp of four companies, only Modise and one other woman had a rank, the rest of the women were rank and file soldiers.

So when we started training I was made section commissar...later on I became a commander. It was tough because these men and boys, and they were men, really mature men, didn't really want to be commanded by young girls. You were being challenged all the way. Doubly hard...physically. I think those few women dug most of the trenches there...to prove ourselves, and out of frustration. Because, I remember once when guard duty started they wanted us women to guard only during the day and only at certain points and we challenged them on that. None of us could shoot, all of us had said we were equals and suddenly they

Modise was aware that she had to protect herself – not just from the apartheid forces

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were trying to tell us what we could do and what we couldn't do. We said we want to be treated like everybody else.

Every day the women worked hard to entrench their rights as equal human beings. Digging was one of the ways to achieve this.

Because we had said, we will do the same guard duty as everybody else, they then said, 'And therefore you will dig like every man does and therefore you will do, whatever.' And we said, 'Fine!' So we dug the trenches and the men would sit there and smoke and we dug!

It was difficult. I mean, our hands! I remember I had blisters and later on there were hard calluses which I thought I'd never get rid of [holds up hands to show they are now smooth]. Your body would ache because in the mornings the road work...they made it extra difficult – going up and down the mountains. We needed to prove we'd keep up.

Even with a stoic acceptance of camp life, womanhood was as daunting as digging trenches or climbing mountains.

With us girls, when we were in Angola, it was terrible...my breasts were growing and therefore they were going to create more of a problem for me. So? Exercise even more! Harden your body even more! Try to be one of the boys because that is one of the protections you have.

There seemed to be a dichotomy within the lives of MK women. On the one hand they needed to prove that they weren't the 'weaker sex', while on the other, they were desperate to maintain their femaleness. There is never a sense of Modise or her female comrades ever coming to terms with this contradiction. In this masculinised world, the female body hindered them, yet they were proud to be women. However, as a group they made a decision not to forget their femininity.

We really felt like one of the boys. But we also proved that come Saturday we'd be putting on our dresses. We'd be very feminine.

Despite this acknowledgement, Modise

believes the women soldiers, no matter what their rank was, remained a novelty. Their sexual identity as women always intruded on the masculine army environment. Nothing is more telling of male-female relationships in the ANC camps than the August 9 parades to commemorate the protest against passes, 'Women's Day'. Thanks to Russian dress design the occasion often stretched beyond the limit of accepted military pomp and ceremony.

The women's platoon would be there in dresses marching. In dresses. Military dresses. Black dresses. And for some reason, the Russians had them very short, above the knee. And we would have every man sitting there watching and sometimes I thought they were looking more at our thighs than at the march itself. But we decided that it would be important for us not to forget that we were women.

Nowadays, Modise can't remember much of the day-to-day realities of camp life for a woman.

Sometimes, I think I've blocked it out. I don't know what we used for pads, sanitary pads, I really can't remember. I really don't remember. I know Ma Tambo has been on TV saying they organised [sanitary pads], definitely not the camps I've been in. Definitely not. I can't remember whether we were using them...because at some point I know our shirts didn't have sleeves, whether we were cutting them off [the sleeves] and using them as pads, I just can't remember. The sewerage system was terrible but we survived. You'd never hear us complain.

The women's barracks were separate from the men's barracks which were named after letters of the alphabet. However, the women's barrack was given a name, *Mzana* which meant 'the small home', which Modise and her comrades felt was belittling. Modise explains:

It was a women's thing, you know a small home, it's not even a home. Mzana.

In *Mzana*, the woman cadres insisted on a united front, they always tried to stay one step ahead of the men. Besides the physical

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competition, they were also pitted against the men intellectually. As well as literacy classes, the female comrades held informal political classes to prepare themselves for the main classes, otherwise, 'They [the men] would come back to say, "girls are stupid" '.

While the 20 women protected themselves and their group, the men did too. One instance highlighted just how a gender battle was playing itself out in the Angolan bush. Clear divisions emerged between the men and women after an incident of sexual harassment, known as the Brushman affair.

The doors in the women's barracks would not lock which made it a simple matter for intruders to enter the women's section at night.

Day by day, you'd think, 'Who do I talk to?' Because in the middle of the night there would be this hand fondling you. I was sharing my room with three other women and finally [there was an outburst by one of the women]...

They had been suspecting each other. *Somebody has been feeling our bodies at night. So we start finding out from the other rooms and they say, 'Yes, definitely but who will talk because we are not sure who does this?' So we laid a trap. And one night we get this guy. Now it's dark and he was a big man because he just threw us off in the passage and ran out. Angola is hot in summer so we were in all forms of undress; panties and bra, I was wearing a panty, no bra. We ran after this man and as we ran we were screaming, all of us, all 20 women...because the men hid him. We wanted this man because he'd been fondling our bodies for months. They hid him... . We went back to sleep.*

The next morning the men would not speak to the women. This silent treatment was known as the 'anti-muhlere campaign' (muhlere means 'woman' in Portuguese). Ironically, it was the men who were furious, they were saying that the women should have dressed properly before going after the suspect. The anti-muhlere campaign was still



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continuing when Modise left the camp to go to South Africa on a MK mission.

Thandi Modise

They were against us. There was such a strong negative feeling against us. As if we were wrong and this man was right to come night after night to feel our bodies...they protected him. He went into one [barrack], they just closed [the door]. Hidden. And up to this day we cannot say whether there was just one man doing it or whether there were a number of them.

Although they were not raped, this invasion left the women soldiers angry because many of their male comrades had chosen to protect one of their own. Even within the liberation ethos of ANC military camps, it appears that a deep-rooted masculinity prevalent in South African society worked against equal gender relations in the liberation movement. According to Modise, many of the MK men were and still are threatened by the presence of women on the front-line of the political struggle.

Up to today, you still can't find an ANC male in that camp to talk frankly about that incident. [According to them] It was the women who were out of order.

The sexual inequalities during Modise's time in MK camps are identified by particular songs sung by many of the men in Nova Catanga. In particular, Modise remembers a Xhosa song traditionally sung at the ceremony before a cow is slaughtered. The song is 'How does a cow see when it is going to

Clear divisions emerged between the men and women after an incident of sexual harassment

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be slaughtered?’ Some male cadres changed the wording to, ‘How does a woman see when she is going to be fucked?’ Modise says wryly:

I left that camp without the leadership in that camp addressing the matter [of sexual harassment].

With hindsight

Modise believes the women who fought in the struggle are stigmatised, especially by their male comrades. For some inexplicable reason, she feels they have been tainted by their fight.

It's quite interesting. I was talking to the women from the Western Sahara and Zimbabwe. They were saying, 'You fight with men in trenches, but something happens to them afterwards'. Whether it is that they cannot accept that you fought with them, whether it is guilt or whether it is denial that women shouldn't have been forced to do this. I don't know. But somehow you become something they do not want to face, something that must be pushed outside. In the ANC this has started...[they say,] 'This is no time for populists. We are now facing a different terrain.' I submit that women face that terrain very well.

Modise identified a similar marginalisation among Mozambican, Namibian and Zimbabwean women former freedom fighters. They too fought a two-pronged battle, similar to that of Modise and her comrades; the dual oppressions of colonialism and misogyny. In *Namibian Women in War* (1988), Dan Tjongarero says:

It was a natural consequence. Women were the next group to be mobilised. To become full participants of the struggle. Not only as cooks, nurses, etc, but as politicians and guerrillas. These demands began to be made by the women leaving the country, and was reflected by the women inside. Then an additional dimension was added; that of 'double oppression'. Women talked of oppression by men also. There was an attempt at sensitising the men in the liberation struggle. They said, 'We are

prepared to take up the challenge to fight colonisation, but are we really equal?' (Cleaver and Wallace, 1990:82)

The perception of alienation and inequality is still felt today by female ex-soldiers and prisoners, even now that the war is over. Modise believes that ex-women soldiers and prisoners are still being marginalised within the ANC.

[When they look at us] women who went to jail, for some reason, they think we must have chosen to fight and to go to jail because we are stupid! It is something that really concerns me in the ANC that people who are known to be MK, women who have been to jail, somehow, it's almost that something happened to our brains and we cannot be trusted with responsibilities. That is my impression. It doesn't matter how good we can be.

With their struggle roles viewed with suspicion, women ex-freedom fighters are disappointed that their role has not been acknowledged as much as they would have hoped. While acknowledging the male freedom fighter, Modise and others like her would like the **woman** freedom fighter to be honoured, not because her fight was more difficult, or more dangerous, or more horrifying but because her fight was different. She fought as a liberationist **and** as a woman.

REFERENCES

Cleaver T & Wallace M (1990) *Nambia: Women in War*, London: Zed Books.

FOOTNOTES

1. Thandi Modise, was interviewed at Luthuli House, Johannesburg, July 5, 1999, and at the Old Fort prison, Johannesburg on July 20, 1999. An anonymous interview was conducted with a former MK soldier, in Auckland Park, Johannesburg, during June 1999.

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