Celebrating ‘mothers of the nation’:
The Monument to the Women of South Africa in Pretoria

Introduction

While providing a detailed investigation of the Monument to the Women of South Africa at Pretoria, this chapter discusses issues of gender within the commemorative effort of the post-apartheid order and more specifically examines the relationship between gender identity and conceptions of national identity. As stated earlier, the Women’s Monument (unveiled by Thabo Mbeki on 9 August 2000) commemorates the 1956 protest march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria and more generally honours the contribution of women to the liberation struggle. But as part of the National Legacy Project, the Women’s Monument also more broadly celebrates the role of women as ‘mothers of the nation’ through their contribution to the foundation of the new democratic order and expresses the constitutionally enshrined commitment of the national government and especially the ANC to gender equality.

If the commemoration of the past is a mirror of the values of the present, the National Women’s monument makes a powerful statement for the recognition of women as equal partners in the attainment of liberation and proclaims the importance of women more generally. Yet, as media reports remind us daily, the sad reality is that the problem of gender discrimination – ranging from economic inequality to the abuse of women – has not been resolved or even adequately addressed in South Africa. While under apartheid the women’s fight for equality had to take a back seat behind the larger struggle for black liberation, which was perceived as being more important, during the immediate post-liberation period women’s issues were again subordinated to the new priorities of nation-building and racial reconciliation. Only in recent years can one discern a more concerted effort – both within civil society and the government – to push agendas of gender equality and devise plans to
address the persistent marginalisation and abuse of women (and children).

This need for strategic intervention in the social ills of the present society, coupled with the forging of a new national identity based on values of non-racialism and non-sexism, constitutes the context for the commemoration of past events involving women and the identification of female heroes selected as models for identification in the present. But I demonstrate in this chapter firstly that the post-apartheid practices of public commemoration throughout South Africa remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, and secondly that the few commemorative initiatives in honour of women, notably the National Monument for the Women of South Africa, promote a specific gender discourse in which women’s achievements and contributions are appropriated for wider societal and political goals and women’s identity is placed in the service of a particular vision of national identity.

In its interrogation of questions relating to national identity this chapter follows on from the previous chapter’s investigation of the Freedom Park project. If the Freedom Park must in part be understood as a counterpart to the VTM, the new national Women’s Monument in Pretoria must be considered against the foil of the old National Women’s Monument, the *Nasionale Vrouemonument*, which Afrikaner Nationalists built on the outskirts of Bloemfontein almost 100 years earlier. Countering the exclusiveness of the old Women’s monument, the post-apartheid initiative intends to truly honour the epithet ‘national’ by commemorating the contribution of all women, irrespective of race, class, culture or political association. This chapter critically investigates how ‘different’ (in ideological and artistic terms) the new Women’s Monument really is. More precisely, I want to investigate to what extent this monument perpetuates or diverts from entrenched patterns of gendered memorialisation, what this monument can be thought to say about women and their role within the nation, how the monument might encourage new models of gendered identification, and also what new limitations, gender stereotypes and categories of exclusion it might be seen to create.

**Historical background of the 1956 Women’s March**

The 1952 Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act mentioned in Chapter Three stipulated that African women, who had until then largely been exempted from permit requirements, would also be forced to carry reference books at an unspecified future date. The government indeed began issuing permits to women in 1954 and reference books from 1956, starting in the Western Cape and soon