# Beauty of the Heart: The Life and Times of Charlotte Mannya Maxeke

Zubeida Jaffer

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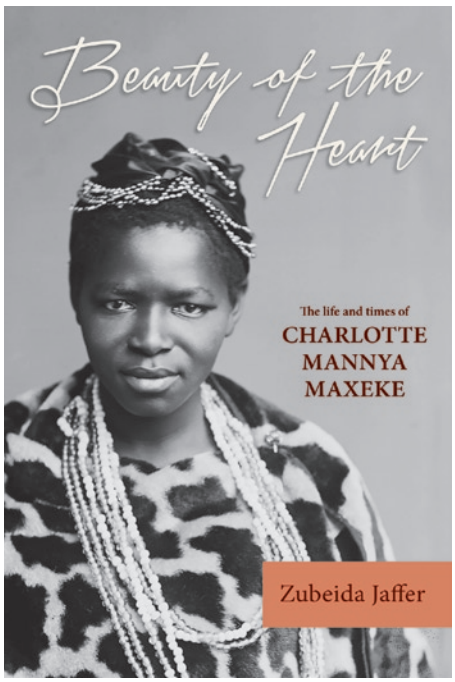
***Review by Claire-Anne Louise Lester***

The life of Charlotte Mannya Maxeke tells the story of one of the most remarkable people in South African history and public life. In this biography, Jaffer weaves a narrative that traverses a great deal of history: from Maxeke's birth in Uitenhage, Eastern Cape in 1871 through her primary education at a mission school and her move to Kimberley when diamonds were discovered. Jaffer traces her travels abroad with the Jubilee Choir and her experience at Wilberforce University in America. We are introduced to Maxeke as part of a burgeoning black intelligentsia, but who is not bound to her class background and returns to South Africa to continue her work as a champion of human rights. She was South Africa's first African woman to obtain a university degree and became a key political figure in the global struggle against oppression, whatever form it took – racial, gender or cultural.




From her youth, Maxeke showed devotion to her Christian faith which was the fount of her strong moral convictions. But sources reveal how she wrestled with the contradictions of missionary work in South Africa in the context of settler colonialism, *de facto* separate development and the dispossession of indigenous people from their land.

Jaffer adeptly contextualises the narrative of Charlotte's experiences against the rapid industrialisation in the Cape. This is spurred by the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley and Jaffer sketches the changes in farming and the increasingly precarious situation of landless African people. Jaffer recounts how Kimberley was the first city in the world to install street lamps in 1882, and where the first stock exchange was created in 1883. We are shown how early capitalist accumulation became the centre of development, while human development suffered.

Charlotte and her sister moved to Kimberley during this time of dramatic change, where she taught at the Wesleyan school. It is in Kimberley ››

that she is introduced to an intellectual circle. In Jaffer's words, "They straddled the ongoing divide between their traditional way of living and adaptation to the way of life of their conquerers. This was to be a constant tension for Charlotte and her contemporaries as they evolved into the intellectual strata of South Africa" (p. 35). In many aspects of her life, Maxeke adopted many identities but never fully wedded herself to any one of them.

Drawing on interviews with Charlotte's sister, the book illustrates Charlotte's attempt to reconcile her unwavering belief in Christianity with the harsh reality she was witnessing, and her attraction to empiricism. She says, "Those Europeans who are wicked are the messengers of satan, sent to confuse us". When asked how she could tell which of the white people were really Christians or Satan's messengers, she responded, "By study" (p. 24).

She remained a Christian throughout her life, without ever conceiving the religion as something imposed on her by a foreign power. That she never undermined or devalued her traditional religious practices speaks volumes about the reverence she had for her African origins. In a speech delivered at the Women's Mite Conference of the AME church in South Africa in the 1930s she stated, "Why, mother, we were not Godless people when the missionaries came; we were worshipping God in our own way" (p. 147). She was, of course, referring to ancestor worship. Moreover, when delivering a speech at her alma mater she defended her local traditions saying, "Rather would I be at the mercy of a witchdoctor than under the misgovernment of an intemperate ruler" (p. 72). This is a portrait of an individual who accepted the secular state as an inevitable part of industrial life but approached each 'religion' with equal respect, using the yardstick of their potential to advance human well-being.

She grew up during a period marred by conflict between colonisers and indigenous inhabitants as widespread resistance to British settlement spread. Cetshwayo, the Zulu king, defeated the British at Isandlwana, "after wiping out an entire regiment of soldiers" (p. 8). Jaffer writes how this news would have travelled to young Charlotte, whose spirit of resistance would celebrate. For Charlotte, education was central to this resistance. Jaffer describes the transnational character of struggle against oppression and the defining role that education played in its alleviation.

Despite Charlotte's relatively privileged position as an educated woman, and having been able to travel to London to sing with her choir, she endured ongoing oppression and humiliation. Upon arriving in London for a series of performances, including one for the Queen, their host informed them that the choir's name would have to be changed from the Jubilee Choir (adapted from their meeting of the Orpheus McAdoo and his Jubilee singers) to "Kaffir Choir" (p. 47). It is narrated how, "Charlotte and the others objected vociferously to no avail" and they were especially humiliated by the word Kaffir as it echoed the Xhosa word *Kafula*, meaning "to spit on" (p. 47). Despite this horrible experience, Charlotte's firmness of conviction led her to excel in London, where she met renowned feminist Emily Pankhurst. In a remarkable feat, she published an article in the London *Review of Reviews*, where she implored the British public to treat people in Africa as they would in England and made a number of demands, including that the British "give our children free education".

Charlotte had the opportunity to attend Wilberforce University – the very first tertiary institution owned and run by African Americans. Her classmates were freed slaves or their children and she was taught by the likes of W.E.B. du Bois, who admired her greatly. She became steeped in intellectual appoaches to structural oppression (p. 64).

Upon her return to South Africa, Jaffer tells us of her rejection from political groups such as the South African Native Convention on account of her being a woman (p. 79), and how, in 1908, she established a school in Evaton through the AME Church. She often delivered speeches at churches, universities and other influential platforms, always with the aim of enhancing cross-racial relationships and the welfare of African people. "Let us try and make our Christianity practical," (p. 151) she said. From there she went on to found the Bantu Women's League (BWL) and was its first president.

The BWL was one of the first nation-wide political groups of South African women, and Charlotte linked it with other organisations including the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) and the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU). The League opposed the imposition of pass laws: the constraints they placed on opportunity and the degradation of African traditional values. She worked tirelessly for the abolition of pass laws for both men and women. She is cited as saying, "How can men liberate women from the pass laws when they themselves are subjected to them? Let men and women cooperate against these pernicious laws...in the building up of a nation, women must lead." (p. 117)

Jaffer takes some creative license in reconstructing this story, as details of Charlotte's life, especially her early life, including her birth date, are simply not known. Nonetheless, she is able to bring narrative texture to a life that was rich in its own right and she uses Maxeke's life to tell a story of the impact that global structural constraints had on her life and the lives of African people. NA