Representations of Post-Apartheid Black Womanhood in the novels of Angela Makholwa and Kopano Matlwa

Sadie Dass

Supervised by

Associate Professor Barbara Boswell

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Plagiarism Declaration

This dissertation has been submitted to Turnitin. I hereby confirm that my supervisor has seen my report and concerns revealed have been resolved with her assistance.

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Student number: DSSSAD001

Student name: Sadie Dass

Signature of Student: Signed by candidate

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Abstract

This thesis examines representations of post-apartheid Black womanhood in the selected novels of South African authors, Kopano Matlwa (2006 & 2016) and Angela Makholwa (2017/2018) by placing them within the context of the changes in South Africa from the time of apartheid to the present. This study shows how these women interpret, through writing, the experiences of women and how women are positioned both in the home, and out, as agents of change in a changing society. The key question driving this research is: In what way do the works of Matlwa and Makholwa illustrate the issues of class and race in relation to women in post-apartheid South Africa? The study aims to fill the gaps in the literature concerning the representation of women's experiences in contemporary South Africa. Previous work has not yet fully addressed the degree to which women writers manage to convey the ideas and realities of gender and social construction in a society recovering from apartheid. In response to the research question this thesis employs a textual analysis in order to study the selected literature. This thesis assesses how the respective authors and their bodies of work, Matlwa's *Coconut* (2006) and *Period Pain* (2016) and Makholwa's *The Blessed Girl* (2017/2018), construct the identities of their characters. To this end, in this way the study discusses the problems faced by these women in society. The evidence suggests that Matlwa and Makholwa, to a certain extent, represent women's lives and perspectives from the angles of struggle against patriarchy and systemic oppression, as well as demonstrating the agency of women and their resilience and strength of character as can be seen from the text.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis analyses literary representation of women characters in selected novels by South African women writers working within the transitional period. The transitional period is defined as being from the ending of apartheid up to the present South African history. Through textual analysis, this study examines how the representation of Black womanhood by Black women writers has shifted in the post-apartheid period of South African literary history. I focus on these three texts because they explore the journeys of young Black women in formation and examine how these characters are defined within their narratives during pivotal moments of South African history. It is important to note the differences of living conditions or Black women during apartheid and in post-apartheid South Africa. During apartheid, black women faced severe oppression, including the denial of basic rights, such as voting and freedom of movement. They were subjected to restrictive pass laws and marginalised within a patriarchal society, which limited their access to education and economic opportunities. This created a cycle of poverty and dependence. In contrast, post-apartheid South Africa saw significant changes for black women. They gained the right to vote and enjoyed greater freedom of movement. However, the economic legacies of apartheid remained unaddressed, leaving many women still grappling with issues of poverty and inequality. While social freedoms improved, the lack of economic opportunities continued to impact their lives and potential for empowerment.

Furthermore, it is noted within this study how these women write about the experiences of women and how women are positioned both in the home and outside of the home as agents of change in a changing society. The key question driving this thesis is: In what ways do the works of Matlwa and Makholwa illustrate the changing nature of class and race positions of Black women in post-apartheid South Africa? This study aims to fill the gaps in the literature concerning representation of women's experiences in contemporary South Africa. This thesis examines selected novels by Matlwa and Makholwa, situating them within the context of the changes in South Africa from the time of apartheid to the present. Under apartheid, Black women faced severe oppression; they were denied the right to vote, subjected to restrictive pass laws, and marginalised in Bantustans. Living under patriarchal laws, these women navigated a landscape that limited their freedoms and opportunities, often becoming key figures in resistance movements, despite their systemic disenfranchisement. Economically Black women were constrained due to economic legacies of apartheid not being addressed. In the post-apartheid era, Black women have experienced significance changes: they gained the right to vote, the

oppressive pass laws have been abolished, and they now enjoy the freedom to choose where they live. With the elimination of the Bantu education, they have access to a broader range of educational opportunities. However, the most pivotal factor remains economic empowerment. Although significant changes have occurred for Black women in post-apartheid South Africa, with economic empowerment due in part to increased participation in the workforce, having financial independence has contributed to broader social change, enhancing their roles within both families and communities. However, without the financial means to support themselves, many women may still find their lives strained by limitations.

Three selected fictional works are explored by examining the ways in which novelists Kopano Matlwa's, *Coconut* and *Period Pain,* and Angela Makholwa's, *The Blessed Girl* characterise women by depicting the changing South African society after the end of apartheid. In addition to this, literary representations of women are examined to evaluate how social, political, and cultural transformation in post-apartheid South Africa has been represented in the subjectivities of young Black women.

I define the post-apartheid period as the literary works emerging in the post-apartheid era in South Africa, encompassing the period after the political transition and the dismantling of the apartheid system which occurred in the early 1990s. Post-apartheid literature reflects the experiences, struggles, and aspirations of South Africans during this time of social, political, and cultural transformation (Frenkel & MacKenzie, 2010). Many post-apartheid literary works grapple with the legacy of apartheid, seeking to understand its impact on individuals and society as a whole (Frenkel & MacKenzie, 2010). These works often depict the complexity and diversity of South African society, portraying characters from different racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds.

The post-apartheid period often critiques the ongoing inequalities, racism, and other social challenges that persist in the post-apartheid era. The works of Matlwa and Makholwa explore various themes such as identity, race relations, reconciliation, and the challenges of building a new democratic society during this post-apartheid period: All themes which this thesis seeks to unpack through interrogating novels, *The Blessed Girl* (2017) and *Coconut* (2007) by Angela Makholwa, as well as *Period Pain* (2016) by Kopano Matlwa. Post-apartheid feminist texts provide insight into the challenges which women experience.

This thesis analyses the evolving representations of Black womanhood in post-apartheid South Africa through the works of notable Black women writers. Each chapter examines different novels, highlighting how these stories reflect the complexities of character identities shaped by

socio-economic issues, gender biases, and historical contexts.

Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* is noted for its commentary on identity and class dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa, which is unpacked within the first analysis chapter of this thesis. Through examining representations of the characters Ofilwe Tlou and Fikile Twala, I illustrate their contrasting experiences with privilege, societal expectations, and cultural dislocation. Matlwa uses stream-of-consciousness to convey their inner conflicts and shared struggles, reflecting broader societal issues faced by many Black women today. *Coconut* critiques existing inequalities and emphasises the importance of recognising these voices in literature.

The chapter that follows looks at how Angela Makholwa's *The Blessed Girl* critically examines Black womanhood in post-apartheid South Africa. Through Bontle's journey, the novel adapts the chick-lit genre to address economic disparities, gender biases, and the psychological impacts of apartheid. It goes beyond entertainment, offering a powerful commentary on the struggles faced by Black women, thus enhancing representation in South African literature. Makholwa emphasises the importance of amplifying Black women's voices and perspectives, challenging traditional genre boundaries and fostering discussions on race, class, and gender.

In the final analysis chapter on *Period Pain*, Matlwa portrays Masechaba, a protagonist facing trauma, pain, loss, dissatisfaction, and violence. Her journey illustrates the complexities of mental health amid societal and personal struggles. Masechaba's story reflects the shift from silence to recognition of Black women's voices in literature. Matlwa emphasises both Masechaba's pain and her resilience, marking a crucial shift in post-apartheid literature from mere survival to an affirmation of agency among Black women.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review seeks to review the literature relevant to the exploration of Black women's identity construction in post-apartheid literature. The key bodies of secondary literature include theories on post-apartheid literature. In this chapter debates around these bodies of knowledge are defined and reviewed, using them as a theoretical framework for an analysis of the three novels studied in this dissertation. In her article, "Spectral Citizenry", Nedine Moonsamy explores a range of texts that underscore the necessity for post-apartheid Black womanhood to engage with the spectral dimensions of history (2014: 69-70). She redefines citizenship and identity through acknowledging grief, loss and the complexities that come with the journey towards healing and empowerment in a society that historically hurt and broken.

The post-apartheid

Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010) in "Conceptualising 'post-apartheid' South African literature in English" define this concept as follows:

> the term 'post-apartheid' South African literature suggest[s] something of the character of this new wave of writing, which is often unfettered to the past in the way that much apartheid writing was, but may still reconsider it in new ways. Equally, it may ignore it altogether. Other features include politically incorrect humour and incisive satire and the mixing of genres with zest and freedom. All of this often renders nugatory traditional markers like nationality, race, or ethnicity (2010, 2).

The term 'post-apartheid' South African literature refers to a new wave of writing, emerging after the transition from apartheid to a post-apartheid society. The term used by the theorists above suggests that this literature is not bound by the past in the same way that apartheid writing was, however, it may still explore and reconsider the past in novel ways. Additionally, this new literature may even choose to altogether ignore the past, as Frenkel and MacKenzie mention.

Intersectionality in South African post-apartheid literary works

Post-apartheid literary works in South Africa often focus on the concept of intersectionality, which recognises that individuals experience multiple forms of oppression and privilege

simultaneously (Samuelson 2010: 113). These works emphasise that Black women characters cannot be understood solely through the lens of race or gender but must be seen as complex individuals whose identities are shaped by the intersection of various social categories, including class, ethnicity and geographic location. This exploration of intersectionality allows for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Black women in South Africa. In Samuelson's (2010) article, “Scripting Connections: Reflections on the Post-apartheid,” she explores the notion of a "post-apartheid literature" in South African literary history and how it has shaped the representation of Black womanhood by Black women writers. Samuelson begins by acknowledging the complex nature of this literature, which draws from transitional concerns and apartheid struggles, while also re-imagining and contesting the national context (Samuelson 2010: 113).

I draw on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s definition of Intersectionality in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” (1991). Crenshaw defined intersectionality as a critical perspective on history that transcends simplistic binary interpretations, revealing the interconnectedness and interplay of race, gender and class in shaping Black women’s oppression (Crenshaw 1991: 51).

The theme of intersectionality which emerges in the post-apartheid literature refers to the interconnectedness of various identities and social oppressions. Samuelson notes that the literature of the transitional era focused on the project of “constructing a shared nation”, while post-apartheid literature is characterised by a process of scripting connections (Samuelson 2010: 113). Writers in this period explore the intersections of race, gender, and class and their respective impacts on Black womanhood. They challenge traditional notions of identity and highlight the complexity of lived experiences. Davies (2013) also alludes to this complexity of Black women’s lived experiences when she cites the work of Jane Poyner, who argues that post-apartheid novelists and writers “turned their gaze inward”, exploring the private sphere and reflecting on their own identities (Davies 2013: 799). This inward turn allowed for a deeper exploration of the complexity of Black womanhood, acknowledging the multiple ways in which gender, race, and class intersect to shape women's experiences. As the dismantling of apartheid allowed for more diverse voices to be heard, writers began to grapple with the intersecting identities and experiences of Black women. Similarly, in the book *And Wrote My Story Anyway: Black South African Women's Novels as Feminism*, Boswell (2020) quotes Davies. Davies argues that Black women writers’ writing can be seen as a form of “migratory subjectivity”,

involving constant renegotiation of their identities (Boswell 2020: 3). Black women writers have had to navigate the intersecting oppressions of racism, classism and sexism within the apartheid system, and therefore their literature reflects the complexities of their lived experiences. I demonstrate this in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the thesis where I analyse the theme of intersectionality through the lives of the protagonists of the novels, *Coconut, The Blessed Girl* and *Period Pain* respectively.

Frenkel and MacKenzie's "Conceptualising 'post-apartheid' South African literature in English" further addresses intersectionality. They state that post-apartheid literature encompasses a range of genres and addresses various issues, including "dislocation, dynamics of illness, and questions of space and its contestation" (Frenkel & MacKenzie 2010: 4). This suggests that Black woman writers are exploring the intersections of race, gender, class and other social identities in their narratives. We can also view intersectionality as the recognition of multiple and intersecting forms of oppression and disadvantage: A key theme in the representation of Black womanhood by Black woman writers. Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010) argue that new South African literature complicates or ignores apartheid-era racial categories. This can be seen in novels such as Ishtiyaq Shukri's *The Silent Minaret* and Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*, where the fluid and scientifically dubious nature of racial categories is questioned (Frenkel & MacKenzie, 2010: 2). This complicates the representation of Black womanhood as it challenges the simplistic and essentialist understanding of race that was dominant during apartheid. Additionally, Demir and Moreillon (2022) highlight that post-transitional South African literature considers intersectionality by addressing the oppression of women, the LGBTQIA+ community, and minorities in addition to racial oppression. This shift is driven by Black woman writers who reclaim and explore these territories with incisiveness and determination. In the post-apartheid period, these writers have explored the intersections of race, gender, and class in their narratives.

Franco Moretti (2000) argues that "literature from (semi-) peripheral nations often reflects the experiences of metropolitan writers who inhabit a 'core' relative to a 'periphery within the (semi-) periphery itself" (Moretti 2000: 56). This suggests that Black women writers are navigating multiple layers of marginalisation and oppression, reflected in their portrayals of Black womanhood. Therefore, intersectionality is a crucial element in understanding the experiences of Black women in South African literary works during the post-apartheid period.

These women face multiple forms of oppression, including white supremacist capitalism and Black patriarchy. Authors explore the intersections of race, gender, class and identity, recognising that Black women face unique challenges and oppressions. Literary works frequently delve into the complexities of being both Black and female, examining how these two identities shape one's experiences and perceptions of the world. Intersectionality allows for a more nuanced portrayal of Black womanhood, acknowledging the diverse experiences within the group. Black woman writers, such as Kopano Matlwa and Angela Makholwa depict their characters navigating and negotiating the constraints imposed by these intersecting systems of oppression. The intersection of race and class distinctions are one of the intersectional elements of identity particularly in *Coconut* and *The Blessed Girl*. The protagonists' class position, and them wanting to move into a more middle-class, affluent state, is a big driver and motivator for these characters, who live in the poverty spawned by apartheid.

Struggles against racism and sexism in South African post-apartheid literary works

In their daily lives, Black women characters in post-apartheid literature often confront racism, sexism, classism and sometimes homophobia. The intersection of race and class discrimination in particular is prevalent in *Coconut* where we as readers see the working class needing to catch two taxis and being ostracised for using public transportation. The intersection of race and class is a big factor in the identities of the characters in both novels as it plays a pivotal role in the characters' motivations. Post-apartheid works such as *Coconut*, *Period Pain* and *The Blessed Girl* highlight the unique challenges faced by Black women in a society where systemic discrimination based on race and gender has been deeply ingrained. By portraying the experiences of Black women characters these literary works shed light on the specific forms of oppression that are faced and the strategies employed to resist and navigate these challenges. Samuelson (2010) suggests that despite the end of apartheid, its effects continue to shape the lives of Black women in South Africa. The "psychic damage and intimate harm" produced under apartheid are still present and have a lasting impact on Black womanhood (Samuelson 2010: 114). Writers in this period are grappling with these effects and addressing the ongoing struggles against racism and sexism. Similarly, Demir and Moreillon (2022) acknowledge that while post-apartheid literature moves away from the dominant focus on apartheid, it is deeply invested in its connection to the apartheid past (Demir & Moreillon 2022: 63). The apartheid regime dominated the country's literary output, but now writers have realised that other forms of domination and subjection existed alongside racial oppression (Demir & Moreillon 2022:

64-67). These forms, including the oppression of women, are now being portrayed in a diverse and nuanced manner. Demir and Moreillon (2022) continue their discussion by stating that "Apartheid laws had an all-encompassing reach, particularly in urban areas, where Black residents were forcibly moved to the periphery" (Demir & Moreillon 2022: 67). The apartheid regime aimed to fracture the physical form of South African cities and disrupt the lives of Black residents. The consequences of this policy are reflected in post-apartheid and post-apartheid literature, where Black women writers explore the aftermath of apartheid on their characters' identities and experiences. I demonstrate this in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the thesis where I show how Black women in the post-apartheid era deal with the aftermath of apartheid.

Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010) argue that South Africa, as a signifier, is marked by "both a history of racial oppression and as an icon of overcoming oppression and bridging differences" (Frenkel & MacKenzie 2010: 5). South Africa's history of racial oppression and segregated political systems has shaped the cultural formations and identities of Black women. Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010) suggest that South Africa as a signifier moves between polarities of thought, burdened by a history of violence and repression, but also symbolising an arbitrator of justice in the global imaginary (Frenkel & MacKenzie 2010: 5). This tension is likely reflected in the narratives of Black woman writers as they navigate the complexities of their experiences during and after apartheid.

Similarly, Davies notes that during the apartheid period writers often turned to tropes and stories associated with the historical circumstances of apartheid. However, post-apartheid literature seeks to move beyond these tropes and offers new perspectives on the struggles faced by Black women (Davies 2013: 797). Post-apartheid literature, in its pursuit of transcending the well-known tropes associated with the historical circumstances of apartheid, seeks to provide fresh and insightful perspectives on the struggles confronted by Black women. By departing from the predictable narrative trajectories, this emerging genre aims to challenge the dominant discourse surrounding race, gender, and identity, while shedding light on a multiplicity of experiences. One of the main strengths of post-apartheid literature lies in its ability to illuminate the complexity and diversity within the lived realities of Black women. By moving beyond the traditional narratives of victimhood and oppression, these works present a nuanced portrayal of the post-apartheid society. These works delve into themes of empowerment, resilience, and agency, highlighting the multifaceted strategies employed by Black women to navigate the social, political, and economic landscapes.

Boswell argues for this, stating that the apartheid regime systematically excluded Black women from literary production, denying them access to education and suppressing their voices through censorship and violence (Boswell 2020: 2-3). However, during the transition to democracy and beyond, Black women writers have been able to flourish and reclaim their agency (Boswell 2020: 205). They creatively envision alternative worlds while documenting the realities of apartheid, offering an imaginative rebellion against oppressive systems (Wisker 2001:143). These Black women writers have used their writing as a means of challenging the oppressive systems of the past and imagining alternative narratives of Black womanhood. Through their exploration of space and location, these writers reimagine the self and challenge the social order of apartheid South Africa.

The legacy of apartheid was largely visible in the post-apartheid period, with literature often reflecting on its lasting effects on Black women. The works highlighted in this literature review show the portrayal of intersections of race, gender, class and identity within the context of apartheid, examining how these factors shaped the lives of Black women characters. The authors explored the struggles of navigating a society which systematically marginalised them, shedding light on the resilience and resistance within these women. Moreover, post-apartheid literature interrogates the intersectionality of identities, acknowledging the intricate web that weaves together race, gender, class, and various other factors and, by doing so, it challenges the monolithic representation of Black women, shifting the lens to the rich tapestry of their experiences. These works invite readers to engage with the complexities and contradictions inherent in the struggles faced by Black women, fostering a deeper understanding and empathy.

Rape and Gender Based Violence

> Rape is not a South African invention. Nor is it distasteful sex. It is sexualised violence, a global phenomenon that exists across vast periods in human history. Rape has survived as long as it has as it works to keep patriarchy intact. It communicates clearly who matters and who is disposable. Those who matter are not afraid of being raped because they have not been taught to fear sexual assault, however, rather they have been taught safety (Gqola 2015: 21).

Gqola states that rape serves to maintain patriarchy by indicating who holds power and who is

marginalised, revealing disparities in fear and safety. Here we understand that certain categories of womanhood, i.e., white, are seen as more violable than, for example, Black or indigenous women. Under the logics and laws of slavery at the Cape for example, enslaved women were not considered to be raped when they were violated, as their bodies were seen as the property of their masters. Throughout her book, *Rape: A South Nightmare* Gqola (2015) calls for a critical examination of cultural norms and power dynamics that perpetuate this cycle of violence.

Moreover, gender-based violence (GBV) and rape in post-apartheid South Africa can be understood through Gqola's idea of the "female fear factory" (Gqola 2015: 78). This concept highlights the widespread culture of fear that affects women's everyday lives. This fear is both dramatic and striking, woven into the social fabric where visible signs and sounds instill fear, controlling women's actions. In this period of change, South Africa continues to deal with its history, and discussions around gender violence are heavily influenced by societal power dynamics. Njabulo Ndebele points out that what people see is prioritised in our understanding, creating intense imagery that is hard to ignore (Gqola 2015: 78). This emphasises a struggle between those with power and those without it, often placing women at a disadvantage. The frequent occurrence of GBV, especially rape, becomes something that society expects rather than acting out of shock, leading to a dangerous desensitisation and leading women into sex work. Additionally, the influence of capitalism complicates the situation. The definition of work as something seen as respectable can occasionally cover up the underlying violence in society. This creates a damaging narrative where the threat of violence against women is seen as a normal part of life. It can be presented misleadingly as a form of strength or resilience, further trapping women in dangerous situations.

Gqola (2015) paints an image in her monograph, *Rape: A South Nightmare*, where she compares the shame of being unemployed with that of being raped. She states how in society, people without jobs often face shame, while those with jobs are seen as having dignity (Gqola 2015: 79). The idea is that having the will to work lifts a person out of feelings of uselessness, dependency, and laziness. However, those who want to change this system, whether by negotiating pay or claiming ownership of their work, are often viewed negatively. This situation resembles a factory that takes up physical space and needs many people and parts to operate (Gqola 2015: 79-80). Like an assembly line, it moves forward, adding pieces seamlessly,

however, it can also cause harm to anyone who tries to interfere. This "factory" relies on a power source and runs effectively, producing results that are readily available. Unfortunately, what it produces, which is female fear tends to spread so widely that it seems normal, even though it is harmful. Similarly, the threat of rape, serves as a stark reminder to women that they are not entirely safe and that their bodies are not solely theirs. This creates an imbalance of power, where the man instilling fear exerts control over the woman who is targeted. It also impacts other women who observe such behaviour, reminding them of their own vulnerabilities or suggesting that they could be next. This highlights a repetition or cycle of fear. I demonstrate this in Chapter 5 where I analyse Matlwa's work.

"Manufacturing of Female Fear" silences women by constantly reminding them that they are seen as targets (Gqola 2015: 80). It pressures them to keep themselves in check, limiting their freedom both physically and mentally. This sometimes makes some men and trans individuals aware that they too could be subjected to similar fears. This collective fear is produced repeatedly through various channels in both private and public spaces, reinforcing a culture of control and restraint, never being able to live without this constant fear.

Comparatively, Graham (2020) urges us to consider the relationship between misogyny and gender-based violence, which leads to sexual assault and rape (2020: 421). Graham defines *rape* "in South Africa refers to men using rape as a violent tool to "correct" sexuality that does not conform to a heteronormative paradigm" (Graham 2020: 419). Graham's definition highlights how rape is used to exert power and control over individuals perceived as non-conforming to societal expectations. Both Graham and Gqola note the term *disciplinary rape*, and have defined this as the violent act of men using rape to enforce or sexually assault a woman on the basis of controlling and policing them for heteronormative sexual norms.

Gqola presents a way forward towards a society without this violence:

> Ending the rape epidemic in South Africa is going to require that many more people think critically about how seemingly benign behaviour enables rape to thrive. In other words, we have to think unrelentingly about how what we are taught in patriarchal society - and all of us are brought up in such society - seduces us into thinking that rape only looks a certain way, and therefore that we should only believe rape when it fits

into that very narrow idea (Gqola 2015: 5-6).

An important aspect of analysing this quotation is the notion of "rape culture", which emerges from misconceptions about what constitutes as rape. Many people may dismiss incidents that do not align with their narrow definitions, often characterised by physical violence and the absence of consent. As a consequence, this perception can lead to victim-blaming, where victims are held responsible for the violence inflicted upon them based on their behaviour, clothing, or choices. Acknowledging that rape can manifest in less overt ways, for example, through coercive pressure, manipulation, or emotional abuse, is essential in dismantling harmful stereotypes and broadening the understanding of consent.

Patriarchal teachings can seduce individuals into accepting harmful ideas around masculinity. Men may learn to assert dominance through control and aggression, believing that their entitlement to women's bodies is a normative part of their identity. This mindset not only perpetuates violence, but also prevents men from empathising with survivors, which is crucial for fostering a culture of respect and understanding.

The aforementioned quote calls for an unrelenting critical examination of societal norms, encouraging proactive education and dialogue amongst all genders. Later chapters of this dissertation draw on these literatures surrounding rape and instances of rape within the novels are explored, examined and analysed.

How post-apartheid literature by Black South African women is coded as "Chick Lit"

The genre of 'chick lit' in the global south, and internationally, is contested among some feminist critics. Some theorists do not believe that 'chick lit' can be considered feminist, while other theorists believe that certain 'chick lit' novels could be viewed as such. This section of the dissertation explores the genre of 'chick lit' from the location of the global south by looking at the definitions of the global south theorists of 'chick lit' to analyse the works of Makholwa and Matlwa. Reading these texts from a global south perspective provides new insight into the genre of 'chick lit', as there are feminist theorists who do not disavow non-western forms of 'chick lit'. Within western studies there are ways in which 'chick lit' has been dismissed as superficial and insubstantial, however, reading it from a global south perspective holds potential for opening up this genre.

Gupta and Frenkel (2019), in their issue of *Feminist Theory* "Chick lit in a time of African cosmopolitanism" write, "to begin the hard work of analysing African chick lit demands patience without falling into the trap of writing about Africa simply from the west, but rather looking at a diversity of culture(s) from a localised perspective" (Fasselt 2018: 377). Building on the work of Fasselt (2018), Frenkel (2019) and Spencer (2019), this section of the literature review considers the genre of 'chick lit' from the location of the global south and these theorists' definitions of the genre.

Spencer (2019: 156) states the following:

> Chick-lit, has been dismissed by critics, especially feminists, as apolitical, consumerist and tawdry. Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing described chick-lit as 'instantly forgettable' (cited in Harzewski 2006: 30) and award-winning author Beryl Bainbridge denounced it as 'a froth sort of thing' (cited in Harzewski 2006: 30). The critics of chick-lit feel that too much is invested in consumer culture, making the genre appear trivial, frivolous and superficial. They expect literature written by and about women 'to advance the political activism of feminisms, to represent women's struggles in patriarchal culture and offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women' (Ferriss and Young 2006: 9).

Engaging with feminist theory, this section of the thesis aims to challenge the assumption that western forms of feminist thought may dismiss certain non-western thoughts and ideas. The rationale of using these three texts, *Coconut, The Blessed Girl* and *Period Pain*, is due to all three being written by South African writers and published by South African publishers with their positionality being in the global south. All three novels are written by Black women from the global south and the genre of the bildungsroman is more commonly associated with the growth and development of people. This thesis acknowledges that 'chick lit' sees much growth and development for women of colour in the global south a which is empowering and part of feminist thought. Hence, the genre of 'chick lit' should not be completely regarded as "trivial, frivolous and superficial" or "apolitical, consumerist and tawdry" as Lessing and Bainbridge have described the genre to be (Spencer 2019: 156).

The writers of 'chick lit' in Africa are steadily embracing this genre to represent new ways of

being for women in contemporary times. It is essential to note that the engagement with the ordinary, everyday and the personal can be seen as political. Politics is not necessarily only focused on governance, however, instead, every day experiences can also be viewed as being politicised. Through paying attention to the ordinary lives of women, a contribution to a growing consciousness of female subjectivities is made. Therefore, 'chick lit' and particularly non-western manifestations of it, capture aspects of women's lives that are not addressed in other forms of writing. This genre provides domestic details, shows battles, and some triumphs; however, it also shows the negative aspects of contemporary women's lives fictionally. This form of writing challenges the patriarchal societies that women inhabit in order to advocate for personal and social change. This is why Spencer (2019) defends the genre of 'chick lit', thus showing how the subaltern can undermine the very patriarchy that demeans its existence. I demonstrate this in Chapter 4 of the thesis by analysing Makholwa's, *The Blessed Girl*.

Representation and agency in South African post-apartheid literary works

Post-apartheid literature in South Africa often gives voice and agency to Black women characters who have historically been marginalised and excluded from mainstream narratives. These works provide a platform for Black women to tell their own stories, challenging dominant narratives and stereotypes. By centering the experiences and perspectives of Black women these literary works contribute to a more diverse and inclusive representation of South African society, illuminating the complexities of their intersectional identities. Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010) argue that this "new wave of literature is characterised by politically incorrect humour, incisive satire, and the mixing of genres" (Frenkel & MacKenzie 2010: 4). They continue this thought by mentioning the proliferation of genres in post-apartheid literature, suggesting that Black woman writers are using diverse literary forms to express their experiences and perspectives (Frenkel & MacKenzie 2010: 4).

These writing techniques allow Black women writers to challenge dominant narratives and construct their own representations. They can assert their agency and speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for. Similarly, Davies notes that the production of narratives about the private sphere, individual traumas, and personal histories serves to humanise Black women and challenge stereotypes (Davies 2013: 800-801). These narratives demand acknowledgement of the complexity and value of individuals beyond societal categorisations. These Black women writers are reclaiming their narratives and asserting their agency through narrating their own

stories. Boswell defines the concept of agency as “creative re-visioning” which emphasises an oppressed individual’s capacity to envision alterative realities (2017: 415-416). She further explains that by re-imagining oppressive structures, individuals can transform them into forces of empowerment, allowing them to assert their identity and influence their narratives (Boswell 2017: 415-416). By expanding Boswell’s definition, we see agency as a dynamic interplay between oppression, structure, resistance, creativity and identify formation, enabling the oppressed to assert themselves and redefine their relationships within societal structures. They are challenging stereotypes and misrepresentations of Black womanhood and seeking to reshape the dominant cultural narratives.

Black women writers in post-apartheid South African literature strive to represent Black women in nuanced and authentic ways, countering stereotypes and misrepresentations. They assert the agency and autonomy of Black women, showcasing their resilience, strength, and diverse experiences. Demir and Moreillon emphasise that literature from the “(semi-) periphery incorporates multiple literary levels, genres, and modes, as well as non-literary and archaic cultural forms, to capture the complexity of Black womanhood” (Demir & Moreillon 2022: 66). By writing their own narratives, these women reclaim their agency and challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and marginalise Black women. Their stories provide a powerful counter-narrative that celebrates the strength, resilience, and agency of Black women. Boswell states that “by writing the nation and documenting their experiences during apartheid, these writers create an intellectual space for examining Black women’s experiences” (Boswell 2020: 63). By seizing the space previously denied to them, they assert their agency and challenge the limited representations of Black womanhood. Boswell highlights the emergence of young Black women writers who are creatively critiquing oppression and imagining new worlds (Boswell 2020: 172). These writers challenge traditional power structures and give voice to Black women's experiences and perspectives. They insist on representing Black women's experiences, stories, and struggles, countering the narratives that have historically marginalised their voices. Lastly, representation and agency are significant concerns within Black South African feminist literary theory. Black women characters are represented as “agentic beings” who navigate and negotiate the constraints they face, creating alternative possibilities for themselves within their social situations (Boswell 2020: 204). These characters challenge the notion of Black women as 'other' and assert their presence in national discourse (Boswell 2020: 201). Black women writers are actively redefining and reshaping their representation in literature. They are reclaiming control over their narratives and asserting

their agency in the process. By centering their stories and experiences, they are challenging stereotypes and biases and offering alternative perspectives on Black womanhood.

Reconciliation in South African post-apartheid literary works

As the country confronted its violent past and sought to build a more equal and just society, the post-apartheid period in South Africa is a time when a nationalist project of reconciliation was produced through discourse. However, living in contemporary South Africa, this project remains incomplete. Despite the efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), redress for apartheid atrocities and "reconciliation" between the oppressed and their oppressors remains elusive. The contemporary post-apartheid landscape includes issues such as socio-economic disparities, racial tensions, poverty, inequality and what will be discussed later within the literature review and through the chapters that follow, gender-based violence and the epidemic of rape. Literary works from this period often explore the ways in which Black women characters' grapple with the legacy of apartheid and reconcile their own identities in the context of a changing society. After the end of apartheid, the country underwent a process of state-produced reconciliation through the TRC, and Black woman writers engage with this process in their work. Frenkel and MacKenzie mention the "notion of conviviality, where oppressors and the oppressed must share the same space" (2010: 6), critiquing the notion that Black woman writers are exploring ways to move beyond the divisions of the past and build a more inclusive and united society. Magona (2010) argues that "autobiographical writing, inspired by the TRC's focus on personal storytelling, can contribute to healing by allowing individuals to reclaim their stories and make them part of the collective historical archive" (2010: 34). Frenkel, MacKenzie, and Magona explore themes of forgiveness, healing from trauma, and finding common ground in a diverse society. Boswell states that Black women's literature in the post-apartheid period can be seen as a means of healing and theorising, a way of imagining a more just social order (2020: 205). Both individually and collectively through the means of telling their stories, Black women writers contribute to the process of healing and reconciliation. Boswell (2020) highlights the significance of reclaiming history and exploring personal narratives for Black women in a post-colonial and apartheid society. By stating that these works aim to "restore fragmented histories and fractured subjectivities that result from colonial and apartheid domination" (Boswell 2020: 146), she emphasises the detrimental impact of historical marginalisation on Black women, rendering their experiences and identities fragmented. The process of reclaiming history is an act of resistance and empowerment. By

delving into their past, Black women challenge the dominant narrative that has silenced their voices and neglected their contributions. Through their narratives they assert their agency and restore their rightful place in history. Such restoration serves as a means of countering the erasure and marginalisation perpetuated by colonial and apartheid systems. Moreover, by restoring their place in history, Black women not only validate their presence but also bring fragmented identities into being (Boswell 2020: 146). The process of exploring personal narratives allows them to piece together the fragments of their experiences and construct a cohesive sense of self. This endeavour is not only vital for their own well-being and identity formation, but also essential for challenging societal stereotypes and misconceptions regarding Black women.

Black women's post-apartheid literature thus sheds light on the complexities of Black women's intersectional identities as they navigate the tensions between their past experiences, present realities, and future aspirations. Through their narratives, Black women writers in post-transitional South African literature explore healing processes and the journey towards reconciliation, whilst also critiquing the idea of reconciliation. The transformative power of reclaiming history and exploring personal narratives allows Black women to not only reshape their own identities but challenge oppressive systems and reconstruct the collective memory.

Identity formation in South African post-apartheid literary works

Identity formation is a recurring and significant theme in the post-apartheid literature of South African writing particularly for Black women writers. The authors mentioned within this thesis grapple with the complex layers of identity which is shaped by the historical and social contexts in which they exist, as well as the personal experiences that contribute to their sense of self. In a society still recovering from the traumatic era of apartheid, where racial and gender inequalities were deeply entrenched, Black women writers have offered insightful narratives that delve into the intricacies of identity formation. They explore the multifaceted nature of their identities, highlighting the intersections of race, gender, class, and culture. Through their works, these writers shed light on the struggles and triumphs of Black women in a post- transitional South Africa. They challenge stereotypes, expose the dilemmas faced by those who seek to balance cultural traditions with modern aspirations, and celebrate the resilience and agency of Black women. Moreover, these literary works contribute to a wider discourse on the construction of self in a society marked by divisions and hierarchies. They encourage readers to reflect on their

own identities and question the systems that limit or define them. By amplifying the voices and experiences of Black women, the post-apartheid literature of South Africa draws attention to the ongoing project of identity formation. It encourages empathy and understanding, fostering a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the diverse identities that shape contemporary South Africa. I demonstrate this in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the thesis.

Frenkel and MacKenzie suggest that new South African literature reflects a wide range of concerns and styles, and "often renders traditional markers like nationality, race, or ethnicity moot" (2010: 7). This allows Black women writers to explore and construct their identities outside of the restrictive categories imposed by apartheid. They can express their individuality and agency in ways that were not possible before. Furthermore, Frenkel and MacKenzie highlight the need to move beyond binary conceptions of "cultural formations, embrace ambiguity and mutual entanglement" (2010: 6). This suggests that Black woman writers are exploring the multiplicity and fluidity of identity, challenging traditional notions of fixed categories and embracing a more nuanced understanding of themselves and their communities. Additionally, exploring identity formation is a central theme in the representation of Black womanhood.

Black South African feminist literary theory, according to Boswell (2022: 204), theorises Black women's positionality in relation to structures of domination, such as apartheid and Black patriarchy. The texts examined by Boswell depict Black women characters who challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative forms of consciousness and counter-narratives (2020: 61, 204). The writers, as mentioned by Boswell, explore the complexities of Black women's identities, highlighting the ways in which they have been marginalised and dispossessed by apartheid. Black women writers in post-apartheid South African literature examine the complexities of identity, grappling with questions of race, gender, and culture. Demir and Moreillon depict the struggles and triumphs of Black women as they navigate multiple, often conflicting, identities (2022: 66). Their view suggests that the archetypal literary form of modernisation, the novel, allows for the "formulation of (semi-)peripheral aesthetics characterised by irrealism" (2022: 66). This blending of realism with residual forms from the (semi-) periphery reflects the precarious experiences of postcolonial subjects and becomes a form of resistance to colonialism.

Struggles against racism and sexism in South African post-apartheid literary works

Black women characters in post-apartheid literature often confront racism, classism, homophobia and sexism in their daily lives. These novels highlight the unique challenges faced by Black women in a society where systemic discrimination based on race, class and gender have been deeply ingrained. By portraying the experiences of Black women characters, these literary works shed light on the specific forms of oppression they face and the strategies they employ to resist and navigate these challenges.

The struggles against racism and sexism are closely intertwined with the representation of Black womanhood in post-apartheid literature. Samuelson suggests that these struggles remain central to the thesis emerging in the present (2010: 115). Black women writers are highlighting the intersecting oppressions which they face and giving voice to their experiences of marginalisation and resistance. Through their literature, they seek to challenge and dismantle these systems of oppression. The legacy of apartheid and the patriarchal nature of South African society have created numerous challenges for Black women. Frenkel and MacKenzie mention several authors who address these struggles, such as Christianse, who retells the story of a slave woman in the Cape Colony (2010: 2).

Such texts shed light on the intersectional oppression faced by Black women and the resilience and strength they exhibit in the face of adversity. Their resilience and strength in the aftermath of apartheid allowed Black women writers to engage with the ongoing fight against racism and sexism in the South African society. They gave, and continue to give, voice to the experiences of marginalised Black women and address issues of social inequality and discrimination. Frenkel and MacKenzie mention the literature of engagement that characterised the past (2010: 4), suggesting that Black women writers are building on this tradition to challenge and overcome persistent forms of oppression.

Their works expose socio-cultural and socio-economic shortcomings within the new dispensation, highlighting the continuing importance of race and the oppression faced by Black women. Samuelson in her journal article, "'Home and the world': The contestation of social fictions in three South African women's memoirs" discusses the violence and abuse that Black women face both inside and outside of the home (2005: 32-41). Here, Samuelson addresses

the impact that Black women writers have by speaking out about their experiences. Through their characters, these writers challenge societal norms and demand justice and equality. Their works often confront the intersectional oppressions they face, offering powerful critiques of the apartheid system and challenging patriarchal norms. Through their writing, Black women writers assert their agency and resist the dehumanising effects of racism and sexism.

Boswell states that by rendering visible the fissures within apartheid sites, foundational Black feminist writers Tlali and Ngcobo engage in reconfiguring the apartheid space and producing situated knowledge towards a more socially just place (Boswell 2020: 65). They offer new ways of reading the nation, highlighting the ways in which the national space genders Black women and how Black women shape and reshape that space (Boswell 2020: 87). These works, as observed by Boswell, "contest dominant nationalisms" and aim to transform the structures of society that "perpetuate gender inequalities" (Boswell 2020: 202-203). The characters in these texts interrogate and push against the structures that hold them back, fighting against discourses and practices that deny them agency and humanity. Through their narratives, these Black women 'post-apartheid' writers such as Matlwa and Makholwa challenge and resist oppressive systems, advocating for social change and equality by highlighting the gross inequalities and injustices of post-apartheid South Africa. I demonstrate this in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the thesis.

Within the context of South Africa, the representation of Black womanhood in literature has been shaped by the history of apartheid and the subsequent social and political changes during the post-apartheid period. During the apartheid era, Black women were subjected to various forms of oppression and discrimination. They were often portrayed as victims of sexual crimes, which were used as a means to maintain power and control over the Black community by the patriarchal Southern culture. Matlwa and Makholwa, in their respective novels, seek to challenge and subvert these harmful representations. In their novels, Matlwa and Makholwa depict women characters who defy traditional stereotypes and navigate their way through an adapting South African society. They explore the complexities of Black womanhood, highlighting the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. The representation of Black womanhood in South African literature by Black women writers has evolved significantly in the post-apartheid period. Black women writers in post-apartheid South Africa have embraced new forms of storytelling and themes that directly confront the historical consciousness of the

past and present. They have moved away from static, objectifying portrayals of Black womanhood, and instead depict multifaceted and empowered women characters who navigate the complexities of a changing South African society.

Through their novels, Matlwa and Makholwa challenge and disrupt the traditional narrative of Black womanhood by presenting nuanced and diverse portrayals of Black women. These authors reject the victim narrative often associated with Black women and instead highlight their agency, resilience, and ability to resist and overcome various forms of oppression. Matlwa and Makholwa emphasise the need for solidarity and unity among Black women, while also recognising and honouring the unique experiences and struggles faced by different groups within the Black community. These authors use their novels to challenge and subvert harmful representations of Black womanhood and to advocate for a more inclusive and equal society.

Overall, literary works from the post-apartheid period in South Africa illuminate the unique experiences and perspectives of Black women characters, shedding light on the complexities of their intersectional identities. Through this exploration, they challenge stereotypes, provide agency and representation, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Black women in South Africa. Therefore, the representation of Black womanhood by Black women writers in post-apartheid South African literature has shifted in terms of intersectionality, impact of apartheid, exploring identity formation, struggles against racism and sexism, representation and agency, and healing and reconciliation. It shifts from a primary focus on the spectacle of apartheid to a deeper exploration of nuanced issues such as class, identity, and the complexities of the lived experiences. This evolution allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Black womanhood that encompasses not only the scars of the past but also the ongoing struggles against racism and sexism, while highlighting themes of representation, agency, and the paths toward healing and reconciliation. The selected works of Makholwa and Matlwa illustrate how shifts in power have changed conceptions and representations of Black womanhood. These shifts reflect the complexities and nuances of Black women's experiences, as well as their resilience and resistance in the face of intersecting systems of oppression.

Chapter 3:

Black womanhood in the Post-Apartheid Period, Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut.*

Introduction

In the post-apartheid period of South African literary history, the representation of Black womanhood has undergone significant shifts, with Black women writers emerging as powerful voices for change. As a writer, Matlwa is exemplary of a new generation of writers who reframes identities in a 'new South Africa'. She highlights issues that were previously ignored or underrepresented in literature, before the advent of democracy. Matlwa, along with other Black women writers, focuses on the aftermath of apartheid making profound contributions to the literary landscape of the nation (Spencer 2009: 67).

This chapter explores the changing representation of Black womanhood by Black woman writers during this transitional period in South African literature which I briefly reference in Chapters 1 and 2 of the thesis. Matlwa's debut novel, *Coconut* (2007), delves into the complex issues of identity faced by young South African women. After seventeen years of the novel's publication, the term 'coconut' is still used as an insult towards Black South Africans exploring their duality as citizens of a reimagined South Africa, while still contending with traditional notions of their identity within communities in a changing, globalised society. Matlwa utilises this term to depict the "divided consciousness" experienced by many Black youths when confronting or embracing an unwelcoming environment (Goodman 2012: 109). The term "coconut" is used figuratively to describe a feeling that Goodman states as "divided consciousness" (2012: 109).

In the context of this novel, and in the South African diaspora, the term suggests that many Black youths experience an internal conflict or duality when facing environments that are not welcoming or accepting of their identity. Through the examination of internal and external stimuli affecting individuals, such as self-confidence and societal expectations, the novel exposes individuals' challenges regarding their self-worth (Goodman 2012: 109). The term "coconut" as a metaphor highlights an important sociocultural struggle which includes internal conflict, social pressures, complex identity issues and negative connotations for individuals who are referred to as such.

Background

Coconut (2007, authored by medical Doctor, Dr Kopano Matlwa catapulted Matlwa into the South African literary sphere. Matlwa uses the stream-of-consciousness narrative style to illustrate two points of view: That of two Black teenagers being upper middle-class Ofilwe Tlou and impoverished Fikile Twala.

Coconut is divided into two parts, with Ofilwe's story first. Ofilwe is the youngest child and only daughter to Mr. and Mrs. Tlou. Her elder brother, Tsepho, hones in on his sister's faults, having embraced a European-influenced lifestyle above her Sepedi roots. The businessman Mr. Tlou, who used bribery and corruption to earn a government tender, lifts his family from township life. Ofilwe and Tsepho enjoy the spoils of wealth that white and non-white communities believe they do not deserve. One such person is Fikile, a waitress at the SilverSpoon Café in an affluent part of Johannesburg where the novel is set.

The Tlou family frequent the restaurant regularly which symbolises their wealth, and Fikile despises serving them. She believes they do not deserve acceptance. The narratives of the two young women overlap on a single day when the Tlou family visit the restaurant, and Fikile is their assigned server. The novel contains flashbacks, with both girls seeking to find their place in post-apartheid South Africa.

Factors Influencing Identity Construction

Matlwa's work suggests that access to education, economic stability, and the media play crucial roles in shaping one's identity in contemporary South Africa. These factors heavily influence the development of identities in post-apartheid South Africa as individuals grapple with the societal expectations and familial pressures placed upon them. Analysing Matlwa's *Coconut* and through critiquing the novel allows for a better understanding of the intricate relationship between these factors and identity construction in post-apartheid South Africa.

This chapter aims to analyse these shifts and explore representations of the challenges Black women face and the factors contributing to developing their identities in the novel *Coconut* by Matlwa. By looking at liminality and duality, the chapter expands on existing investigations into identity, economic success, and media.

Working definitions of specific terms are necessary for this chapter. In South African society, the term "coconut" has been used derogatorily to describe Black individuals who predominantly speak English, belong to the middle or upper class, and receive education from private institutions. Such individuals are seen as betraying African culture due to their preference for a European lifestyle and mannerisms (Dlamini 2019: 13892).

In this study, identity refers to how people identify themselves and how others identify them within the context of South Africa as a country in transition. Despite the ideology of a "Rainbow Nation" portraying national unity and mutual understanding, South Africa has yet to achieve this fully. The text foregrounds South Africa as a country in transition. David Howarth in analysing Jung's work states that identity and identification are formed by focusing on two main ideas: The first is about the larger systems and structures around us, such as society and politics, and the other is about individual choices and actions (Howarth 2002: 260-261). The article goes on to suggest that political leaders might use convincing language or messages to shape people's identities in order to assist them in achieving their own goals. The impact of these messages on people depends on numerous factors, such as surrounding conditions, resources that people do or do not have, how organised people are and what ideas they believe in (Howarth 2002: 260-261).

This novel concurs with Jung and Howarth as in most cases, particularly for many of the characters in the novels by Makholwa and Matlwa, their identity formations are in fact shaped by their conditions, politics and society. Analysing the shifts in the representation of Black womanhood will shed light on the classification of identity and the challenge of embracing women's duality in post-apartheid South Africa.

According to liminality theorist Lacy (2019):

> Liminal spaces are often seen in a negative light. Since they are spaces in-between, always shifting and impermanent, we often people them with the "monstrous other" instead of the simply "other." One might be pushed into a liminal space, perhaps tricked or forced, but a character in a novel rarely ventures there purposefully. Yet liminal spaces play an essential role in character growth [identity formation] as a space where decisions must be made. The anthropologist Bjorn Thomassen analysed Victor Turner's concepts and concluded that "Turner realised that 'liminality' served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human

> reactions to liminal experiences: the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes-dramatic tying together of thought and experience" (2-3).

By using liminality as a theoretical framework as indicated in Chapter 2 of the thesis, this chapter suggests that Black women are caught between thresholds, forcing them to determine their role in a transitional space. According to Phiri the novel investigates and prompts the "complex process of existential liminality" (2013: 171). Phiri further suggests that liminality is portrayed as an ongoing, necessary "survival strategy" along with an "inevitable existential condition" in a modern "socio-economically" and "culturally" changing country (2013: 172). These liminal spaces obscure the authenticity of an individual's identity. The novel's premise is made clear by looking at Ofilwe Tlou, one of the central characters. Her elder brother, Tsepho, warns Ofilwe, which provides insight into her insecure situation and a glimpse into a possible future if she continues the path she adamantly seeks to follow.

In his opinion:

> You will find, Ofilwe, that the [white] people you strive so hard to be like will one-day reject you because as much as you may pretend, you are not one of their own. Then you will turn back, but there, too, you will find no acceptance, for those [Black people] you once rejected will no longer recognise the thing you have become. So far, too far to return. So much, too much, you have changed. Stuck between two worlds, shunned by both. (Matlwa 2007: 69).

Moopi and Makombe (2020) agree that both Ofilwe and Fikile Twala, another protagonist, are situated in a "liminal space" in which they "negotiate" a new and multifaceted identity (11). Fikile's narrative indicates that feelings of inferiority produce an identity crisis.

Duality is another theoretical lens that can be applied to analyse *Coconut*. A 'coconut' represents an ambivalent individual who merges differing spheres. Both "liminality" and duality represent a "disembodied" [or separated] sense of self (Kalua 2017: 27). In relation, Ofilwe and Fikile experience detachment from their identities not only as Black people, but as modern women. Thus, the novel foregrounds their journeys of self-discovery. Despite their difficulties, the girls cannot recognise an ally in one another as they believe that the newly created space which they aim to inhabit can only accommodate one of them. This implies that

they are truly alone in their plight. Therefore, the novel emphasises that Black women are left isolated through their identity struggles and gradually lose their self-worth as the protagonists struggle to find belonging in post-apartheid society while they compete with one another.

Matlwa alludes to this disregard during Ofilwe's narrative when she recalls three white men coming to her primary school to record the home languages of each student. Ofilwe faces discrimination from her Black teacher and the white men who refuse to believe that she speaks English at home. One of the men suggests that they should "tick her under 'Zulu' [because] it [is] all the same" (Matlwa 2007: 45). The African teacher does not correct the men and instead punishes Ofilwe for her honesty. This reflects the confusion surrounding duality and the reactions of those who cannot understand the new generation of Black women.

During apartheid, the upper-class employer determined how successful employees could be. The jobs of Black workers were not secure. Although the novel is set in post-apartheid South Africa, Fikile still experiences such precarity, as her white employer constantly threatens to dismiss her and openly displays a racist attitude toward the Black staff. This indicates that specific individuals retain discriminatory notions in post-apartheid South Africa.

South Africa carries the burden of reversing the damage of colonial and apartheid oppression. Apartheid prevented white and Black communities from "acknowledging and confronting" their "differences" before the implementation of democracy (Dlamini 2019: 13900). Racial tensions become challenging to overcome when citizens recall the discrimination and inhumane treatment that certain races experience. *Coconut* explores the complex experiences of African individuals during the post-apartheid era in response to a changing socio-political atmosphere. As such, the novel indicates how apartheid created lasting "economic problems" (Dlamini 2019: 13900).

Many youths born after the 1994 democratic election cannot establish a sense of belonging or acceptance as they have not fully understood their identities amidst the shifts in South Africa. In the novel, also it is evident that this is exacerbated by not having economic opportunities, as is the case with Fikile. This character is raped by her uncle on whom she is dependent. Her abuse, which intersects with the poverty withing which she lives, contributes to her vulnerability and oppression. The traces and legacy of the apartheid regime continue to mold and influence the collective experiences as well as the lifestyles of South African women (Tivenga 2021). The generation born post- apartheid South Africa is battling a crisis of

understanding their dual identities (Montle & Mogoboya 2020). Gqibitole's (2019) research shows that Black youths who attempt to integrate themselves into a white-dominated society only succeed in destabilising and, in some instances, rejecting their native tongue or cultural identity.

Ofilwe is the first character introduced in the novel. She moves from the township to an affluent region of Johannesburg with her parents and brother at a young age. She forsakes her African heritage early to blend into her new environment. Her self-worth is based on her intelligence, and she believes that "because [she] speak[s] perfect English[,] [t]hat is why people treat [her] differently. [She] knew from a very young age that Sepedi would not take [her] far (Matlwa 2007: 43). However, she cannot find her niche as both worlds are foreign. The language barrier is an evident deterrent. She masters English, however, eventually realises that Sepedi is an important aspect of her cultural background. She decides to embrace the language in her life. She eventually concludes that she will always be an outcast. Ofilwe believes that her people are "shackled. Some [are] shackled around the ankles and wrists, others around their hearts, but most […], are shackled around their minds" (Matlwa 2007: 27). Ofilwe is theoretically in paradise since she attends the best schools, lives in an extravagant home, owns designer clothing and can eat in upmarket restaurants, however, she is often discontent. Ofilwe experiences isolation as she attempts to define herself within the context of her family. Outwardly, her family displays the traditional Western concept of a nuclear family, but there is a chasm between each member.

As mentioned, Tsepho frequently confronts Ofilwe about what he believes is her inauthenticity by prompting her to contemplate "[w]ho" she is because he feels that she does "not know who" she is, her identity Matlwa 2007: 35). He disapproves of her choices of friends as he notices that her peers are not accepting of her background. He suggests that "friends do not scoff at beliefs, friends appreciate customs, friends accept you for who you really are", (Matlwa 2007: 36). Ironically, Tsepho does not allow Ofilwe the freedom to decide or explore her individuality. He is guilty of restricting her development by preventing her from understanding the cosmopolitan aspect of her character.

Through his critical conversations, he guides her introspection, causing her to view herself and her choices negatively, creating further difficulty as she begins to doubt her judgment. She decides that although the Black students at her school "treat [her] like the scum they believe they are [,] [a]t least they are all the same […] they [do not] stare [,] question or misunderstand

[her]" (Matlwa 2007: 40). While Ofilwe navigated her adolescence, this group serves as the lesser of two evils. Her parents are the representation of her ambivalent personality. She is caught between two worlds which manifests in how she addresses and views her parents. She struggles to fit into either domain. She states that she "connect[s]" her parents, but she has to "instigate an argument to" facilitate a conversation (Matlwa 2007: 53). This symbolises her dual selves which are in constant conflict and cannot merge. At the Silver Spoon Café Ofilwe observes that her family do "not belong" (Matlwa 2007: 27). Thus, Tsepho opts to be absent from his family's visits to the restaurant.

Tshepo questions his privilege from a young age. Despite his family's financial stability, he applies for a job at a fast-food restaurant. Although he yearns to be closer to the Black working class, his colleagues regard him as an educated youth with little experience in the real world. He too fails to carve out a space to belong. He is "afraid" of his coworkers because he knows there is a difference between him and them (Matlwa 2007: 24). He dresses in non-branded clothing to hide his wealth but suspects it is still evident. Furthermore, he is appalled at the treatment of staff while his fellow workers resolve that "'[t]hese Model C children know nothing of the real world. They are shocked by the ways of [white people]" (Matlwa 2007: 26). They suggest that Tsepho joining the workforce will be a necessary experience for him to "learn" about society (Matlwa 2007: 26). This environment causes him to question his opinion of himself and seek validation of his achievements and intellect. Dlamini (2019: 13903) observes that individuals such as Tsepho believe that they must "constantly prove to the white world that they are intelligent, if not better than "white" people.

However, unlike Fikile and Ofilwe, Tsepho's identity is fixed in his culture. Contrary to Fikile's experiences, Tsepho is treated with disdain by the customers that he serves, reinforcing his apprehensions. He wants Ofilwe to reject all things associated with whiteness, as the white world repeatedly rejects the Black amongst them. Tsepho struggles to locate the benefits of adopting or adapting a European identity because he believes it will alienate him from his true self. He desperately tries to uphold his African roots by performing oral storytelling. To display his loyalty to his "Pedi culture" and reject any "whiteness" clinging to him, Tsepho pays homage to his heritage through "African poetry" (Dlamini 2019: 13904).

Due to the strain in his relationship with his father and his close bond with his mother, he can fasten his characteristics to his mother's beliefs. Ofilwe recalls observing her brother wearing a "brightly coloured loose-fitting tunic […] resembl[ing] [a] West African shirt" in an attempt

to reject European attire (Matlwa 2007: 62). She later realises that the shirt is "one of [their mother's] kaftans, presumably the white one […] which he must have dyed", symbolising his closeness to his mother (Matlwa 2007: 63). Furthermore, altering the white kaftan by adding vibrant colours alludes to Tsepho's rejection of whiteness. His path distances him from his sister whom he feels eagerly embraces European personality tropes as she ages. Initially, he and Ofilwe had been "best friend[s]", but as they grow to be more dissimilar, they become estranged until they cannot understand one another (Matlwa 2007: 67). These young characters are unable to foster an idea of hybridity and multiplicity.

Fikile's dilemma is similar to Ofilwe's, with the exception that she does not have the advantage that the Tlou's attain when their family acquires wealth and success. Fikile decides to reinvent herself after observing the luxury of the white elite in magazines and through studying the patrons of the Silver Spoon Café, where she works as a server. Her choice to "alter" herself to satisfy a white standard of acceptability stems from her boss, Miss Becky. Miss Becky criticises Fikile on her first day of employment (Dlamini 2019: 13697). Fikile's ultimate desire is to achieve whiteness and escape the township where she resides. She does not associate "whiteness" with "race" and naively believes that her social standing determines how she is treated (Dlamini 2019: 13897). However, the Tlou family is wealthy but cannot integrate into white communities. Fikile's environment is "a constant reminder to [her] of what [she does] not want to be [,] Black, dirty and poor" and a "daily motivator for [her] to keep working towards where [she wants to] someday be [which is] white, rich and happy" (Matlwa 2007: 85). Fikile bases her identity on the opinions of others and socio-economic status. Since her reality is lackluster, she fabricates her background and focuses on her outward appearance, accent, and gestures. She is desperate to prove that she is above those who share in her misfortune, thinking that:

> *I am not one of you,* I want to tell them. Some day you will see me drive past […] in a sleek air-conditioned car, and I will roll up my windows if you try to come near me, because *I am not one of you*. You are poor and Black, and I am rich and brown. (Matlwa 2007: 101)

By repeating that she is not a part of the impoverished majority, she distances herself from her circumstances and idealises herself. When recreating her image, her choice of green contact lenses symbolises 'the green-eyed monster', a phrase associated with envy or jealousy. The persona she adopts is taken from magazines which do not apply to her reality. Thus, they are

more attractive because of the contrasting perspective shown. She cannot "relate to other Black South Africans" because she views herself as "different" (Matlwa 2007: 105). Fikile loathes the Tlou family as she believes that they are phoney. This is ironic as she fabricates her background to impress the white customers of the Silver Spoon Café. To her, the Tlou's are an African BEE family who does not fit her ideal of success.

Therefore, she is embarrassed to serve them. Furthermore, due to experiencing sexual assault from her uncle during childhood, she believes that although there could be "good [Black men] who really mean no harm [,] unfortunately their peers have sullied their name. [Thus,] as a general rule [she tries] not to mix with any Black men at all" (Matlwa 2007: 93). Fikile deludes herself by believing that she can "relate" to those who frequent the café and that it makes her "good at [her] job" (Matlwa 2007: 116). Unlike Ofilwe, Fikile believes she belongs to white society until she is dismissed from work for a minor issue. Her worldview shifts when she understands her precarious position. After speaking to a stranger on the train, she realises she should not discard her heritage. This conversation pushes her to re-evaluate her choices and appreciate her background. The stranger's daughter, Palesa, is a product of Western education and rejects her native tongue in favour of English. By listening to the man's concerns about his daughter's colonised mind, Fikile realises her mistakes.

The South African standard of education varies nationally, especially in secondary and tertiary institutions. The most prominent schools are generally for those of the upper-class. *Coconut* introduces the concept of "Model C" schools, which the apartheid government instituted for white children to get the best education (Matlwa 2007: 26). At the dawn of democracy, all races could attend these schools if their families had sufficient financial resources. Montle & Mogoboya (2020) and Tivenga (2021) agree that integrating Black students into former white-only institutions can be a gateway to racial unification and mutual understanding.

However, young Black students thrust into an English education system can become a catalyst for racial discrimination and the abandonment of African identity (Tivenga 2021; Moopi & Makombe 2020; Gqibitole 2019). There are difficulties for students as they adjust to a new environment, as demonstrated by Tsepho, who "should have been in grade two but was held back a year, because he did not speak English as well as his new, elite, all-boys school would have liked" (Matlwa 2007: 10).

In addition, as the novel illustrates, subconsciously some students begin to internalise a white, European identity. There is little desire to understand or speak their native tongue. The

privileged few attending prestigious schools are called ‘Coconuts’ as they supposedly trade their indigenous languages for English and embrace Western lifestyles (Gqibitole 2019; Chapman 2014; Rudwick 2008). A language barrier is thus created between elders and youths. Matlwa displays this through the voice of Ofilwe’s mother, Gemina, who complains to her own mother about Ofilwe’s behaviour:

> “It is a great embarrassing, Koko. Hayi! You should have been here to hear your little Ofilwe. Those women are my elders, not even I would speak with them in such a manner. ‘Hi’. Just like that, Koko. ‘Hi’. As if. You’d think she’s doing them a favour by greeting them. Is a simple ‘Dumelang bo Mama’ too much to ask? It’s not right, Koko. No, it is not right one bit. What kind of children am I raising?” (Matlwa 2007: 21).

The verbal mistakes echo the difficulties that Gemina has with English speech. A paradox develops as upper-class Black citizens enroll their children in private schools to display their merits and reverse the system which excludes Black South Africans. However, in a psychologically hostile environment, the children lose sight of their goals. This is demonstrated by characters such as Fikile, who are vulnerable, alienated, and uncomfortable in their skin and strive to reinvent themselves. The novel reflects this through Ofilwe’s pursuit of “beautiful” hair, indicating that notions of beauty are the first theme expressed in *Coconut* (Matlwa 2007: 9). Furthermore, the mention of “[t]he Black American TV girls on the box of the relaxer cream [who] had hair so straight and so long that [Ofilwe’s mother] assured [her that the hair] could not be real” perpetuates the unrealistic beauty standards (Matlwa 2007: 9). This happens while South African society constricts and polices their freedom of identity (Hlongwane 2013). An appreciation for hybridised, multilingual individuals is lacking, as the term ‘coconut’ is intended to insult those pursuing diversification.

Appearance

Globalisation and technological advancement assist in the construction of identities. *Coconut* demonstrates the role of the media in identity formation. Kalua (2017) suggests that in South Africa the concept of identity should account for and incorporate differences, however, societal conformity is preferred with the influence of global media. Physical appearance is generalised as the basis of identity globally, which is a significant theme in the text. Spencer (2009) argues that young Black women are socialised into whiteness by mass media pressures. Hair is the first

determinant of beauty. Black women often change the appearance of their hair to fit the ideals of mainstream society. The women that South Africans are conditioned to idolise and aspire to imitate, in line with the portrayals in media, are often wealthy white people. Only a small number of Black women can approximate with them. As Murray (2012) notes, these constructs promote Westernised standards of beauty, which drive individuals, especially young women, into self-loathing. The lightness of skin is another factor that indicates if a person is praised or shunned. Wealthy women possess the means to alter their appearance and tailor it to what is deemed acceptable by the media. This is highlighted in the novel when Ofilwe recalls that her mother's "money is her own to be used on herself and nothing else because she is beautiful and it costs money to remain so. [This is] something that [is] never questioned" (Matlwa, 2007: 60). Images of models in magazines have the ability to create forms of body dysmorphia for insecure women. The depictions of whiteness in mass media build the tropes which the public adopts uncritically (Phiri 2013).

This theme is also evident in *Coconut*, where the pursuit of European ideas of beauty and conformity to mainstream ideals are significant themes. Boswell references Spencer's assertion of the pressures that these two young Black individuals undergo in pursuing whiteness, with hair being a fundamental determinant of beauty (Boswell 2020: 179). Matlwa's novel exemplifies this through the character Ofilwe who seeks out "beautiful" hair in line with unrealistic beauty standards portrayed in the media (Matlwa 2007: 9).

In *Coconut*, Ofilwe's mother, who possesses wealth and the means to conform to these standards, is depicted as using her money solely for herself to maintain her beauty (Matlwa 2007: 60). This illustrates the influence of media in shaping perceptions of beauty and the lengths individuals may go to fit into these expectations. The emphasis on physical appearance, specifically hair and skin colour, reinforces societal conformity and perpetuates the inequality between South African women. Boswell's analysis aligns with Matlwa's depiction of Ofilwe and Fikile's pursuit of whiteness as a means to attain social acceptance and success:

> Trapped in the unattainable aspiration towards whiteness, what is tragic about their encounter is that each projects her loathing of Blackness onto the other, with each displaying a palpable disdain for the other girl. *Coconut* suggests that the intersection between race and class chasm between the two young women is insurmountable, foreclosing the possibility of friendship or solidarity between the girls based on their shared gender and racial identities. South Africa's inequality dooms the two to being locked into a dynamic of disdain and disgust (Boswell 2020: 179).

The above indicates that the protagonists face similar struggles in their liminality but are pitted

against each other by circumstance. Their identities are shaped by contemporary society's standards of beauty and requirements for economic success.

Education

Education is linked to economic advantages as private schools require payment of exorbitant fees. With the implementation of Black Economic Empowerment, many individuals were able to improve their living situations. However, some are thrust further into the margins of society as they are either exploited or denied access to these opportunities. "Educated" African individuals cannot position themselves, primarily through their dissimilarity in order to "negotiate" and develop "safe spaces" and "identities" embedded in the urban upper-class community, which represents the "economic sphere" of South Africa (Dlamini 2019: 13893).

Poverty is constantly on the rise. Some individuals take their positions for granted, such as Fikile's coworker, Ayanda, who is confrontational toward rude customers. Ayanda hails from a wealthy family and his job is not his sole means of income (Matlwa 2007: 28). The novel exposes how upper middle-class Black South Africans adopt modern, cosmopolitan identities which conflict with the traditional lifestyles of the older generation in their families (Chapman 2014; Rafapa 2014; Goodman 2012). Alternatively, those who can attain a life of luxury are pressured to maintain their lifestyle. For instance, Ofilwe's grandmother, "Koko" tells Gemina that she "lives a life that many women from where she comes from can only dream of and that she cannot jeopardise that by" divorcing her husband (Matlwa 2007: 14).

In *Coconut*, many other characters develop their identity from outside influences, affecting how they interact with others and how they view themselves. Although this chapter focuses on the youths affected by the remnants of apartheid, the older generation's also harbour similar internal struggles as they build lives for themselves and ensure that their families reap the rewards of democracy. Although it is through bribery, Mr. Tlou capitalises on BEE as he knows and appreciates the value of the opportunities that those who were once marginalised are being given. He is quick to forget the ills of apartheid and commend the white man for his efforts to keep himself wealthy and maintain social standing. He disapproves of his son's academic

aspirations because he believes that “African Literature” will not award Tsepho the lifestyle which “actuarial scientists” can afford (Dlamini 2019: 13904).

In addition, Mr. Tlou’s desire to be on par with the once-ruling elite reveals the insecurity of a man who once had little chance of changing his circumstances. However, this indicates that he can progress because he releases the burdens of apartheid. Mr. Tlou is especially happy in his new environment, with his new lifestyle satisfying his ideas of success. He believes that taking his family to the Silver Spoon Café every Sunday displays his ability to spoil his family frequently.

On the other hand, Mrs. Tlou is a complex character, hoping for acceptance in this new situation that her husband creates. Mrs. Tlou struggles adjust. She does not speak English well, has difficulty using utensils in restaurants, treats her daughter’s white friends like royalty, has dark skin and cannot understand the proceedings at Ofilwe’s school. She rebukes her mother when her family is reprimanded for hosting a traditional ceremony at their estate home. In the novel we see that many of the older characters find their identity formation from outside influences much like Fikile’s uncle who is a tragic character, often wallowing in self-pity. He complains about his employers taking him for granted, yet continues to aid their corrupt scheme of using him as a fake partner at Lesego Communications to benefit from BEE. Fikile’s uncle is an educated man, but he does not use his education beneficially.

The upmarket restaurant environment depicts how Black South Africans are “othered” by employers, employees and even patrons. This illustrates the divide which creates liminal spaces for youth. Furthermore, the “colonised other” is considered “inferior”, becomes “aware” of the situation and is forced to imitate the “coloniser culture” to be regarded as human (Dlamini 2019: 13901). This is demonstrated by Ofilwe’s friend, Belinda, who attempts to help her ‘improve’ her English speech so that Ofilwe can integrate better and not face ridicule. Eventually, Ofilwe becomes frustrated with being told how to speak and behave, which causes her to relinquish those friendships. This leaves her isolated in her school environment, adding to the feelings of isolation within her home. Since Ofilwe fails to confront Belinda, the behaviour cannot be corrected. The “alienation” that the character’s experience causes them to either resent white people, like Tsepho does, or admire the former ruling class, as Mr. Tlou and Fikile do (Dlamini 2019: 13897). Despite their appreciation for white culture, Fikile and Mr. Tlou are rejected. Fikile is dismissed from her job when a young white male customer refuses to heed her instruction. Similarly, Mr. Tlou is subtly accused of theft when he arrives at

Ofilwe's school in his new car. The importance placed on economic status further complicates race relations. Ofilwe's peers do not believe that her father can afford a luxury car because he is Black. Thus, Black South Africans choose to shatter racist stereotypes actively.

For instance, Tsepho decides to use his "education" as an avenue to "critique contemporary racism" through academic platforms (Dlamini 2019:13904). Matlwa creates relatable characters and accurately portrays how South African youth develop post-apartheid. Her emphasis on hybridity urges readers to consider their identities. The youth are a conduit for change as society progresses. Young people cannot fall into the trap of segregating themselves or their communities based on the events of the past.

Coconut suggests that individuals can always choose their paths. The question that we need to consider is: Can the characters really choose their own paths when they are trapped in poverty or being abused?

It is not as simple as choosing a path, especially with the influence of media also impacting identity. There are a range of subtle ideologies and structures acting on these characters, which influences the people they are able to become and how their characters and identities develop. Therefore, the novel further displays that those who strive for the approval of others experience dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Matlwa's novel *Coconut* serves as a powerful exploration of identity, race and class dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa. Through the contrasting narratives of Ofilwe Tlou, an upper-class teenager grappling with her cultural roots, and Fikile Twala, a young working- class woman struggling with socioeconomic disparities, Matlwa vividly portrays the complexities of their lives and the economic inequalities of contemporary, post-apartheid South Africa.

The stream-of-consciousness style effectively highlights their inner conflicts and shared experiences, culminating in a pivotal encounter that encapsulates their divergent worlds. *Coconut* invites readers to reflect on the broader societal issues of privilege, acceptance, and belonging which both characters must navigate in their quest for identity and meaning. Hence, Black women writers' representation of Black womanhood in post-apartheid South African

literary history has witnessed a notable shift. This shift refers to the transformation in the themes, perspectives, and narratives presented by Black women writers which indicates a progression toward greater visibility, voice and complexity in the narratives that reflect the experiences of said women.

Whereas writers such as Tlali and Ngcobo, writing during apartheid, focused primarily on the dehumanisation of Black people by the apartheid system, Matlwa has shed light on the multifaceted issues surrounding identity in a rapidly changing society. These powerful voices continue to challenge existing narratives of a patriarchal society. While this has been changing, these positive changes contribute significantly to the ongoing conversation on Black womanhood and the transformation of South African literature.

Chapter 4:

"Victim or Victor": A Contemporary Approach to Portrayals of South African Black Womanhood in Angela Makholwa's *The Blessed Girl*

> I'm so glad to be a young woman in these times. Thank God for democracy, BEE deals and men's inability to think with their brains. (Makholwa 2018/2017: 13)

Introduction

This chapter demonstrates how Makholwa's novel, *The Blessed Girl*, re-envisions chick-lit through the application thereof within the context of a modern Black South African anti-heroine as highlighted briefly in the first and second chapters of the thesis. This chapter examines and compares both the Pan Macmillan and the Bloomsbury publications of *The Blessed Girl*. I argue that this novel and its representation of women and relationships illustrates how the gender power balance has shifted in post-apartheid literature.

For the purposes of this chapter, traditional chick-lit is defined as literature that targets female readers and centers around an endearing woman protagonist who aims to better her personal, professional, and romantic life, according to research by Murray (2016), Spencer (2018) and Fasselt (2018). This thesis notes that, chick-lit, having read the work of scholars who write about this literary form, suggests that the Eurocentric versions of this genre do not typically deal with sensitive or serious topics. However, Makholwa carves out her niche within chick-lit by dealing with serious issues unique to a Southern African context instead of following the Western blueprint for her first edition of the text.

The above extract from *The Blessed Girl*, a title that holds significance to this thematic analysis, alludes to the potential shift in gender power dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa. The current socioeconomic climate allows Makholwa's protagonist, Bontle Tau, to use her agency to benefit from patriarchy and racism, which have oppressed women for millennia. For Bontle, the patriarchal mindsets of men allow her to profit from reparation efforts such as Black Economic Empowerment indirectly. She manipulates a system of male domination to further her position in South African society. Thus, as the title of this chapter suggests, Bontle portrays a victim of gender inequality who emerges victorious by using men's vices to succeed economically in the Bloomsbury version of the novel.

However, her emerging victorious is not the case in the original version of the novel which was first published by Pan Macmillan. The variations between the Pan Macmillan and Bloomsbury publications are highlighted within this chapter. Makholwa's quoted concluding words are a crude reference to a woman's desirability as a possible means for economic advancement, which appears to be the premise of *The Blessed Girl*. This dissertation depicts how representations of Black womanhood have shifted in post-apartheid South African literature. Makholwa's novel cannot be solely classified as traditional chick-lit, as defined above. This signifies how the representations of women are in flux.

According to Spencer (2018), South African chick-lit is a genre in its own right as "new femininities are accommodated, but in their intimate relationships, women reveal a degree of tactical compliance, constrained agency, and conscious strategy [while their] gendered identity remains ambiguous: there is always a nervous negotiation or uneasy compromise with rigid patriarchal structures and norms" (Spencer 2018: 94). Considering Spencer's statement, Bontle's narrative is part of a sub-category which creates chick-lit protagonists from the global South, rejecting the notion of 'one-size-fits-all' writing. In literature, as in history, a woman's role has transformed as society has changed. Makholwa's protagonist signifies these changes as she reimagines femininity and success.

Before a textual analysis is conducted of the novel, a background of Makholwa's tale is provided below to support the discussion. The rejection of conventional behaviours and situations such as a traditional relationship or nuclear family, mainstream employment, and standard beauty practices illustrated by Bontle all allude to the discourse that modern women have space to challenge controversial ideas. The author indicates that as Bontle pursues social advancement she is at greater risk of exploitation and abuse.

Makholwa uses the novel to address how forms of violence have contributed to the depiction of women in South African literature. According to Murray (2016), Makholwa's novels suggest that "female characters are at their most vulnerable in their relationships and in their own homes" (Murray 2016: 23). By consulting research that focuses on gender inequality, sexual violence, and female empowerment, applied to an analysis of *The Blessed Girl*, this chapter depicts a post-apartheid representation of Black womanhood as indicated in the literature review and introduction of the thesis. Contemporary South African literature allows writers advocating for equality to initiate discourse about sensitive yet relevant issues. Makholwa does this in many of her novels. Beyond the humorous, chick-lit exterior, Makholwa illustrates the

lengths women must go to in order to compete with their male counterparts without succumbing to abuse or exploitation.

Background

Published and set in 2017, *The Blessed Girl* follows Bontle Tau, a young Black woman in the prime of life, living in upper middle-class Johannesburg. As her narrative progresses, she is portrayed as morally ambiguous and often an unreliable narrator as she embellishes details about her supposedly glamorous life.

Bontle's origins lie in the humble township of Mamelodi. She claws her way up the social ladder by seducing men who reward her with gifts for companionship and sexual favours. She is determined to increase her riches which comes at a price. She curates her life for social media fans to consume, bankrolled by wealthy, married, older men known as blessers. Blessers lavish their riches upon younger women in exchange for sexual relations, indicating that Bontle engages in sex work to gain financial stability.

The novel is structured as an autobiographical blog, with Bontle conversationally speaking to her readers as if they are an audience to her daily routine. This embraces and embodies the influencer culture theme as Bontle advertises her business and life on Instagram, a social networking site. Makholwa separates the text into three main sections. The first provides a glimpse into Bontle's romanticised life, the second foregrounding the truth about her past and crumbling present and the third allowing her a chance to introspect and change.

Bontle's life proves more complex than she describes or realises. At fourteen, she is a victim of rape which results in a pregnancy. She is robbed of her childhood, causing her to lie about her age and relationship to her son as an adult. She seeks to maintain youth and beauty by investing in cosmetic treatments and surgeries. This causes her to psychologically break down, with drastic consequences. Bontle's experience is linked to the concept of grooming and pedophilia. Additionally, having not known her father, she engages in transactional relations with older men. Despite her shortcomings and the difficulties that she has endured, Bontle demonstrates strong business acumen.

She epitomises a resilient woman. Her experiences with sexual assault, forms of sex work and sexually transmitted diseases highlights the dangers of the blessee-blesser relationship, which coerces young women into putting their health and safety at risk. *The Blessed Girl* uses irony

to emphasise how trauma affects a woman's identity and prospects as blessings become burdens. When Bontle is simultaneously confronted with several crises demanding her attention, she embarks on a journey to independence. She must now admit that she has lied about who she is and the life she wants. Makholwa uses the text to contemplate what it means to be a young, Black South African woman in a volatile socioeconomic setting. There are two versions of Makholwa's novel in circulation. Although some of the major plot points are covered in both, the message of each is significantly different. Thus, this chapter must consider both storylines to analyse Makholwa's work accurately. Pan Macmillan (2018) and Bloomsbury (2019) published the novel which accounts for the variation in the narratives. Pan Macmillan's rendering opted for a realistic portrayal of Bontle which subverts the chick-lit genre, while the Bloomsbury edition follows a more classic happily-ever-after formula.

(Re)Defining Women's Roles and Responsibilities

Bontle begins her narration by stating that since "the moment I was born; my parents knew that I was destined to go far because of the way I looked" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 3). She implies that her beauty is a means to secure a comfortable lifestyle. Her confidence stems from positive responses to her appearance. Bontle's mother, Gladys, is complimented for her daughter's "good looks", while "grown men" are said to "stop and stare" at young Bontle (Makholwa 2018/2017: 3). This concerning statement foreshadows the traumatic incident during the protagonist's adolescence and her romantic involvements during adulthood.

Bontle proudly asserts that her "teachers at school would let things go with [her] that they wouldn't with other children" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 3). This indicates that she is accustomed to receiving special treatment for being good-looking. As a result, she prefers to be valued for her attractiveness rather than intellect by stating that she would choose to be "Marilyn Monroe" over "Albert Einstein" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 3). Thus, Bontle believes that desirability would get her further than education. She refers to Monroe as the "original blessee", introducing the central theme and revealing Bontle's aspirations (3). The reference to Monroe relates to Bontle's quest to increase her popularity through social media. Thereafter, she expresses her materialism, which drives her to make questionable choices.

Bontle is proud that whilst she struggled to complete grade twelve and did not pursue tertiary education, she is the proprietor of two businesses and owns a "luxury German vehicle" along with a "penthouse on Grayston Drive in Sandton" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 3). However, as the

novel progresses, she becomes an unreliable narrator who tells few truths. By the conclusion of the Macmillan edition, Makholwa's protagonist regrets solely focusing on her appearance for financial stability. When she is no longer admired for her pretty face and cannot use her body, she commits suicide. The Bloomsbury edition gives Bontle a redemption arc in which she gains independence, love and happiness as heroines do in typical chick-lit. Fasselt (2018) acknowledges that chick-lit "heroines gain self-knowledge and self-acceptance, and are thus empowered to take control of their intimate relationships and professional lives" (2018: 382). The Bloomsbury version establishes a platform for empowering Makholwa's protagonist, advocating for self-actualisation and resilience in the presence of systemic barriers. Bloomsbury's Bontle evolves from a woman dependent on the affluence of her male counterparts to a businesswoman advocating for her interests, which is a compelling illustration of self-realisation and financial independence. Through this transformative narrative, the novel reinforces the crucial notion that young women such as Bontle harbour agency and strength to endure, flourish, and assert their individuality.

Makholwa explores the themes of materialism and consumerism, often associated with pursuing upward social mobility. Bontle's behaviour, driven by her desire for status and wealth, signifies a departure from representations of Black women solely focused on social or political struggles. This shift in focus reflects Black women's changing priorities and aspirations in post-transitional South Africa as they seek to redefine themselves beyond the historical struggle for their rights. As someone who has spent adolescence and adult years enjoying the fruits of democracy through association with rich and powerful men, Bontle views revolt against apartheid differently from older generations. This is evidenced by her judgement of Mama Sophia, owner of the construction company Bontle partners with to earn a government construction tender. Bontle internally criticises the older woman for wearing promotional t-shirts, stating that:

> the people who died for our freedom didn't sacrifice their lives for us to be wearing promotional T-shirts. Ngeke! I really believe that the struggle for freedom had a lot to do with how we are now free to express ourselves. The best service you can give to your countrymen is to look good. Full stop. How can you wear slogan T-shirts during apartheid, and then continue to wear them during democracy? Hay' suka. Common sense really is not that common (Makholwa 2018/2017: 13).

The extract demonstrates Bontle's strong opinions regarding political movements. Her musings indicate that she is grateful for those who fought for emancipation so that Black women could have the life their ancestors dreamed of. This illustrates how South African literature evolves,

since Bontle's narrative focuses on non-political aspects of the female experience. Beginning her narrative by highlighting the importance of appearance, Bontle suggests that it is "disrespectful to present yourself shabbily to your countrymen" (Makholwa 2017/2018: 6). She asserts that the state of affairs in South Africa would improve "if we all just took extra care in how we presented ourselves in public" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 6).

As roles and expectations change, Black women allow themselves to focus on matters vastly different from those of their predecessors. Makholwa challenges traditional perceptions of Black womanhood in post-apartheid South Africa by displaying Bontle's unapologetic pursuit of material wealth, physical perfection, and social status. Instead of purporting traditions of self-sacrifice, motherhood, and submissiveness, Bontle prioritises her desires and uses her good looks and charisma to entice rich men who can meet the demands of her life of luxury. Her refusal of domestic responsibility is linked to her trauma as a child rape victim when she reveals that her supposed brother, Golokile, is the son she left her mother to raise. Bontle further demonstrates her rejection of gender roles by suggesting that although she enjoys cleaning, she and her mother, Gladys, cannot cook well.

Makholwa reminds readers that Bontle exists in a contemporary, globalised space with reminders of the vital role of social media and consumerism among modern citizens. Bontle boasts that she "imports and sells weaves" and that her "decent [amount of] clientele" is "thanks to the following I amassed on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook" (Makholwa 2017/2018: 6). This illustrates how the social media boom and influencer culture have allowed women to market themselves as brands to expand their economic prospects. Throughout the novel, Bontle mentions luxury brand names, such like many brand ambassadors do within social media advertising campaigns, illustrating her attachment to material things while exploring her role as a lifestyle influencer. Makholwa touches on documenting leisure travels and brand collaborations as income sources, signaling changing employment trends.

In a later chapter, Bontle wonders if the luxury auto brand Mercedes-Benz would "sponsor" her "with the latest model since" she mentions "their brand so many times" in the blog, styled as her autobiography (2018/2017: 43). This further demonstrates the significance of influencing, marketing and sponsorship linked to social media popularity. Makholwa's examination of social media and digital platforms as instruments for self-promotion highlight how these mediums begin to impact literary portrayals. Bontle's utilisation of social media to curate her public persona and sustain her lifestyle underscores the impact of technology on

contemporary Black womanhood. This sheds light on the significant roles these tools play in shaping identity and determining self-worth in the context of the digital age.

The power and reach of publicised living and advertising trends are apparent as Bontle emphasises that she wants to teach others "how to market and brand" themselves (Makholwa: 2018/2017: 6). She laments that she does not:

> understand how people think they can make a name for themselves without having a decent social media profile. Mind you, your profile must be carefully curated so that you get the kind of results that will make you stand out in a crowd. I love nothing more than to give people a little taste of my glamorous life. I like to think of it as my social responsibility because I know a lot of girls ekasi who need that inspiration; they hunger for a taste of a life that seems inaccessible and far out of their reach. Thanks to social media, they can feel like they're right there with me – shopping in Dubai, hanging out at the latest nightspots, enjoying a day at the spa… (Makholwa 2018/2017: 6).

Bontle puts her life on display as a pseudo-celebrity. However, gradually, she realises the price of fame as she is forced to keep up appearances. This is costly as she constantly spends money on what she portrays as an effortlessly wealthy life, indicating cyclic capitalism. Consequently, she is pressured to adhere to societal beauty standards. She invests significantly in her appearance to conform to the blesser-blessee culture, which serves as a poignant reflection of broader societal concerns, including patriarchy and the objectification of women. Moreover, it sheds light on the economic inequality that propels the pursuit of financial support, underscoring the interconnectedness of these issues within the narrative. By implying that her life is always glamorous, she never allows herself to process the trauma from her past, which leads to a mental breakdown. In the Macmillan imprint this climaxes into a drug habit that results in an automotive accident, which initiates the irreversible destruction of her Blessee lifestyle and suicide.

Bontle alludes to government corruption and how women are now in positions to benefit from the misuse of policy by stating that her blesser, nicknamed Teddy Bear, "promised [her] a construction tender" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 7). This corruption is alluded to in Matlwa's *Coconut* (2007), as Ofilwe's father receives a tender through bribery. He also has extramarital affairs after becoming wealthy. Bontle illustrates how women have moved to the front of the line for redistribution efforts by explaining:

> about this BEE thing that the government introduced when Nelson Mandela came into power, right? The Black Economic Empowerment policy? As you are aware, the apartheid system arrested Black people's development, so my Teddy Bear broke it down for me the other day and explained that our government broadened its

> policies to make sure that women and the youth are now fast-tracked into big business. Enter Bontle Tau. A woman. A young lioness. A force to be reckoned with. Yup, I am ready to claim my piece of the pie, baby! (Makholwa 2018/2017: 12).

The above, omitted by Macmillan, provides context for the new category that young Black women can belong to, which more post-apartheid writers are highlighting through their protagonists. Thus, by the end of the Bloomsbury adaptation, Bontle creates a legitimate and sustainable income stream by opening a clothing boutique. This portrayal mirrors the shifting social dynamics in South Africa, characterised by the dismantling of the country's previous discriminatory system and the emergence of new opportunities for Black women to assert their independence.

Bontle's quest for wealth and status implies that the changing social landscape provides Black women with the agency to forge their trajectories and defy traditional gender roles. Makholwa's writing serves as a way of highlighting issues of abuse, toxic masculinity, and "misogyny" and showing alternative ways of dealing with them in the different versions of this story, (Murray 2016: 14) as Bloomsbury's Bontle frees herself from the Blessee lifestyle. The Macmillan edition highlights the evils of the blesser-blessee culture. Some of the principal evils reflected in Bontle's story are health risks from sexually transmitted diseases, various forms of abuse, gender power struggles and lack of financial freedom.

Bontle is determined to live lavishly despite struggling to maintain that lifestyle alone. She is a paradox as she describes herself as a predator but allows older men to prey upon her. When contemplating her son Golokile's dalliance with drugs, she determines that "boys seem to feel the lack of a father figure more than girls do", however, she, too, is affected by her father's absence (Makholwa 2018/2017: 74). Golokile uses intoxicating substances as a coping mechanism, while Bontle finds solace in transactional relations with older men. There are glimmers of her self-awareness as she thinks that she "feel[s] well-adjusted most of the time, but [wonders] if [her] drive for success is some sort of escapism" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 75). Macmillan has Bontle contemplate the root of her family's strife, illustrating her burgeoning mental instability. She asks herself:

> if this is our lot in life, my small family unit? What if we always have to reach out for something – a pill, a glass, a bottle or a pipe – whenever life doesn't go our way? Are we just ill-equipped to deal with life's problems the way others do? Is it in our DNA? […]
>
> Is Money an addiction of mine? Men or rather, male attention? What about beauty?

> Surely some people would say the extent I go to in order to stay attractive is some kind of addiction? (Makholwa 2018/2017: 95)

By considering her family's fate, Bontle views herself as a victim of circumstance and fails to enact her agency. Although realising that she is addicted to her vices, she continues as before, once she has overcome the onset of her recurring depression. Bontle convinces herself that she is a "delicate creature" whose "life must always be sweet, rosy and wonderful, otherwise [she] will melt" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 161). This indicates her naivety, preventing her from improving herself and managing the inevitable challenges of her lifestyle. Thus, Bontle's attitude, coupled with structural racism, classism, poverty and sexism, obstructs her from accessing her latent potential.

Along with the allure of social media success comes the lie of manifestation. Bontle works hard to capture a man so that he will provide for her financially. Thus, she is susceptible to being mistreated by men who control her with their wealth. She makes similar statements throughout the text, such as, "[h]ave you read *The Secret*? It's one of my all-time favourite books. If you cannot visualise it, it will never be. You have to mentally see yourself owning that oil company, making those millions, and sooner rather than later, you'll be right at the top, where you belong" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 13). This shows that she is at the mercy of others and does not recognise how she bends to the will of the rich and powerful.

Her delusions are typical of gradual mental collapse and depression. Instead of teasing the subject, Makholwa addresses mental health and the strain that women endure. Ironically, Bontle berates her friend Tsolo for enjoying European romantic movies stating that Tsolo is "deluding" herself as she is "sucked into a false sense of reality", yet Bontle's life is a façade for social media followers (Makholwa 2018/2017: 43). Her narrative is filled with pretense until she unintentionally reveals truths to readers. Ultimately, Makholwa's portrayal of Bontle subverts classic chick-lit protagonist tropes.

(Re)Asserting Dominance

The novel redefines notions of patriarchy by suggesting that "it's [un]natural for girls to have to pay for themselves" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 14). In this way, characters such as Bontle reinvent the position that was imposed upon them by using a man's fragile masculinity and need for dominance to their advantage. Bontle is conditioned to seek male approval at any cost. Her reality

is that the pursuit of "physical perfection in the modern world" is a commitment which "pays the bills" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 43). This contributes to her mental fragility as she judges herself against a standard which makes women think that they are inadequate.

Gawas, Kangira and Mlambo (2022) consider the pressure that women feel to conform to global standards of beauty, stating that:

> Makholwa's (2018) detailed description of worn brands emphasises the importance of what the blessed girl considers as an appropriate appearance in a transactional sex relationship. Similarly, the blessee in *The Blessed Girl* advocates going to any length such as body modification to obtain the appearance that will appeal to the blesser. These examples are evidence of the pressure placed on women to look a certain way and wear brand names. In addition, these examples reiterate what Lipstick Feminism advocates because the focus on appearance covertly promotes patriarchy and the objectification of women's bodies. Ironically, all of the efforts that the women apply to look good is to impress the blessers and although it seems as though their sex appeal empowers them, they are disempowered (2022: 79).

The excerpt indicates that a Blessee's appearance is tailored to their wishes. Thus, Bontle's identity is rooted in the blesser's desires. This suggests that she takes measures to ensure that her partners do not discard her as Bontle's age catches up to her and causes her to become more materialistic. Furthermore, Bontle creates an illusion of power to her audience. She begins to believe she is in control of her blessed life, however inevitably faces the consequences of her choices and realises that she is not powerful. Instead, her power is taken away from her when she contracts HIV and has to own up about being the biological mother of Golokile.

Bontle's childhood accounts for her insecurity and materialism. She describes her struggle with depression from an early age:

> I got really low for the first time when I was fourteen. School was so much pressure; not the work, which didn't interest me, I mean the other kids' lives – the luxury cars that came to pick them up, the constant chat about expensive holiday trips with their families … The only 'holiday trip' I ever went on was a visit to Hammanskraal to see my grandmother and my hateful aunts. You don't know how humiliating it was to hear kids rattling off places like Paris, Venice, Knysna, Cape Town and Durban, when all I got to do during the holidays was scrub floors at my grandmother's house. Sometimes I would make up exotic holiday trips but the rich kids would see through my lies and waste no opportunity to mock me (Makholwa 2018/2017: 40).

The above indicates that despite living in a democratic South Africa, Bontle was excluded by her privileged peers, and her education was financed through her mother's shebeen earnings.

As an outsider, she longed to live as her classmates did. This exposed her to generational wealth, ensuring that the rich maintained their wealth, impacting on the widening gap between upper- and lower-income households. The reference to scrubbing floors suggests that young Bontle was taught the role she should fulfil as a woman. It alludes to the impoverished women who become domestic workers when they cannot further their education or acquire mainstream employable skills. Her choice to lie emphasises her desperation. Fasselt highlights that Bontle's "aim to 'make it big' and 'enjoy the Sweet Life' (Makholwa 2018/2017: 51) [causes her to] liberally cheat and lie, irrespective of moral considerations" (2018: 385). The novel subtly alludes to the morally reprehensible, inherent complexities and contradictions within post-apartheid South Africa, such as corruption among politicians, which impacts the inequality among citisens as funds are mismanaged. Although Bontle's aspiration for material wealth during adulthood may be interpreted as a symbol of empowerment and liberation, it simultaneously underscores the persistent socioeconomic disparities within the nation that she experienced during her youth.

The stark contrast between those who have access to wealth and those who do not accentuate the enduring challenges of inequality emphasises that these issues persist even in a post-apartheid society. Bontle struggles with feelings of inferiority as she lives in poverty while her classmates are from affluent families. Her internal conflict leads her to make drastic choices, eventually causing her to seek a blesser.

Makholwa's work displays the prevalence of inequality and capitalism among South Africans. Unable to wait for education to combat economic disparity, Bontle develops schemes to 'get rich quick'. Makholwa underscores the challenges encountered by those hailing from impoverished backgrounds grappling with restricted opportunities for education and limited employment prospects. Bontle, despite her aspirations to break free from poverty, becomes ensnared in a cycle of dependence on affluent men for survival.

The narrative parallels the broader societal concern of limited socioeconomic mobility for marginalised communities, contributing to inequality. Bontle, with the encouragement of her mother, chooses to sell her body to escape destitution. Makholwa often pivots from comedic chick-lit topics to serious gender issues by developing a layered backstory for Bontle, illustrating her multifaceted version of the genre. She provides glimpses into her youth by describing how Gladys allowed older men to interact with her young daughter inappropriately, giving the adolescent a false sense of security in these situations:

> When I was in my teens, my mother's shady customers started taking an unsavoury interest in me and she never really discouraged them. In fact, she was proud. 'Darling, beauty runs in this family!' she would say. 'Every dime I've ever made; I've made directly or indirectly because of the way I look. If a woman knows how to work her charms, and she is smart enough to use her brains … then that woman rules the world, baby. Watch and learn from your mom, my sweetheart.' If I complained to her about one of her customers groping me, she'd want to know which part of my body they'd 'messed around' with. If I told her that they touched my breasts or squeezed my bum, she'd say something like; 'Ag, don't worry too much about that, my baby. That's just men being men. The only place you mustn't let them touch you is here—' And she'd touch herself on her private parts (Makholwa 2018/2017: 40).

The above is an example of rape being condoned while victims are silenced. More than silencing her daughter, Bontle's mother allows her to be sexually exploited in the shebeen to attract customers. This is how she learns extractive relationships, which eventually leads to transactional sex with men. Bontle is told to overlook disrespectful behaviour and appreciate being objectified, emphasising the scourge of gender-based violence in South Africa. Pucherová (2021) asserts that Makholwa's writing explores "the rampant violence against women in post-apartheid South Africa [as] the result of the failure of the anti-apartheid struggle to recognise gender, alongside race, as a category of oppression" (2021: 140).

Bontle elaborates on the root of her trauma by recalling the sexual assault which she endured, emphasising the Blessee lifestyle as a means of escape from the horrors and psychological scars. When Golokile's father insists on having a relationship with him, Bontle is transported back to her adolescence. Her "mind does quick flashbacks. I am in my school uniform. A man in my life … a man; not a boy. I am fourteen years old yet feel the weight of all these expectations. I am expected to know the ways of a woman" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 140). Her first sexual encounter through rape shaped her future. When she is brought face-to-face with her abuser, Bontle is "that little girl again. Scared, uncertain, anxious to please" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 140). The overarching message of her narrative suggests that she carries this fear, self-doubt and anxiety while trying to cater to the desires of her lovers. Bontle reveals that she had been conditioned by her mother to seek the Blessee lifestyle from a young age, stating that "[t]he first lesson my mother taught me was that I should never allow a man to sleep with me if he was not going to spend money on me" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 140).

For years, Bontle lived according to her mother's philosophy. However, Bontle's initial marriage to Ntokozo before her journey as a Blessee represents her yearning for a stable life and relationship. When dealing with the re-emergence of Golokile's father, she admits that she

"should have stayed married to Ntokozo. He would have agreed to adopt Golokile, allowed him to stay with [them], built a secure home for him. But what did I do instead? I kept on running around with old men, chasing nothing – money, clothes, cars. Material things" (Makholwa 2018/2017:142). In this moment of weakness, Bontle's regret signals her dissatisfaction with her lifestyle of lavish consumption. Vusimuzi, Golokile's father, was the first to "buy me gifts and give me a monthly allowance" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 143). Being accustomed to this treatment, Bontle grew tired of her ordinary life with Ntokozo. Yet, her time of introspection suggests that her priorities have changed as she accepts her role as a mother.

Bontle suggests that "Black men got so messed up by apartheid [that they are] incapable of the kind of love displayed in [romantic] movies" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 50). This view explores how the apartheid government desensitised the Black community to the seriousness of assault by imposing an inhumane system through brutality and manipulation. Black women became the targets of vengeful men, who for a long time were unable to unleash their anger beyond the confines of their homes. This perpetuated a cycle of abuse, which was justified by patriarchal attitudes, and although the regime was eventually overthrown, women were affected by the aftermath.

Makholwa delves into the enduring impact of apartheid on Black womanhood. The compelling narrative of *The Blessed Girl* intricately explores the psychological repercussions of living in a society which has undergone profound transformations. Through nuanced character development, Makholwa vividly portrays the intricate emotions and psychological turmoil faced by Black women who inherit a history marked by oppression and systemic discrimination. Themes of identity, self-worth, and the pursuit of empowerment in a world that frequently constrains the agency of Black women are eloquently addressed.

By highlighting these challenges, Makholwa illuminates the persistent repercussions of apartheid on the lived experiences of Black women in post-apartheid South Africa. Through Bontle, Makholwa explores the intricacies of navigating gender power dynamics and the ambiguous boundaries between empowerment and exploitation. This sophisticated depiction challenges preconceptions surrounding modern women, moving away from viewing them solely as passive victims and delving into their agency when navigating romantic or transactional relationships. This creates avenues for dismantling stereotypes. By the end of the Bloomsbury version, Bontle reflects character growth as she attempts to pursue a relationship with Ntokozo, her former husband, whose character contrasts that of a blesser.

In both versions, to make amends for impregnating and abandoning Bontle to raise the child alone, Vusimuzi performs a cultural ceremony for restitution. Bontle explains that:

> *Inhlawulo* is a cultural practice that requires a man to pay a dowry price for a child conceived out of wedlock as a way of accepting or claiming his paternity of the child. It is a detailed process that involves written correspondence between the two families and final written agreements on the negotiated settlement going forward. (Makholwa 2018/2017: 150).

The practice demonstrates the importance of traditions and how they protect community members while advocating for women's rights. This is contrary to the belief that patriarchy is tied to culture. The extract indicates that women are valued, and men should take responsibility for their mistakes.

For Golokile's sake, Bontle allows Vusimuzi to build a relationship with their son. She wants to shield him from the depression she faces, stating that she "can relate to that sense of emptiness. Maybe it is a similar sense of longing that drives me to chase older men. I say a silent prayer that it will all work out for the best. I pray that Vusi's sudden emergence helps Loki and doesn't damage him" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 150). In this way, she puts her child's needs before her own and shows genuine concern which her character was devoid of at the beginning of the novel. However, this growth is lacking in the Macmillan version. Bontle has another point of clarity as she determines that her life choices are destructive. She confesses that if she and Gladys had: "been honest from the start, none of this would have happened. Maybe my life would have taken a completely different turn. Maybe I would have been more serious in my studies, made something of my life. But instead, I fell into the arms of another man" (Makholwa 2018/2017: 152).

In the Bloomsbury imprint of the novel, her regret prompts a departure from the blessed life to pursue meaningful relationships and financial independence. She begins reconciling with her former husband and seeks the stable relationship she would have had with him if not for her pursuit of 'the blessed life'.

Bontle becomes a legitimate business mogul in a matter of months and lives a healthier, safer lifestyle. Despite being HIV-positive, the novel ends with the promise of Bontle securing a successful future. The Macmillan version has Bontle secure a future for her mother and son before committing suicide rather than succumbing to her fate of living with and depending on her mother. This ending shows Bontle falling into despair after her physical appearance is

damaged and her mobility is compromised. Both versions illustrate the future awaiting women in precarious positions, with success or failure at the flip of a coin.

Makholwa suggests that blessees are aware of the risks to their health and financial stability when involved with blessers. The stark differences between the Bloomsbury and Pan Macmillan editions highlight the conflicting perceptions and portrayals of contemporary South African women. Additionally, "the novel follows the arc of a morality tale that warns its readers against the pitfalls of transactional sexual relationships. And yet, Bontle's character cannot easily be confined to the rigid gender roles which moral tales usually reserved for women" (Fasselt 2018: 383). Fasselt's assessment of the Macmillan edition notes that "the search for love and a fulfilling relationship" is "absent" from Bontle's narrative, which is contrary to archetypical chick-lit protagonists, demonstrating that women's goals have changed (2018: 381).

One of the most notable differences is where and how Bontle finds out that she is HIV-positive. Bloomsbury has her friend Iris confront Bontle about stealing her blesser, who has deceived them regarding his sexual health. Iris catches Bontle in her blesser, Mr. Emmanuel's home, and divulges his lies, stating in the Bloomsbury edition:

> That beast you want so badly you will step all over our friendship … he's not only an abusive, violent bastard, he's also made me pregnant. Yes,' she says, nodding as if to affirm the statement to herself. 'And you know what else, bitch? He's got AIDS. He's given me HIV, so welcome to Emmanuel's wonderful world. I hope you enjoy it. And I sure as hell hope it was worth it,' she says, before stalking out (Makholwa 2018/2017: 166).

Iris' experience suggests that the Blessee lifestyle is riddled with abuse, exploitation, and danger. Having evaded women's traditional roles, Iris finds herself in a position similar to Bontle years prior. She must mother a child while contending with difficulty. Her statement about friendship indicates that these women reject solidarity as they are forced to compete with one another for blessers. Mr. Emmanuel is an archetype of gender inequality, violence, and patriarchy. The shocking realisation causes a hiatus in Bontle's story as she deals with the backlash of her carelessness. According to Fasselt "[a]s a narrative in which the inspirational rags-to-riches format that Bontle initially invokes is soon lost, Makholwa's text can be read as a failed or anti-Bildungsroman" (2018: 382). However, this is only applicable to Macmillan's version.

Conclusion

In *The Blessed Girl,* Makholwa masterfully contextualises and delves into the dynamic socio-political milieu of post-apartheid South Africa. Makholwa uses her portrayal of Black womanhood as a lens through which to explore this multifaceted landscape. She adapts the chick-lit genre to her unique writing style. Bontle's narrative highlights the economic disparities, violence, entrenched racial and gender biases, and the profound psychological repercussions of apartheid, offering readers a profound insight into the complex layers of South African society.

By centering the experiences of a contemporary Black woman within her narrative, Makholwa introduces unique challenges to the post-apartheid South African literary sphere, from navigating systemic inequalities to grappling with the legacy of historical injustices. Makholwa confronts these issues head-on through her characters, presenting nuanced portrayals that capture Black women's resilience, agency, and diverse experiences.

By amplifying their voices and perspectives, she underscores the imperative of recognising and valuing the contributions of Black women to the country's ongoing transformation. In doing so, she highlights the need for greater inclusivity and representation in chick-lit writing while emphasising the indispensable role that Black women play in shaping the trajectory of post-transitional literary history.

Overall, *The Blessed Girl* serves as a poignant testament to Black women's enduring struggles and triumphs in the face of adversity, while also challenging readers to confront and interrogate their preconceptions regarding race, gender, and power dynamics.

Chapter 5:

"A Fall from Grace": How Female Vulnerability Has Impacted South African Black Womanhood as Depicted in Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain*

> How do they expect you not to lose your mind? They pull you open again and again, ram themselves into you again and again. Leave you with disease, warts, worms, pimples, pain, blood, rot coming out of your body. Your body! Because of the gold mines, they tell you, because of the Dutch, because someone at some point stole from them, because they never had fathers, because of Zimbabwe and Shaka and the government, because of xenophobia, unemployment, apartheid, colonialism, because of history, because of the serpent, because of Adam and Eve. Because of anything and everything. Because they can (Matlwa 2016: 120).

Introduction

The above quotation refers to the brutal gang rape of Masechaba, a young medical professional who is the protagonist of *Period Pain,* (2016) authored by Matlwa. Masechaba's commentary on the traumatic event indicates that the damage done to the protagonist has been physical and mental. Thus, Matlwa explores how post-traumatic stress disorder, abbreviated as PTSD, from gender-based violence affects Black South African women through the figure of her character, Masechaba.

In analysing Matlwa's novel, this chapter seeks to understand how Black women's trauma and the effects of community taboos are represented in South African literature. Like Matlwa's *Coconut* (2008) and Makholwa's *The Blessed Girl* (2017), *Period Pain* highlights themes which are frequently of concern for women and are ultimately harsh realities. A comparison of the texts suggests that violence is as prevalent in affluence as in impoverishment. A woman cannot escape it. Fikile, a protagonist of *Coconut*, is sexually assaulted by her guardian. This suggests, as Murray outlines, that "women are at their most vulnerable in their own homes and with the men with whom they share their lives" (2019: 2). *Period Pain* implies that women are not safe in familiar spaces, as Masechaba is raped at the hospital where she works.

Similarly, Makholwa's Bontle jeopardises her health by having sexual relations with an abusive, HIV-positive older man from whom she contracts HIV. While Fikile uses her trauma to springboard her escape from poverty, Bontle and Masechaba contemplate suicide as their lives implode. As the title of this section implies, *Period Pain* tells the story of Masechaba's fall from grace as she moves from being a doctor with a bright future to a broken survivor of

violent crime. Much of what Masechaba experiences during her lifetime causes her to be treated as a pariah: Such as her irregular menstrual cycle during childhood, her bouts of mental instability as an adult, suicidal thoughts due to the aftereffects of rape, mothering a child and contracting a sexually transmitted disease. The communal reactions to Masechaba's woes highlight that women are often shunned when dealing with sensitive or unpleasant situations.

According to Das (2008: 30), Captain James Cook introduced the term 'taboo' to English when he took it from the Polynesian word *tabu* in the 1700s. Kofi Agyekum explains that:

> Taboo is a system that prohibits and restricts specific acts and utterances in society. These prohibitions signify that the acts or utterances in question are not acceptable within the norms and culture of the society and, therefore, must not be practiced or talked about by its members (2002: 370).

Suicide, mental health, menstruation, rape, and sexual intercourse are subjects of verbal taboos. Matlwa alludes to this in *Period Pain*. The extract from Matlwa's noveldemonstrates that victims may "lose [their] mind[s]" and, therefore, lose pieces of themselves after a traumatic event (Matlwa 2016: 120). This often leaves them with physical remnants of the ordeal, such as "disease, warts, worms, pimples, pain, blood, rot coming out of your body" (Matlwa 2016: 120).

Those responsible for the evil, shift blame to anything remotely connected, as Matlwa sarcastically lists. According to Winstanley (2018), Matlwa insists that the trauma of apartheid cannot remain the principal referent which South Africans use to understand their identity. She writes: "it's always been easy to be the victim of apartheid, to blame everything on apartheid, but now we have to ask ourselves hard questions on what we are doing as a country" (Winstanley 2018: 64). This implies that Matlwa uses her writing and the excuses that criminals make to show that past injustices do not justify present wrongs, and former victims cannot use their history to validate their current crimes against other human beings, violating their right to life, safety, bodily integrity and bodily security, which is a norm in South Africa.

The symbolism of Period Pain throughout the text, a marker of female identity in one respect, is associated with women coming of age. However, it is also related to female vulnerability, as it takes us back to the issue of the trials and tribulations of women, from the girl-child who is vulnerable to abuse to the woman who is also susceptible to abuse.

Furthermore, the novel considers the prevalence of rape in South African society, through discussing South African culture and South African masculinity. The text challenges societies to have a firm look at what constitutes masculinity and how the gender power (im)balance is displayed and maintained. A medical doctor by profession, Matlwa, fills *Period Pain* with technical terms and biological facts to overlay fiction with truth. This serves as a watermark of the accuracy and relevance of her writing since her themes are steeped in reality.

Background

Period Pain is styled as Masechaba's stream-of-consciousness narrative, presenting her thoughts to readers. This literary technique allows her to reveal to readers that the narrations are entries in her journal, which her therapist suggests as a means to cope with the grief of her brother, Tshiamo's death via suicide. The entries present thoughts, memories and prayers directed at God.

Masechaba's tale begins with her painful transition from girl to young woman, marked by her menstrual cycle. However, this rite of passage is unlike what the average woman experiences, as Masechaba's bleeding is perpetual. She is eventually forced to undergo a procedure to regulate this, at the risk of stopping menstruation indefinitely.

The novel is separated into four parts. Part One describes how Masechaba's medical history influences her decision to become a doctor, exploring her professional life once she qualifies, representing her friendship with Zimbabwean doctor Nyasha and representations of the xenophobia sweeping South Africa during the period in which the novel is set. In part two, Masechaba, who usually remains neutral, starts a petition to end xenophobia and show solidarity toward Nyasha. Part three shows Masechaba dealing with the gang rape by men who believed her petition to be the act of a traitor. The view being that a fellow South African is expected to view foreigners as a threat to their livelihood, with this mindset being alluded to throughout the narrative by various character portrayals, and her choice to stand with the foreign nationals becoming a betrayal. Part four details Masechaba's pregnancy resulting from the rape.

Visual Manifestations of Trauma in *Period Pain*

Period Pain deals with socio-economic issues such as xenophobia, poverty, lack of resources and violence faced by many post-apartheid South Africans. Although these issues are rife and critical to write about, they also have an impact on an issue that many do not consider: mental

health. As one progresses through the novel, it is apparent that many of the experiences faced by the protagonist have impacted her mental health.

The most impactful tragedy that befalls Masechaba is being gang-raped at the hospital where she works, however, there are instances which show us that her mental health was at risk before the rape occurred. In her seminal work *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, Gqola (2015) suggests that rape:

> is sexualised violence, a global phenomenon that exists across vast periods in human history. Rape has survived as long as it has because it works to keep patriarchy intact. […] Rape is the communication of patriarchal power, reigning in, enforcing submission and punishing defiance. It is an extreme act of aggression and of power […] (2015: 21).

This reinforces the idea that Masechaba's rapists chose to teach a lesson through sexual abuse, which shifts the power to them as men. These men, who she suspects are lower-ranking hospital employees, desire to prove their masculinity through violence. They further seek to reclaim South Africa, branding Masechaba as theirs, indicated by their words, "Today we will make you a real South African woman" before they rape her (Matlwa 2016: 77). This quotation is similar to a story shared by Pule, a feminist who recounts the story of a young woman in 2013 being harassed by a young man in a shop in Johannesburg CBD. In her book, *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, Gqola retells this sad but real story (2015: 80-83). There is a sad but true comparison between the words "Today we will make you a real South African woman" (Matlwa 2016: 77) spoken before a rape in Matlwa's fictional world and Pule's real-life experience where a perpetrator told a young woman who did not want to give him the attention he so badly wanted,

> "This is why we rape you," he communicates his total power over her. Unlike him, she has no choices, he communicates. She can surrender to one form of harassment or be subjected to another. Either way, she will be violated (Gqola 2015: 84).

In the fictional scenario in *Period Pain*, the phrase implies a twisted form of initiation, highlighting that this act of violence is a means to define womanhood, stripping away Masechaba's agency and identity, treating her as an object rather than an autonomous person.

Similarly, in Pule's experience, the young man's words "This is why we rape you" reinforces the cruel patriarchal logic that a woman's rejection leads to violence against them. Showing that a woman's assertiveness, autonomy or blatant refusal towards a man's advances is not only met with hostility, but can also lead to sexual violence. Both experiences highlight the pervasive culture of misogyny and entitlement to women's bodies that exists in society. Both instances

showcase the normalisation of violence against women and the aggressive attempts to assert control over them. Gqola and Matlwa, through means of storytelling, both show the importance and need for a societal change that supports women asserting their autonomy.

However, this is not where Masechaba's mental illness begins, however, perhaps the rape was the final straw in the harsh events that Masechaba faced growing up. Her mind finally unraveled after it, just as the accident pushed Makholwa's Bontle to commit/ attempt suicide as her life fell apart.

One of the first difficulties faced by Masechaba was her menorrhagia, known to be abnormal menstruation. This distressed her to the point where she wanted her uterus removed: "I remember telling Ma that I wanted it taken out, cut away from me and incinerated at the large chamber at the hospital behind the hill" (Matlwa 2016: 46). Due to not being educated on the topic of menstruation, Masechaba believes that her first bleed, scientifically known as menarche, is because she is a "naughty child", and this is a "punishment from God" (Matlwa 2016: 11). This aligns with the idea of the curse upon womankind after Eve ate the forbidden fruit as *The Bible* states that "to the woman [God] said, I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain, you shall bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16, New International Version).

Masechaba's initial fear and guilt associated with menstruation is a precursor to her life later on when she says that she "pay[s] in blood" for her sins after her rape (Matlwa 2016: 110). Although her mother, referred to as Ma, pretended to be unbothered, Masechaba knew that her heavy childhood menstruation caused her mother to be "embarrassed and perplexed by the aggression of her daughter's young womb as everybody else was" (Matlwa 2016: 12). Due to her unusual menstrual cycle, she isolated herself to make things less awkward for herself and those around her. This resulted in her having her brother, Tshiamo, as her only friend. Eventually, however, to have a better quality of life, Masechaba underwent an endometrial ablation, which somewhat normalised her menstrual flow. Nonetheless, she still feared that "The beast was only sleeping and could wake at any moment" (Matlwa 2016: 14).

By viewing her reproductive cycle as a "beast", Masechaba likens her reproductive cycle to a malevolent force (Matlwa 2016: 14). She takes the drastic step at a young age to have an operation in retaliation. However, even after the successful procedure, she is still without peace, believing that her body will not cooperate indefinitely. Her fears become a reality when, after

years of regulated bleeding, Masechaba's cycle is disrupted, and severe bleeding ensues almost immediately after she is sexually violated. This intensifies her trauma as her body and mind fail her.

Masechaba's mother blames her daughter's menorrhagia on petty and senseless causes, such as overeating cheese and using tampons (Murray 2019). This method of coping is seen again when Masechaba's mother tries to understand her daughter's rape. Ma claimed that perhaps the reason Masechaba was raped was because she did not consult the ancestors when she graduated. Furthermore, that possibly her friend Nyasha was jealous of her success and therefore sent men to rape Masechaba. Although Ma's reasons at times annoyed Masechaba, she eventually says: "Ma needs a reason, I don't blame her. I need one too. Something to make sense of the senselessness. Something to hang the pain on" (Matlwa 2016: 76).

As human beings, we each have our personal view of the world. Simply put, we make sense of our world through schemas, which are cognitive structures we build over time (Janoff-Bulman & Timko 1987). These schemas represent and organise our knowledge (or the data we perceive) regarding a given concept (Fiske & Taylor 2013). Thus, when we experience a traumatic event, we may be unable to cope as this sudden new experience does not fit within our current data. Therefore, we either find ourselves in denial or trying to find reasons to understand or cope with the trauma (Tuval-Mashiach et al. 2004). Thus, to deal with the trauma mentally and emotionally, both Masechaba and her mother try to find reasons to explain their ordeals. At one point, Masechaba also assigned blame for her brother's death for her rape, "Maybe if he'd been here, none of this would have happened" (Matlwa 2016: 74).

The loss of her brother was another incident which took its toll on Masechaba. Although we are not given much detail on Tshiamo's death, we know he was probably grappling with his mental health as, according to his sister, he committed suicide because "Tshiamo painted pain, but it made him think too many deep thoughts, so he hung himself on a tree" (Matlwa 2016: 21). The implication is that he could not deal with these overwhelming "deep thoughts" that he had (Matlwa 2016: 21). Thus, he hung himself to escape the pain and confusion.

Instead of telling Masechaba to her face, her mother whispered the news about her brother's death into her ear. Masechaba was, therefore, left alone to deal with the death of her only friend. Ghafeer and Abdullah (2022) discuss attachment trauma in analysing *Period Pain*. Although they suggest that Masechaba's attachment to Nyasha and their severed ties causes trauma, this

dissertation indicates that Masechaba's connection to her brother contributes more to her mental state. According to Ghafeer and Abdullah, "the death of a loved individual to whom one is highly attached results in melancholic pain for a specific length of time. However, if that person abruptly abandons his or her attachment people, the consequences will be empathically more dangerous, if not fatally traumatic" (2022: 673). This is comparable to Golokile and Bontle in *The Blessed Girl*, who both suffer from mental instability due to complex familial experiences. Both Masechaba and Bontle visit psychologists to make sense of the trauma which they experienced.

One of the ways Masechaba tries to deal with her brother's death is by sending messages to his email address: "Of course I didn't expect a response. I'm not crazy. Nor was I ever in denial. But people mourn differently, and I was entitled to mourn whichever way I saw fit" (Matlwa 2016: 18). Masechaba, therefore, finds an unconventional way to mourn her brother's death. However, by still "communicating" with him, she may be struggling to let him go. This is also evident later on when Masechaba gets raped. She continuously calls Tshiamo's phone to relay information to him. However, after reaching his voicemail box, she says: "'As soon as possible.' How many times has he said that to me? 'As soon as possible.' I've left message after message on his phone and 'as soon as possible' has never come. It will never come" (Matlwa 2016: 74). From the last sentence, it is apparent that Masechaba has accepted that her brother is dead, however, it seems that she is still struggling with his loss, which is expected, considering how attached she had been to him.

Masechaba also seems traumatised by the numerous deaths and lack of resources at the hospital where she works, however, she tries to convince herself that she does enough for her patients:

> Patients die all the time. Nobody expects you to save all of them all the time. We do what we can. And with our crumbling health system, our staff shortages, our social challenges, well, what can people really expect? (Matlwa 2016: 22).

As she narrates the story, Masechaba repeats the phrase "We do what we can" approximately six times. This reinforces her shock at the situation. She claims that this phrase is the mantra she and others sing to each other. However, quite often, this mantra does not help to better deal with the deaths at the hospital. Although Masechaba knows that the socio-economic difficulties hinder medical staff from doing their jobs effectively, she still feels like the death of patients is on their hands: "You kill the patients alone. You kill them alone" (Matlwa 2016: 22).

Essentially, patients die at the hands of the medical experts. Most individuals will not blame the

economy or social circumstances that fail to allow practitioners to attend to patients adequately. It is thus left to the doctors' consciences to deal with the deaths (Mgom 2019). Furthermore, Masechaba does not say that the patients die but rather that they are killed. It seems that she feels directly responsible for the deaths of the patients. Perhaps so many people die, and of seemingly curable ailments or ailments that could have been prevented, that she now feels as if the doctors kill the patients.

We only witness the complete breakdown of Masechaba's mental health after she is raped. She contemplates suicide quite a few times and, at one point, even imagines falling to her death:

> In the mornings, I sit on the edge of my bed. I imagine it's a tall building, or a bridge, a cliff, a roof, or the balcony of a skyscraper. I fantasize about what it would be like to fly off and come crashing to the floor (Matlwa 2016: 65).

Her mental state at this time is possibly the worst it has ever been. Although she feels as if sleep is her only escape, it is clear that Masechaba's trauma haunts her in her slumber, too. Masechaba has vivid nightmares about the rape. In one of her dreams, there was blood pouring out of her, "gushing, spraying, splashing everywhere" and covering the legs, arms, and heads of her attackers (Matlwa 2016: 65). She frequently awakens at 03:02 and ponders over the numbers on the clock; "There were three men and they divided me in two? Or was it three times two?" (Matlwa 2016: 63). Masechaba constantly relives the incident, and her resulting PTSD displays how trauma shapes her identity. Her descriptions reveal the extent of her physical and emotional pain. Being "divided" signifies that she is a broken woman and that the men stole parts of her (Matlwa 2016: 63).

In both Abrahams' poignant commentary on rape in South Africa and the harrowing narrative of Masechaba in Matlwa's novel *Period Pain*, we witness the profound psychological consequences of rape. Abrahams' assertion that rape is "endemic" within South African culture resonates deeply with Masechaba's fragmented mental state following her traumatic experience (Abrahams 2003: 434).

As Abraham's critiques the systemic failures in addressing sexual violence, Matlwa illustrates the personal ramifications of such a societal ailment. Masechaba's contemplation of suicide and her vivid nightmares serve as manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder, epitomising the internal chaos birthed from her assault. The imagery of blood "pouring out" and the visceral recollections of her attackers signify not only physical violence but an existential rupture, where

her identity itself is threatened.

The phrase “divided me in two” underscores a profound loss of self, revealing how trauma can erase agency and wholeness. This echoes Abraham’s observation of the cultural underpinnings of violence, suggesting that the pervasive nature of rape transcends individual experiences, contributing to a collective trauma that demands urgent societal recognition and intervention (Abrahams 2003: 434-435). Both narratives compel us to confront the brutal intersection of violence and identity, emphasising the necessity for a critical re-evaluation of societal attitudes towards sexual violence.

Recognising the Signs of Mental Fragility

Although it is only after she is raped when Masechaba is officially diagnosed with depression, the experiences mentioned previously, as well as other incidents in the book, reveal her spiraling mental health. Masechaba herself hints at her vulnerable mental health:

> Sometimes, I see things out of the corner of my eye. The red washing basket on the floor is a squatting man in a red hoody, trying hard not to be seen. Sometimes, a fork rises from the pile on the dish rack […] I ignore these cracks in my psyche the way a smoker ignores the occasional speck of blood in his sputum. I dare not ask the obvious. Am I going mad? (Matlwa 2016: 40).

She wonders if she is depressed, but for fear of picking up weight, she decides not to take the anti-depressant named Fluoxetine. Towards the end of the first chapter, Masechaba recounts that she saw a cat coming out from under the table and Portuguese men at the window. She was afraid to tell her friend, Nyasha, as she felt that Nyasha would “leave [her] for sure if [Nyasha] began to worry [she] might be going mad” (Matlwa 2016: 45). Masechaba is eventually diagnosed with major depression with psychotic features. Dr Phakama, Masechaba’s therapist, feels that Masechaba has become somewhat psychotic due to her extreme depression from the rape and that it is her “family history” that made Masechaba “especially vulnerable” to getting depressed (Matlwa 2016: 72).

However, Masechaba considers that her mental illness began before the rape: “I wanted to tell her she was wrong, that my mind began to come apart a long time ago, long before any of this happened […] Long before I began to pay in blood” (Matlwa 2016: 68). Masechaba’s social circumstances were another factor that put immense stress on her. It had become her responsibility to care for her mother while completing her studies. Furthermore, her studies did

not allow her to take breaks. She could not even find the time to express her feelings, and crying was a “luxury” that they did not “have the time for” (Matlwa 2016: 80).

Masechaba also begins hallucinating. She hears voices and feels the breath of the rapists on her neck. She thinks she sees cockroaches when they are “a scratch in the wall, a sweet wrapper on the floor, a chip in the tiles” (Matlwa 2016: 65). When Masechaba takes a bath, she thinks she sees blood stains on her legs and continuously tries to scrub them off. However, these stains are a hallucination, perhaps because there was blood running down her legs after the rape. As her daughter deals with the aftermath of the rape, Masechaba’s mother says she will not allow her daughter to give in to the madness that is consuming her, and explains this “madness” she is referring to:

> The madness, Masechaba, the madness that has done all these things to you. The madness that has stolen my child. The madness that has stolen your life. The madness that makes you sit on a bucket, wiping yourself with newspapers, covering the floor and walls with blood. The madness that is killing you, Masechaba (96).

The above statement by Masechaba’s mother gives us insight into Masechaba’s mind. She seems paranoid, and her mother notices how her mind has unraveled. Masechaba is fascinated by her period blood: “I’ve actually come to like it, this little trickle of blood coming out of me day after day” (Matlwa 2016: 64). Ironically, Masechaba now likes her period, yet when she was younger, it was something she wanted to get rid of.

After a string of losses in her life being her father succumbing to alcohol, the passing of her brother, her mother ‘wilting’ after the death of Tshiamo, and losing touch with herself after being raped, she now sees her period as something that belongs to her: “It’s a kind of pain, a kind of pleasure, a kind of freedom that I like, that Dr Phakama’s medication tried to steal from me. But it’s mine and it’s nice and I want it” (Matlwa 2016: 64).

How Ignoring Trauma Worsens the Problem

Many verbal taboos influence the trauma that Matlwa alludes to in the novel, one being suicide. As previously discussed, when Tshiamo dies, Masechaba’s parents do not talk to her about his suicide. Masechaba explains that "[n]obody had bothered to tell [her] to [her] face that Tshiamo was dead. Instead, [her mother] came into [Masechaba’s] room while [she] was pretending to sleep and whispered it in [her] ear" (Matlwa 2016: 67). By avoiding a conversation with their daughter about her brother’s death, Masechaba’s parents deny her an outlet for her grief. At the beginning of her narrative, Masechaba casually mentions that “Tshiamo painted pain, but it

made him think too many deep thoughts, so he hung himself on a tree" (Matlwa 2016: 21).

Another taboo that is unspoken in the novel is sexual intercourse and pregnancy. Despite Masechaba's mother having an administrative job at the "Department of Health" (Matlwa 2016: 20), she does not explain menstruation, sex, or pregnancy to her daughter. Instead, Ma uses a euphemism to try and get the message across to Masechaba that if she wants to stop her menstrual cycle completely, she will regret it in the future because she will be "unable to bring life into the world" (Matlwa 2016: 12). This leaves Masechaba confused about menstruation and the so-called "life" that Ma alludes to (Matlwa 2016: 12). This inadequacy on the part of mothers makes young girls not realise that menstruation is "necessary for reproduction" (Das 2008: 37). Masechaba does not realise that the "life" that her mother alludes to is procreation that comes as a result of menstruation and sexual intercourse which serves as foreshadowing. Masechaba, despite being a doctor, fails to recognise the signs of her pregnancy which resulted from the rape.

Masechaba and her mother both use negative connotations when speaking about menstruation. Her mother refers to Masechaba as being "unwell" (Matlwa 2016: 12). This implies that the menstrual cycle is a sickness. Masechaba herself refers to her period by using negatively coded descriptions. She calls her menstruation a "so-called dirt flow" (Matlwa 2016: 17), a "demon" (Matlwa 2016: 96), the "madness that came from within", and the "beast [that] was only sleeping and could wake at any moment" (Matlwa 2016: 96). Thus, Masechaba associates the bleeding with evil. These phrases used by both Masechaba and her mother signify that menstruation is a verbal taboo, even between mother and daughter in *Period Pain*. Many of the words and phrases used to conceal the natural bodily processes of biologically matured women are reminiscent of terms applied to mental health and perpetuate the stigma that these topics should be avoided or ignored even by one's closest relations. This signifies that Masechaba is discouraged from voicing her fears and concerns.

The hostility that her mother puts on Masechaba allows her to believe that she is to blame for her unpredictable menstrual cycle. This blame plays a role later on in Masechaba's life when she blames herself for the rape. She says, "I should have listened. I should have been calmer, quieter, more thoughtful, more focused. I was too, too excited. That's why those men raped me" (Matlwa 2016: 108). Women, such as Masechaba, for example, blame themselves for their periods, for their feelings and even for being raped. They cannot help all these things because it is not their choice in many situations. This highlights how women are often blamed by society

when they are sexually assaulted. This victim-blaming amplifies their trauma. Masechaba labelling herself as “too excited” as opposed to being “calmer, quieter, more thoughtful and more focused” (Matlwa 2016: 108) resembles the stereotype that women should be submissive to men as a sign of femininity. Masechaba’s father’s words reinforce this as he articulates, “Why do you talk so much? You’re over-confident for a young lady. Be humble, be quiet, rest a little” (Matlwa 2016: 112). Early in her narrative, Masechaba indicates that after losing his son, a government tender and dealing with bad publicity, her father left to live with his mother and “drink the days that remain away” (Matlwa 2016: 18). She rarely mentions him thereafter, however, their estrangement is noteworthy. The absence of a positive male figure contributes to Masechaba’s feelings of abandonment and isolation. This also impacts Masechaba’s interactions with her mother, as Ma is more protective and critical of her having raised Masechaba alone.

Speaking on issues that are considered verbal taboos in many cultures and societies across the world is necessary according to Das (2008). Matlwa alludes to this throughout the novel, whereby she mentions the issue of menstruation as a verbal taboo to make the reader aware of the negative ramifications of not speaking about this natural phenomenon in women's lives. Rape and female vulnerability are issues that are out of control globally and pose the question that Masechaba asks of every human being, "How do we change? And stay changed?” (Matlwa, 2016: 49).

The plight of women and their vulnerability in society is a critical issue which requires discussion due to the societal ills of the world, such as Masechaba's experiences. This is alluded to cleverly by Matlwa in the recurring motif of the colour red and the image of blood. The "blood splattered across [the] living room walls" (Matlwa 2016: 43) of the white lady who was gang-raped in her own home, despite her boyfriend being there, shows the vulnerability of women in society as a whole, but more specifically in South Africa. The colour red is shown in the novel when we read about the "red washing basket", a "man in a red hoody" (Matlwa 2016: 55), the “maroon towel” (Matlwa 2016: 43) on Masechaba’s bed, and the “water [going] dark maroon” (Matlwa 2016: 101) after Masechaba is raped and has a bath. This red and blood motif is seen throughout the novel and symbolises the blood at the hands of the South African people against injustices and cruelty, such as the rape and abuse of women and children. The motif also highlights the vulnerability of women regardless of their educational status.

Similarly, the significance of red and blood as a metaphor for suffering, life and death in *Period*

Pain is comparable to the connotations of Black, especially regarding skin colour as highlighted in *Coconut*. The last image in *Period Pain*, the most powerful in the novel, is when Masechaba writes in her diary:

> How viscous our blood must be? It carries so much in it. Stories swirling round and round our veins, up into our hearts at least a zillion times a day. Stories of men going into cities, men in men, men in women, women in men, children in women, men in children. Strangers living in each other's arteries, sharing intimacies, sharing pain, sharing anger, sharing hatred, sharing resentment, sharing loss. Who are these terrorists that have invaded my blood, taken over my body? (Matlwa 2016: 118).

This quote highlights the blood motif and metaphor. The aforementioned quotation demonstrates how the blood is being personified and can be viewed as a metaphor, as it is being compared to and "infected" by violence. The quote can be analysed by seeing how Masechaba describes her rape as a parasitic connection solidified by blood. The body here is also the body politic – the fabric of society, the fabric of the nation. Her words prove true when she learns of her pregnancy which confirms that the blood (DNA) of her rapists remains inside her and flows through her child.

The motif of blood further represents a person's essence, and Masechaba reflects that a culture of violence is entrenched in her society and spreads like cancer, infecting her blood and surroundings. Her tone is resigned, but her words are compelling. The terrorists which she refers to are not the people from other countries. They are her people who did this to her and who raped her. They hurt, took, and stole entities from her that can never be replaced.

Beyond the focus on social taboos such as suicide and rape, *Period Pain* emphasises that it is essential to examine the effect of such problems on one's mental health. Thus, Matlwa cleverly hints at and demonstrates the breakdown of Masechaba's psyche. Although Masechaba seems to take notice of her declining mental state, she chooses to hide it and decides against seeking the help she needs. This is evident when Masechaba reflects that she "can tell Nyasha most things, but" could "never tell her" (Matlwa 2016: 51). Masechaba is confident that her friend would "leave [her] if she began to worry that [she] might be going mad" (Matlwa 2016: 51).

This fear causes Masechaba to "write" about her psychological turmoil in her "journal but tell no one" (Matlwa 2016: 51). However, even after Masechaba is raped, it is apparent that the methods of counselling are mainly Western and do not seem adequate to treat her. For example, Dr Phakama asks her to imagine herself sitting alone with her eyes closed behind a big tree.

Whilst this technique may work with other patients, it does not seem suitable for treating a patient who was raped. Dr Phakama detracts from the seriousness of rape and the prevalence of it in society. She tells Masechaba to see her rape as "a blessing in disguise" and asks her to try and "understand where the men were coming from" (Matlwa 2016: 73). Thus, it could be said that even those who are in a position to help the distressed in society, are not equipped to do so. Furthermore, the novel highlights that the lack of proper support contributes to a decline in mental stability. For instance, Makholwa's protagonist, Bontle, was taken advantage of sexually and raped as a minor, and her mother did not intervene or give her emotional support, just like Masechaba's mother failed to console her through her menstrual difficulties, her brother's suicide, and her rape. Moreover, Dr Phakama eagerly suggests that she and Masechaba write a scholarly article regarding the phenomenon, with Masechaba credited but not as the first author. This adds insult to injury by treating Masechaba as a professional guinea pig.

Conclusion

Through *Period Pain* (2016), Matlwa contemplates the post-apartheid literary representation of Black South African women by creating a protagonist who is vulnerable at every significant juncture in her life. From Masechaba's early years dealing with menorrhagia, her brother's suicide while studying, becoming an unfulfilled doctor to her rape and resulting pregnancy, she is plagued by trauma which triggers depression.

Matlwa uses Masechaba to suggest that discourse around women's mental health is relevant and necessary. The novel further indicates that one's mental state is bound to regress when living in a society with high levels of gender-based violence, and without adequate support. Victims seek an outlet to ascribe blame in times of crisis.

As indicated above, there are clear overlaps between *Coconut* (2008), *The Blessed Girl* (2017) and *Period Pain* (2016). The correlation between sexual violence, trauma and the effect on Black South African womanhood is the core focus of this chapter. Masechaba's life is an accurate representation of the burdens which victims bear. Dr Phakama's character depicts the shortcomings of generalised approaches to treating survivors of violent crime. Matlwa also highlights that regardless of race or class, a woman is susceptible to gender-based violence. The importance of recognising topics as pertinent for discussion instead of encouraging verbal taboos is evident and reflects the changing portrayals of female characters.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This thesis explores the representations of Black womanhood in post-apartheid South Africa by performing a textual analysis focusing on central characters in Matlwa's *Coconut* (2007) and *Period Pain* (2016) and two versions of Makholwa's *The Blessed Girl* (Pan MacMillian 2017 and Bloomsbury 2019). Previous chapters comprise analysis of the abovementioned novels and secondary sources to determine how the portrayal of women from the Black community is represented in literature.

The discussion indicates that the roles and aspirations of Black women have evolved, as South Africa has worked to shed the residual burden of its colonial and apartheid past. Chapter one is an introduction to this study, covering the critical theories and literature used. Chapter two comprises of the literature review. Chapter three begins the dissertation analysis focusing on the identity struggles faced by Black women as reflected in *Coconut*.

In the chapter on Matlwa's *Coconut*, it has been shown that the novel serves as a poignant commentary on identity, race and class dynamics in a post-apartheid context. Through the perspectives of Ofilwe Tlou and Fikile Twala, we see the stark contrasts in their experiences which highlights how the characters navigate the intricacies of privilege, societal expectations, and cultural dislocation. Matlwa's *Coconut* exemplifies this shift by candidly illustrating the internal and external struggles faced by Black women as they grapple with identity, belonging, and socioeconomic disparities.

Chapter four is read from a chick-lit context to determine how women exert agency or succumb to stigma brought on by external forces related to abuse, mental and financial instability, corruption and the remnants of racial disparity in Makholwa's *The Blessed Girl*. The novel serves as a pivotal examination of Black womanhood within the complex socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. Through Bontle's journey, we see that Makholwa skillfully adapts the chick-lit genre to convey critical reflections on the economic disparities, gender biases, and psychological fallout of apartheid.

The narrative does not merely entertain. Instead, it provides a powerful commentary on the contemporary struggles faced by Black women, thus broadening the scope of representation in South African literature. Chapter five explores female vulnerability, trauma, sexual violence and gender inequality among Black South Africans in *Period Pain*. We see how Matlwa

presents Masechaba, a protagonist whose life is marked by a series of profound traumas, including debilitating pain, the loss of her brother, professional dissatisfaction, and sexual violence.

Through Masechaba's journey, the novel articulates the complexities of mental health struggles within the context of societal and personal violence. Matlwa's narrative contributes to the evolving portrayal of Black womanhood by showcasing not only the pain and trauma experienced by Masechaba, but her resilience and potential for recovery in a world that often silences such narratives. This pivotal shift from mere survival to an affirmation of agency among Black women is a crucial marker of the post-apartheid literary landscape, as explored throughout this thesis.

There are many similarities between the selected novels. A significant contributor to the internalised trauma faced by each protagonist is that they deal with a form of rape. According to Gqola:

> Ending the rape epidemic in South Africa will require many people to think critically about how seemingly benign behaviour enables rape to thrive. In other words, we must think relentlessly about how and what we are taught in patriarchal society – one that we are all raised in – seducing us into believing that rape only looks a certain way, and therefore, we should only recognise rape when it fits into that very narrow definition (2015: 5-6).

This quote emphasises the fact that rape and gender-based violence is a complex epidemic in South Africa, both during the apartheid regime, and in post-apartheid South Africa. Gqola writes the need to examine societal norms and behaviours that are seemingly harmless, but in fact contribute to a culture and society that perpetuates rape and violence. While post-transitional South Africa has made major steps toward individual rights through democracy, the prevalence of gender-based violence is a persisting issue that echoes throughout society.

Moreover, in *Coconut*, Fikile, during her childhood, is molested by her paternal uncle, who is her legal guardian. This causes her to reject the Black community and pursue wealth and whiteness. *Period Pain*'s Masechaba is gang-raped for her support of the anti-xenophobia movement, which results in a mental breakdown and pregnancy. *The Blessed Girl* illustrates that Bontle had been sexually exploited and impregnated as a teenager by an adult male. Having been subject to such traumatic situations directly impacts how these young women view and present themselves in contemporary South Africa.

Fikile and Bontle seek to escape reality by lying about their lives and backgrounds, while Masechaba loses touch with reality in waves of psychological stress. The men are never brought to justice, and although the incidents evoke sympathy and disgust from readers, the women are not given the necessary support from those in their lives who are aware, highlighting the shortcomings of law enforcement, the need for appropriate mental health support initiatives and the power imbalance between men and women.

This analysis reflects on how Black South African women depicted in fictional literature have undergone a process of change which mirrors current societal changes. In earlier literature by Black women such as Miriam Tlali, Lauretta Ngcobo and Sindiwe Magona, (pre-apartheid and literature of the transition) they show, almost uniformly, the oppressive effects of apartheid on womanhood, motherhood and families.

Coconut (2007) provides a glimpse into the lives of two starkly different young Black women who face the same challenge of navigating a newly established nation clinging to past ideologies. Fikile and Ofilwe draw attention to a phase when female identity is in flux, influenced by local and global factors. In *The Blessed Girl* (2017), Makholwa explores and contextualises the evolving socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa by depicting the experiences and challenges faced by Black women in this context. The protagonist, Bontle Tau, represents a growing class of South African women known as blessees who enter into transactional relationships with wealthy, often older, men in exchange for material benefits.

Through Bontle's experiences and the stories of other women in similar situations, Makholwa critiques the economic disparities that persist in post-apartheid South Africa. She explores the financial realities, racial and gender-based discrimination, and the psychological effects of apartheid. She critically examines their challenges by placing Black women at the centre of her narrative. She highlights the need for their voices to be heard and valued within a changing society.

Makholwa's portrayal of Bontle challenges the expectation that Black women should conform to societal norms. *The Blessed Girl* is styled as contemporary Black chick-lit. The Pan Macmillan version is written for a South African audience, while the Bloomsburg publication appeals to international readers. Pan Macmillan re-envisions the genre by making Bontle face the consequences for her reckless actions, while Bloomsburg chooses the cliché happily-ever-

after.

The South African flair added to what is considered chick-lit demonstrates that the global south cannot be forced to adhere to Eurocentric notions of femininity. Although Bontle conforms to particular Western lifestyle and beauty standards due to social media culture, she highlights the authenticity of Africa and its people. Through Masechaba's experiences, *Period Pain* (2016) suggests that even when Black women can elevate themselves despite the prevalence of racial and gender inequality, they are still subject to patriarchy.

The novel highlights that injustice and gender-based violence are a blight upon a South Africa which is trying to heal from its past. Each novel reveals a unique aspect of Black womanhood that contemporary writers touch on. Unlike previous literature from a male gaze, the characters are written from a female perspective. It is important to note that these characters in all three novels are no longer required to carry the dreaded pass documents such as Black women characters in previous works before the post-apartheid period, which was mandatory by the pass laws of apartheid. Yet, they are still constrained by different forces such as economics, gender-based violence and patriarchy.

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