

**Disruptive bodies and peripheral politics:
How naked protests disrupt the patriarchal public sphere**



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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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1 Abstract

On 4 October 2016, three black female students at the University of Witwatersrand (hereafter Wits) in Johannesburg, South Africa staged a naked protest to call for a ceasefire during the peak of the #FeesMustFall (FMF) protests. The FMF movement emerged in late 2015 as a student revolt against costly higher education fees especially for black students in South Africa. Armed police fired rubber bullets, stun grenades, and teargas to stop ongoing FMF protests which shut down university operations as students vowed to protest until all their demands were met. Within this context, the three female students at Wits University stood topless and formed a buffer zone between mostly male protesting students and the police. The method of protest was however mostly received with condemnation by the public and received widespread attention on social media platforms where the focus shifted from the central issues that sparked the naked protest to predominantly body shaming the women and questioning their morality (Ndlovu, 2017:68). This response to the naked protest therefore raised questions around the continuous policing of women's bodies and the patriarchal structure of public space where naked protests are performed.

This thesis will use the 2016 naked protest that took place during violent FMF clashes between the police, private security, and students at Wits University as a lens to explore the ways in which naked protests have been used as an empowering tool to challenge men and authorities in violent contexts. It will draw on the 1990 naked protest in Soweto in South Africa, the 2002 naked peace protest in Liberia, and the 2002 anti-oil naked protest in Nigeria to illustrate the trajectory of naked protests in different African societies and the unique ways in which women's nakedness and undress has been perceived with apprehension in these societies. The central question that this thesis intends to explore is why do naked protests by women in African societies trigger apprehension in bystanders and black authoritarian male figures? I argue that it is a powerful form of protest, beyond cultural symbolisms attached to senior black women's bodies, as it subverts patriarchal mores underpinned in public space that delineates when and how black women can be seen in the public domain. I argue that it also provides the space for black women to assert their presence in protest movements and broader society which is typically unappreciated and overlooked. The point is to illustrate how naked protests ultimately undermines patriarchal mores and essentially invalidates colonial ideologies that renders the black female body socially invisible.

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4 CHAPTER 1: Introduction to naked protests

4.1 Introduction

On 4 October 2016, three black female students at the University of Witwatersrand (hereafter Wits) in Johannesburg, South Africa staged a naked protest to call for a ceasefire during the peak of the #FeesMustFall protests. The #FeesMustFall movement was a student uprising that emerged in late 2015 against the rising costs of higher education in South Africa especially for black students and their families (Hodes, 2017:141). The movement conveyed students' frustrations with the state's and the academy's failure to ensure the accessibility of tertiary education for all as poor black students continued to be financially and systemically excluded in the university space. Ongoing student protests shut down university operations as they called for free education, the decolonisation of the university space, and the insourcing of black workers on campus (Xaba, 2017:99). Within this context, the three female students at Wits University stood topless and formed a buffer zone between mostly male protesting students and armed police who fired rubber bullets, stun grenades, and teargas (Ndlovu, 2017:68). The method of protest was mostly received with condemnation by the public as well as by influential public figures in South Africa and received widespread attention on social media platforms where the focus shifted from the central issues behind the protest, to predominantly body shaming the topless women and questioning their morals (Ndlovu, 2017:68).

Online comments were directed at the protesters' morals and the standard of beauty of their bodies that were put on the line. In this sense, the naked protest was reduced to a superficial event about wardrobe and the sexualisation of women's bodies as the protesters received a great deal of public criticism, including from influential South African figures, such as local comedian Skhumbuzo 'Skhumba' Hlophe, who body-shamed the topless women on radio station Khaya FM (Ndlovu, 2017:75). The Acting National Police Commissioner at the time, Khomotso Phahlane, also questioned the women's sense of morality and condemned their actions as gratuitous (Kubheka, 2016). According to Ngcobo (2016), the women were however unfazed about the public backlash as they claimed that they "didn't do it for public opinion" and that their main goal was to obtain a ceasefire which was successfully achieved. It was therefore a successful strategy in bringing an end to the violence on the day and for asserting the powerful role and work of women in the

movement which, according to Malabela (2016:141), has been increasingly undermined by patriarchal attitudes from male #FeesMustFall (hereafter FMF) leaders. Moreover, the protest was significant as it highlighted the need for ongoing and open dialogues about the underlying ideologies of the public backlash that labelled the naked protest as immoral and indecent.

Naked protests have taken place in many African societies, dating back to precolonial and colonial times, and have been interpreted in different ways in different contexts. On the one hand, naked protests are regarded as an empowering and sacred traditional form of protest. This is most evident in naked protests organised and centred on the basis of motherhood, or women's social and biological identities as mothers, in some African countries which has been lauded for its cultural and symbolic meanings (see e.g. Diduk, 2004; Prash, 2015; Stevens, 2006; Turner & Brownhill, 2004; Tyler, 2013). In many African societies, naked protests represent a powerful symbolic tool underpinned by notions around a naked curse as women use nudity in protests as a symbolic weapon against men or any individual that caused their suffering (Diabate, 2017; Guyson, [2016](#); Abonga et al, 2019). These symbolic powers construct naked black women around a narrative of agency and autonomy as it is only available to women in some African societies, specifically maternal bodies or 'senior' women which includes mothers and elderly women in the society. While this symbolic curse is not explicitly associated with younger women, naked protests that involves young black women in contemporary African societies is also empowering as it is seen as a transgressive form of protest that disrupts public norms around decency (Eileraas, 2014:41).

Naked protests are also powerful as women undertake the risk of harassment, abuse, rape, and death as their bodies are often sexualised in the public sphere (Menrad, [2019](#)). For instance, Mugo ([2016](#)) illustrates an encounter with Thenjiwe Mswane - one of the key female protesters within the 2015 FMF movement - who described the experience of being a black woman in a predominantly black male space as "wildly dangerous". According to Mswane, despite the fact that black women and men were fighting for the same cause in FMF, black female bodies are never completely safe in spaces that are violent and largely dominated by black men (Mugo, [2016](#)). Naked protests are therefore significant as black women enter the protest space understanding the dire consequences of literally laying bare their vulnerabilities. As evident in FMF naked protest, the public sphere exposes young black women to harsh criticisms from bystanders and male figures

that labels naked protests as indecent, gratuitous, and grotesque (see e.g. Fanghanel, 2019; O’Keefe, 2014; Sultana, 2013). The online criticisms largely highlighted the public’s apprehension towards the exposed female body in public. Since this is regarded as a traditional form of protest in African societies, these criticisms raise questions around changing moralistic standards and the tensions around naked protests by black women in the public sphere. Criticisms of women’s naked bodies in protest points to underlying fears and tensions around the symbolic notions of the curse of maternal bodies. It is also largely based on the patriarchal male gaze as well as the sexualisation of women’s bodies which consequently resurfaces the colonial preoccupation of the black female body (Sultana, 2013:10). Ongoing contentions around naked protests in the postcolonial period are therefore based on these notions and the potential of the naked female body to curse and disrupt social and public norms.

The central question that this thesis intends to explore is why do naked protests by women in African societies trigger apprehension from bystanders and black authoritarian male figures? I argue that it is a powerful form of protest, beyond cultural symbolisms attached to senior black women’s bodies, as it subverts patriarchal mores underpinned in public space that delineates when and how black women can be seen in the public domain. I argue that it also provides the space for black women to assert their presence in protest movements and broader society which is typically unappreciated and overlooked. This is evident in the gendered forms of resistance in the FMF movement as Xaba (2017:101) argues that the countless masculine militarisation in images of protesters throwing stones and carrying knobkerries overshadowed other forms of resistance and marginalised bodies such as black feminists and queer bodies that were instrumental to the movement. The central concern of this thesis is therefore to show how the contentions around naked protests in contemporary South African urban spaces spark important conversations around the broader policing of black women’s bodies in the public sphere that has been instilled by colonialism and Apartheid. The point is to illustrate how naked protests ultimately undermines patriarchal mores and colonial discourses that renders the black female body socially invisible. I use ‘black women’ as a broad concept to refer to women of colour in African societies who have experienced disenfranchisement based on their race and gender. I also borrow Levine’s (2013:25) conceptualisation of ‘nakedness’ which is a condition determined by a set of social and cultural determinants rather than simply an account of the state of dress.

This thesis will use the 2016 naked protest that took place during violent FMF clashes between the police, private security, and students at Wits university as a lens to explore the ways in which naked protests have been used as an empowering tool to challenge men and authorities in violent contexts. It will draw on the 1990 naked protest in Soweto in South Africa, the 2002 naked peace protest in Liberia, and the 2002 anti-oil naked protest in Nigeria to illustrate the trajectory of naked protests in different African societies and the unique ways in which women's nakedness and undress has been perceived with apprehension in these societies. These cases will serve to support the argument that naked protests are a powerful means of protest that goes against dominant patriarchal mores to reassert the role of women in society that has largely been diminished by colonial powers. This is important as the advent of colonialism in African societies reinforced patriarchal ideologies through Victorian ideals around women, morality, and public life, which essentially marginalised and undermined black women's presence in the public sphere. The 2016 naked protest at Wits University is unique as it provides a different lens into naked protests that goes beyond cultural depictions and symbolic meanings of black women's bodies. It illustrates how the power of naked protests should not be deduced to a mere association with certain women's symbolic bodies such as senior and maternal bodies in the case of the 1990s Soweto protest in South Africa and the 2002 naked protests in Liberia and Nigeria. Instead, it is derived from the method of protest itself which is on the periphery of the formal political sphere of organised protest and it offers an embodied resistance to the hegemonic order in public space and society.

The following section will provide a contextual background to the 2016 naked protest at Wits University to understand the circumstances that sparked the women students to act against the authoritative powers on campus. It will then be followed by a conceptualisation of social protests to unpack and situate naked protests in formal politics to understand the apprehensions around undress as a protest tactic. Chapter 2 will explore women's involvement in protest action and naked protests in different African contexts which will illustrate the ways in which undress has been used as a traditional form of protest that is read beyond a Westernised voyeuristic gaze. Chapter 3 will follow on from this by providing an outline of the unique ways in which naked protests are regarded by men and women in these societies. It will also illustrate how naked protests are constructed through a Westernised lens that primarily highlights patriarchal mores and discourses

of women's bodies entrenched by colonialism. Chapter 4 will provide a historical trajectory of these discourses to understand how these contentions are still perpetuated in the contemporary that was highlighted in the naked protest at Wits University. Chapter 5 will then demonstrate the ways in which patriarchal discourses are played out within various social institutions and structures of power to regulate women's bodies and essentially construct socially invisible bodies. Chapter 6 will provide a discussion and concluding remarks which will emphasise the power of naked protests as it undermines patriarchal mores and essentially invalidates colonial ideologies that renders black women's bodies socially invisible.

4.2 Background

The FMF movement initially emerged at Wits University in late 2015 following the university's decision to support a fee increment for the 2016 academic year (Malabela, 2016:136). Students at Wits called for a mass rejection of fee increases across all South African higher education institutions which gained widespread national support from students and staff and spurred mass protests that swept across public universities, bringing operations to a standstill (Ndlovu, 2017:69). The 2015 FMF protests was successful as protesters managed to obtain a zero percent fees increase for the 2016 academic year which was announced by President Jacob Zuma on 23 October 2015 (Ndlovu, 2016:69). The struggle for free quality education is ongoing as FMF protests resurfaced in 2016 due to Blade Nzimande's, the Minister of Higher Education, announcement on 19 September 2016 of a fees increase capped at seven percent for the 2017 academic year (Ndlovu, 2017:69). The students vowed to protest until all their demands for free, quality, and decolonised education for all were addressed.

The focus on decoloniality emphasised the need for sexual and gender justice which saw an increase in feminist and queer activism on various university campuses across South Africa. These demands are based on the legacy of existing deep-rooted structural inequalities established during colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa where education was instrumental to further entrench inequality between the black and white population (Xaba, 2017:97). The FMF protests therefore highlighted the need for broader transformation as young black students, especially marginalised bodies such as black women and queer students, are faced with navigating the austere legacy of racism and structural inequality established by the colonial and Apartheid regime. The naked

protest came after the Wits university management decided to open the university with maximum, armed security and police following ongoing nationwide FMF protests across South African universities (Ndlovu, 2017:69).

Issues around continuing protests and returning to class created further divisions within the FMF movement and sparked debates around leadership which raised concerns around male dominance and patriarchal attitudes not only in the movement but also in practices within the university space (Malabela, 2016:141). While female protesters were not passive victims of patriarchal attitudes and practices, Malabela (2016:141) argues that they constantly had to reclaim their roles and statuses in the movement as they were undermined by male leaders. This is also highlighted by Ndlovu's (2017:70) argument that female protesters were actively involved in the struggle as well as behind the scenes which was often invisible to the public as it did not make news headlines in comparison to male leaders. When a leading female FMF activist and incoming SRC president at the time, Nompandolo Mkhathshwa, was on the cover of South Africa's *Destiny Magazine*, this was mainly viewed with scepticism by FMF activists which led to Mkhathshwa's downfall and her subsequent abandonment of the FMF movement (Malabela, 2016:143). According to Malabela (2016:143), Mkhathshwa was accused of using the FMF movement to enhance her political standing in the ANC (African National Congress) at national level which underscored the politics of patriarchy within the FMF movement. These allegations came after Mkhathshwa appeared on the cover of *Destiny Magazine* in an ANC doek as Malabela (2016:143) suggests that her leadership as a female undermined the central notion of male students as the leaders within the FMF movement.

According to Malabela's (2016:141) interview with a female FMF protester, it was important for the women to reclaim their positions within FMF as the female protesters claimed that the dominance of men and patriarchal attitudes in the movement was directly linked to patriarchal ideologies established in the student residences at the university. Ndlovu (2017:71) argues that the naked protest was therefore a manifestation of these issues and was used to reiterate the role and the power of women's bodies on the picket line, as well as the tireless work undertaken by women in movements that is often overlooked. Moreover, the naked protest highlighted an unresolved discussion around the freedom of women's bodies in South Africa and in Africa in general

(Ndlovu, 2017:75). This protest was unique as the female student protesters had access to resources and thus the power to use a different means of protest in line with conventional protest tactics, yet they chose to use a traditional form of protest which is largely controversial in urban spaces in South African public sphere. The protesters demonstrated how black women navigate a complex terrain where nakedness can be used to negotiate between the contemporary and precolonial worlds, and between power and subjection. The protest therefore raised important questions around how women's naked protesting bodies are perceived in the public sphere and why they are perceived in particular ways.

In order to examine the naked protesting body sensibly, it is thus important to explore how it has been thought about which requires what Lewis (2011:200) emphasises as identifying and questioning how black bodies have been historically imagined. The basis of this exploration means to understand how the black female body has been framed in precolonial African societies, and to acknowledge the intricate ways in which colonial ideologies that were fixated on the black African body have entrenched African patriarchal notions in urban, contemporary African societies. Since the body is a contextualised product of an intricate relationship between historical and ongoing systems of oppression such as colonialism, racism, capitalism, and patriarchy (O'Keefe, 2014:3), the naked body in protest therefore represents more than an emanation of desperation as it conveys underlying symbolic meanings that are unique to Africa. As Tamale (2017:42) notes, we cannot ignore aspects of cultural ideology that are widely shared among Africans, such as the significant role of black mothers and senior women in African communities, just as we cannot overlook the common historical legacies established in cultures within Africa by forces such as colonialism, imperialism, and globalisation. The neglect of existing scholarship to unpack this history in relation to the use of naked protests therefore reinforces the gaps in reading black women's naked bodies around a voyeuristic gaze which fails to understand the broader significance and power of this protest strategy within in the relevant society.

I used the phrases 'naked', 'protest', and 'Africa' to obtain literature as the focus of this thesis is particularly interested in the black female body in protest. Three cases of naked protests in Africa were selected as the focus of this study: the 1990 naked protest in Dobsonville Soweto, South Africa, the 2002 naked peace protest in Liberia, and the 2002 anti-oil naked protest in Nigeria.

These cases were selected based on the historic significance and successful achievements of the naked protests at the time when these African societies were experiencing large-scale violence and civil strife. This thesis will review these cases to provide a lens into the unique ways in which naked protests are perceived in South Africa, Liberia, and Nigeria by women and men. However, it does not intend to speak on behalf of the protesting women nor impose meanings on their bodies. A historical trajectory and review of naked protests in an African context will illustrate the ways in which black women have traditionally employed this form of protest and the ways in which it was revered in precolonial African societies in order to understand why it is regarded as a sacred and valuable protest strategy in the postcolonial. This review challenges Western interpretations and meanings imposed on naked protests that largely constructs it around a demoralising tone. In this context, a review is important to understand why young black women in South Africa continue to rely on this form of protest since they are exposed to a vast array of resources to voice their grievances and to use other conventional forms of protest. This is unique in its own right and deserves deeper exploration in order to understand the significance of naked protests in African societies and why it is perceived with apprehension.

The following section will outline the different ways in which social protests can be conceptualised as a means of locating naked protests and the forces that construct it as an empowering strategy. This overview is important to understand how naked protests are located on the periphery of formal, conventional, orderly political action and is therefore already a defiant form of politics that destabilises the patriarchal, masculine public sphere in many contemporary African societies. An understanding of naked protests as a form of politics that transcends the established political field exemplifies how the naked body in protest can be read beyond cultural depictions associated with certain African women, voyeurism, and sexualisation as it represents a powerful symbol of defiance. The point is to illustrate how naked protests do not draw on the tactics and symbols employed in conventional social protests which complicatedly undermines these norms as well as the hegemonic patriarchal public sphere where naked protests are performed. This will provide further evidence as to the ways in which naked protests triggers apprehensions as it challenges and disrupt prescribed patriarchal mores that prescribes when and how women can engage in protest politics.

4.3 Conceptualising social protests

Social protest is described as repertoires of contention which manifests from struggle within a given socio-political context, is consciously performed in a specific process, and susceptible to ongoing change (Hanna et al, 2016:218). It is noted that Hanna et al (2016:220) specifies that the repertoires are always contextual as some performances or acts may constitute protest in one context but not in another. Protests are therefore perceived as performative events that are exacerbated by the media as it is characterised by public performances that are used to influence public opinion and decision-making (Hanna et al, 2016:219). To perform is therefore seen as inducing specific outcomes by triggering emotions which constructs it as an important means for transformation. The concept of performance is often associated with protest events since it involves repertoires to convey particular ideas. In the context of protest, performance is characterised as a cultural behaviour comprised of signs, images, identities, as well as bodies (Juris, 2015:231). Protest in African societies is predominantly portrayed in relation to the association between political protest and culture in terms of the ways in which meanings are conveyed through the body (Juris, 2015:228). Culture is described as a system of meanings rooted in public symbols rather than notions that take place in the mind (Juris, 2015:229).

This viewpoint allows us to understand cultural meanings as texts as opposed to rationalising how ideas influence action. The role of performance is key to this relationship as it not only reveals how meanings are produced but it also reconciles the divide between mind/body evident in social movement scholarship. Sasson-Levy and Rapoport (2003:381) argue that the historical neglect of the body in social movement theory is due to the Western mind-body dualism that categorises human experience into two separate spheres; namely cognitive and embodied dimensions. This dualism is further problematised as it attributes knowledge and rationality with masculinity while the body and emotion are often associated with femininity. Feminist scholars have critiqued this divide and outlined the importance of analysing the body as not only a signifier of meaning but importantly as a site of political knowledge and cultural contest (Sasson-Levy & Rapoport, 2003:381). While performance is central to protest repertoires, it remains a marginal focus in social movement literature.

Performative protest has been arguably rejuvenated amongst the youth in South Africa since the 2015 #MustFall student protests that escalated across South African public universities. The tactics of the 2015-16 student mobilisations involved disrupting spaces through different forms of what Kasembeli (2019:3) refers to as “body activism” that soon after moved to online spaces. This form of body activism can be linked to the emergence of the Fallist movement which promoted decolonial discourses, incited political activism, and importantly, artistic engagement amongst young people in South Africa (Shefer, 2019:420). Part of this discourse is the call to challenge exploitative colonial methodologies in higher education and to incorporate participatory and creative methodologies to counter the divide between scholarship, art, and activism (Shefer, 2019:421). Decolonial activism in contemporary South Africa is therefore represented in the increase use of the body, performance, and art as activism and is often evident in feminist and queer spaces. A prominent example of performative activism in the contemporary is the Trans Collective, also known as the trans-feminist collective, that emerged during the 2015 #RhodesMustFall movement at the University of Cape Town.

According to Shefer (2019:424), The Trans Collective performed a form of guerrilla theatre when they interrupted the opening of an art exhibition that took place at UCT to commemorate the falling of the Rhodes Statue. Guerrilla theatre is a form of performative protest used to shock and raise awareness about a particular social concern (Juris, 2015:238). Protest tactics within this category blurs the divide between performer and spectator as performances are often interactive which provides a platform to develop new cultural-political understandings of the specific concern (Juris,2015:239). The protest by the Trans Collective involved activists using their partially dressed and naked bodies to physically block the entrance to the exhibition as well as using red paint to inscribe text on their bodies and the exhibition photographs (Shefer, 2019:424). The protest represented the discrimination and violence against queer and feminist bodies and ultimately the erasure and marginalisation of their contributions to the student movement and its success. In this context, naked protests can be viewed as a form of performative protest as protesters employ their bodies as a repertoire to convey certain messages and as a tool for transformation.

For the focus of this thesis however, I argue that naked protests can be described as spectacles as it highlights and challenges dominant notions of African womanhood that is typically aligned to ideals of nationhood reinforced by hegemonic patriarchal powers. Strauss (2014:482) defines spectacles as sites where understandings of power, nationhood, and gendered embodiment are publicly challenged. Spectacles therefore provide a significant foundation for the beliefs, narratives, and symbols that are important to people's sense of personhood and gender (Strauss, 2014:483). This understanding enables naked protests to be regarded as a legitimate form of protest as naked protests are often relegated to the margins of formal protest politics since it is still a largely contested form of protest despite its prevalent use in precolonial African societies which will be demonstrated in the following chapter. Reimagining naked protests as spectacles points to Hassim and Gouws' (1998:56) argument that a broader definition of politics that seeks to explore the relationship between democratic processes and popular mobilisation is essential to highlight women as legitimate political agents.

4.3.1 Reimagining protest politics

Naked protests are located on the periphery of organised protest especially in African societies and can therefore be characterised as what Lewis (2009:127) refers to as 'public spectacles'. According to Lewis (2009:127), public spectacles often include sensationalised noteworthy incidents which represent a form of politics that is situated on the margins of the formal political sphere. Somatic meanings, symbols, as well as visuality are central to the power of public spectacles as it draws on notions around social order and a robust body politic to subvert the dominant status quo (Lewis, 2009:128). The 2008 miniskirt attacks at the Noordhoek taxi rank in Johannesburg is a clear illustration of a public spectacle in the South African context as a 25-year old black woman was 'disciplined' through various forms of abuse by onlookers and taxi drivers for wearing a mini skirt. This incident made news headlines as the story was followed by a series of similar experiences from other South African women at taxi ranks which indicated a long history of black women as targets of sexual harassment and verbal abuse by men and taxi drivers for their choice of dress (Lewis, 2009:130). In contrast to other social protests, the subversive power of public spectacle is largely determined by an understanding of public space where the incident occurs. The public space in South Africa is regarded as a central site of masculine entitlement and violence where

black women's bodies are regulated and 'disciplined' for deviating from the patriarchal social order established in the public sphere (Lewis, 2009:130).

Women's bodies that are not regulated are often viewed as the main reason for the social and economic ills in many postcolonial African contexts as their presence in the public sphere is viewed as tainting progress and development. For instance, Ghanaian market women in urban areas have been framed as immoral and the source of Ghana's economic crisis (Lewis, 2009:132). Similarly, in Nigeria, women traders were accused of causing the economic crisis during the eighties and were heavily disciplined through various state mechanisms on the basis of a modernising mission (Lewis, 2009:132). Women in Zimbabwe were also a target of post-independence policies of urban population control implemented by the government (Lewis, 2009:132). Understanding how women's bodies have been at the centre of ideals around a healthy body politic in many postcolonial African societies provides a broad context for the ways in which naked protests should be read as a powerful subversive act of resistance against the patriarchal status quo that 'disciplines' deviance. Spectacles that are used to subvert authority have been increasingly employed in contemporary South Africa especially by marginalised groups such as black women. The 2008 protests organised by the group People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) against the Noordhoek taxi drivers in Johannesburg, South Africa provides an illustrative case of spectacle opposing power.

The protest saw hundreds of women march to the taxi ranks deliberately dressed in miniskirts as an act of solidarity and to assert their rights to public spaces as well as their rights over their own bodies (Lewis, 2009:135). Since public spectacles are considered beyond formal orderly marches where movements, sounds, and voice serve specific purposes in opposing authority, it is important to understand how spectacles as a form of resistance deviates from conventional political action around women's rights. This entails reflecting on how women's bodies occupy spaces in comparatively disorganised and spontaneous ways in performing subversive public spectacles. The power of public spectacle as a defiant protest is emphasised through the performance of "other" ways of being personified which circumvents the dominant social order established by patriarchal scripts and conventional modes of orderly protest encouraged by patriarchal regimes (Lewis, 2009:136). Naked protests therefore defy these conventions as the exposed female body

in the public sphere embodies nonconformity to the social norms of public space. Subversive public spectacles such as naked protests emphasise body politics which entails how power is negotiated through the body (Schlyter & Chipeta, 2009:12). Body politics also reveals how state policies prevent or facilitate space for women to assert their agency, as well as how women's bodies are constructed through political discourse (Schlyter & Chipeta, 2009:12).

Reimagining social protest therefore entails understanding the dominant social order of a society, public space, its conventional modes of political action, and body politics. These factors contribute to the experience women have of their bodies which is fundamental to the ways in which they construct their citizenship (Schlyter & Chipeta, 2009:12). Black women in many African societies engaged in this form of peripheral politics in the precolonial as well as colonial eras to challenge authoritative regimes and men in the community. However, the subversive power of naked protest is predominantly analysed in relation to cultural beliefs that frame senior women's bodies with symbolic cultural powers, consequently limiting the power of naked protests to body politics. While this is certainly empowering, it does not demonstrate how the form of protest itself is significant and powerful when read beyond the types of bodies that are involved. It is therefore important to explore naked protests as subversive politics in relation to conventional protest politics, hegemonic social and cultural scripts, how public space is constructed, in addition to body politics in order to understand the ways in which naked protests represent a powerful form of protest that challenges the dominant social order. However, black women are still marginalised in the political public sphere which requires a deeper examination of some of the main contestations around protest activism that would illuminate why certain forms of tactics are regarded as protest actions as opposed to others.

4.3.2 The politics around women's activism

While there is a wealth of literature that explores popular social movements and protest action that have taken place in Africa, social movements and protest action that is led and organised by black women is often neglected in existing literature. This is evident in the scant literature on naked protests in South Africa which has taken place in slum areas over housing concerns (Sutton, 2007:144) as well as most recently in the higher education sector over fees and the mandatory implementation of a decolonial praxis in teaching (Shefer, 2019:424). It is argued that this gap can

be attributed to issues such as the complexity around the concept of 'civil society' that excludes women as political agents and neglects the systematic impediments that prevent women from participating in the public sphere. Civil society is defined as an intermediary realm between the private sphere and the state where organisations formed voluntarily by members of society occupy freely in relation to the state in order to protect their interests (Hassim & Gouws, 1998:55). This conception is predicated on the construction of a public and private sphere which does not acknowledge how the gendered constraints of women's unequal position within the household (private) determines the limitations of their participation in the public sphere. Women's participation as political agents are therefore curtailed as their realm of political activity is not viewed as meaningful. Despite the constraints and complexities around women's role in political organisations, women have historically and continued to advance transformation by forming socio-political movements and staging various forms of protest to resist oppression (Britton, 2006:145).

However, contemporary women's groups are faced with the added challenge of navigating between collaborating with or working against the democratic government in order to monitor and ensure that progress is being made (Britton, 2006:150). The declining socio-economic conditions for the majority of black African women evidenced by economic adversities, persistent gender-based violence, and patriarchal control, has led to the establishment of several civil society initiatives. Britton (2006:151) argues that the formation of grassroots organisations and coalitions have become the main contact representatives for African states as these groups provide various social and legal services, as well as shelter and intervention services that aim to protect women and the wellbeing of the broader community. Contemporary women's movements have moved towards the formation of groups that focus on concerns such as violence against women, education, and poverty, as opposed to national coalitions that were operational during the early 1990s across Africa. Conflicts around what concerns to raise and how it should be articulated to raise social awareness are one of the main issues that manifests 'behind the scenes' in protest movements. The internet and social media, which now provides an alternative platform to express political views, is an added strain to these debates as it requires constant reworking of the conceptualisation of protest and new forms of activism.

In the context of naked protests, women encounter various challenges to re-appropriate and reclaim the volatile symbolic and material domain where naked female bodies typically occupy in the contemporary era (Sutton, 2007:141). According to Sutton (2007:141), this can be attributed to the expressive possibilities of naked protests that is often seen as destabilising and threatening to the dominant social system. This has much to do with the dominant norms in most contemporary societies which Sutton (2007:144) argues endorses the wearing of clothing in public spaces. Naked protests provide a platform for women to highlight the implicit boundaries of the social system and in public space. The politics around this form of activism is therefore centred on the possibilities that naked protests affords women to disrupt and undermine the material and symbolic terrain which Sutton (2007:141) refers to in which the protest takes place. This terrain is argued to be volatile as it represents the tension between defiance and risk in terms of the ways in which naked protests can be interpreted by the public. Nakedness conveys symbolic and cultural gendered connotations that are rooted in the history of various cultures and societies and is further entangled in systems of oppression such as ideologies of colonialism, racism, and sexism amongst others (Sutton, 2007:142).

One of the main challenges in the contemporary is therefore the colonial implications of interpreting naked protests which affects its ability to express a broader political message as protesting women have to contend with Western appropriations and hegemonic constructions of naked women's bodies. Because of the racialised and gendered historical meanings attached to nakedness, there is always the risk of bystanders imposing meanings on protesters' nakedness and their bodies in the contemporary and misunderstanding the intended message behind naked protests (Sutton, 2007:145). This points to the politics of black women's activism in naked protests which has the power to reinforce these dominant discourses or to undermine the hegemonic patriarchal script. However, Sutton (2007:145) argues that naked protests are especially powerful in cultures where female nakedness represents symbolic meanings detached from the titillation of Western media. In this sense, naked protests by women in African societies where undress was often drawn on as a traditional form of protest and to maintain social order has the power to undermine dominant patriarchal scripts. The following chapter will provide an outline of the ways in which black women in different African societies and contexts have engaged in peripheral,

subversive politics which will underline how naked protests have triggered apprehension as it challenges the dominant social order in the face of violent, patriarchal, masculine public spaces.

5 CHAPTER 2: A review of naked protests in Africa

5.1 Women in precolonial and colonial societies

African women have occupied significant roles in their respective societies and were actively involved in naked protests during the precolonial era as well as in anti-colonial protests to protect their interests (see e.g. Abonga et al, 2019; Chuku, 2009; Johnson, 1982; Ogbomo & Ogbomo, 1993; van Allen, 1972). Women have historically engaged in symbolic protests as indirect ways to challenge the regime which transformed the landscape and nature of politics, as well as the content of public discourse (Hassim & Gouws, 1998:57). Naked bodies are described as an ancient form of protest (Abonga et al, 2019:2) yet it has remained marginal to protest scholarship that explores how African women have been involved in alternative subversive protest politics against authoritarian and violent regimes. South-eastern and western Nigeria is a prominent example of how black women's movements and symbolic activism, dating back to precolonial times, were used to express their grievances towards men (Chuku, 2009; Johnson, 1982; Ogbomo & Ogbomo, 1993; van Allen, 1972).

For instance, According to Chuku (2009:82), precolonial Igbo society was characterised by dual-sex politics which comprised of hierarchical relationships largely determined by age, marital status, and experience. Respect and power were therefore earned based on individuals' leadership qualities, wisdom, and moral probity amongst other gallant attributes, which meant that power was diffuse as these traits were not ascribed to one gender. Women's organisations were a form of parallel structure of authority to that of men and were used to exercise direct political power on issues that affected women, and which posed a threat to the wellbeing of the society (Chuku, 2009:84). Women acquired political power and influence through an age-grade system, prevalent in many Nigerian ethnic tribes and societies, which bestowed special social duties to women as they advanced in age where the most senior women were involved in pertinent issues that affected the state (Chuku, 2009:86).

All men and women in their respective age-grade classes were assigned various roles and responsibilities and those who did not abide by these social rules were disciplined. Women were often responsible for this by staging a boycott to force the men to police themselves or face the

consequences of women “sitting” on them (van Allen, 1972:170). To sit on a man was essentially to “make war” on men who have violated the laws of the society which involved several women assembling at his home dressed as men embarking on war, wearing only loincloths, their heads wrapped in ferns, carrying sticks with palm fronds in their hands, and their faces smeared with ashes or charcoal (van Allen, 1972:174). The women would dance and sing insulting songs which questioned his manhood, and which expressed women’s grievances against him, and would even go as far as demolishing his hut and roughing him up (van Allen, 1972:170).

Ogbomo and Ogbomo (1993:435) argue that sitting on a man was a legitimate traditional sanction to administer justice to those men who have violated customary law with regard to women. Women relied on their significant social and economic status in implementing strikes and boycotts to confront men as a group. Their protests were therefore always aimed at temporarily disrupting the economic and social activities in the village which forced the men to address women’s grievances as they played a vital role in the economy and the overall welfare of the society (Ogbomo & Ogbomo, 1993:436). In the North-western part of Nigeria, the precolonial Iyede women’s council would also threaten to strip naked in front of anyone who caused a predicament which endangered the welfare of the community, or any persons they considered to be responsible for disregarding their objectives (Ogbomo & Ogbomo, 1993:436). Women’s collective voice and their status in precolonial Nigerian societies could not be ignored by the men.

However, scholars (see e.g. Bernhardt, [2010](#); Chuku, 2009; Johnson, 1982; Ogbomo & Ogbomo, 1993; van Allen, 1972) have argued that women’s status in both Igbo and Yoruba society diminished and became near invisible with the advent of British colonisation. The effects of colonialism ultimately eroded Igbo culture and religion which was particularly detrimental to women as it undermined their political and religious power through the enactment of Western conceptions of the state, gender roles, and the family (Chuku, 2009:88). These conceptions were discriminatory towards women as it was centred on patriarchal notions, which favoured male institutions and authorities, that framed women’s contributions in the public sphere as insignificant. Colonial establishments and innovations therefore bestowed Igbo men with increased power and authority to dominate the political sphere as well as the local economy. The establishment of Native Courts under colonial rule were administered by British district officers

and selected Igbo men who served as warrant chiefs (Chuku, 2009:88). Native men took full advantage of the colonial system as they infiltrated and regulated previously female dominated economic spheres that pushed women to the informal sector of the colonial economy.

Warrant chiefs, who were essentially agents of the British, became increasingly corrupt, oppressive, and violated traditions as they were able to get away with it since their version would be believed by the British (van Allen, 1972:172). Colonial powers predicated on patriarchal values therefore entrenched African patriarchy which created an unequal power shift between native men and women that still exists in many post-independent African societies. South-western Nigerian women perceived this as a threat to their interests and used their networks in the market to organise women to protect their rights and interests through traditional and Western protest actions (Johnson, 1982:138). Similarly, to women in Yoruba society, Igbo women used various forms of protest such as sit-ins, boycotts, marches, and petitions against the colonial government and their Igbo agents as a response to the subjugation of their position in the economic, political, religious, and social spheres during the colonial period (Chuku, 2009:89). Most notable was the 1929 mass protest of over ten thousand naked and half naked women who protested against colonial policies and demanded the arrest of warrant chief of Oloko as well as a written assurance that women would not be taxed (Bernhardt, [2010](#)).

The women staged a sit-in outside the district office for several days until the British eventually responded to the women's grievances by ordering the warrant chief to provide the women with a written assurance that they would not be taxed (van Allen, 1972:173). This victory resulted in increased protests by women's networks across two provinces and in 16 Native Court areas to terminate their warrant chiefs and the Native Administration as a whole (Bernhardt, [2010](#); van Allen, 1972:174). Women also took matters into their own hands by sitting on warrant chiefs, burning Native Court buildings, and releasing prisoners from jail in some instances (van Allen, 1972:174). British officers ordered police and soldiers to control the situation through the use of violence which saw more than 50 women killed as well as 50 women injured from police shooting on two occasions, while no Igbo or British men experienced any fatalities (van Allen, 1972:174). The British regarded the women as disorderly mobs and savages, and their rebellion as a series of

nonsensical riots, as they failed to recognise the women's grassroots leadership and traditional forms of subversive politics and power.

While the role of women in precolonial Nigerian societies have been largely discounted by Western scholars since the advent of British colonisation, Chuku (2009:81) notes how the growing literature around women in precolonial Africa often romanticises African women's political history. For instance, Ogbomo and Ogbomo (1993:432) points to the fact that women were undeniably victims of male oppression in precolonial Iyede, particularly in the centralisation of political authority, since this was a patriarchal society much like the Igbo society in South-eastern Nigeria. Female organisation implicitly stressed marital status in precolonial society as women's political status was predominantly defined in relation to their kinship relationships as wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and in-laws to men (Chuku, 2009:83). Certain women were therefore afforded powerful roles and political influence to act as the spokesperson of the women in clan councils through their relationships as wives or mothers to royal and influential men in the village. According to Ogbomo and Ogbomo (1993:435), divorced women in Iyede society had no say in matters concerning the running of society as it was considered a curse to be divorced. The title of wives as well as mothers therefore enhanced women's status and influence in the precolonial political realm.

According to Ogbomo and Ogbomo (1993:434), wifehood and motherhood were emphasised as women's foremost responsibility in Nigerian society as even though women maintained a powerful weapon over men in terms of regulating food supply and wealth, they directed their trade towards the feeding and survival of the family. On the other hand, the men used their harvests for the intention of acquiring prestige and advancing their title. The only exception was the Omu – recognised as the mother of the society – as Chuku (2009:84) claims that the Omu maintained a significant political position in Igbo society as she did not obtain her status from a kinship relationship to any man but rather from her character and ability which was measured based on wealth. The Omu's decisions impacted men in the community despite the fact that she controlled female affairs and was thus seen as a vital force in political matters. In addition to this political status, Chuku (2009:85) notes that the Omu also possessed mystical powers buttressed by frequent consultation with powerful diviners which allowed them to serve as ritual specialists for the

stability and peace of the society. However, Chuku (2009:86) argues that women who maintained religious powers in addition to their significant social and political status in precolonial society were viewed as “males” who therefore benefited from privileges that were inaccessible to women who were not part of the title societies.

These privileges included entrance into restricted men’s societies, splitting and sharing a kolanut – a status symbol preserved for men, and immunity against masked spirits (Chuku, 2009:87). The male status was used as a benchmark to measure women’s power and influence in society which was not accessible to all women on the basis of their kinship relationships or wealth. While it is clear that women in precolonial Igbo, Yoruba, and Iyede societies possessed considerable political power and status, it provides a clear illustration of the ways in which African patriarchal and gender ideologies centred around social responsibilities such as wifhood and motherhood were used to regulate precolonial Nigerian societies. These ideologies cannot be discounted as it presented certain restrictions on women’s movements that prevented them from taking part in protest demonstrations. For instance, Iyede women who experienced the loss of a husband in precolonial society were not only faced with the challenge of relegating to a lower status of widowhood, they were also required to observe particular taboos such as limiting their movement beyond the home (Ogbomo & Ogbomo, 1993:439). This inherently excluded a group of women from participating in village meetings or assemblies as well as in women’s organisations to raise pertinent issues.

Women’s organisations, characterised by the age-grade system and marital status, were also used to regulate women’s activities and to ensure their conformity with social norms which were largely based on a patriarchal framework (Chuku, 2009:86). Cultural norms in post-independent Nigerian society have been continuously discerned through masculine perceptions that strengthened patriarchal notions about women’s roles as mothers or wives. Moreover, native men have also benefited from the post-colonial state which perpetuates a gendered hierarchy that favours men and marginalises women (Chuku, 2009:103). This patriarchal framework became a significant basis for organising women in post-colonial Nigeria as Chuku (2009:102) argues that precarious economic conditions compelled women to mobilise themselves around issues of economic survival as opposed to political participation. In this context, traditional forms of protest such as the threat

of stripping naked and sitting on a man were powerful tactics that threatened to undermine the patriarchal foundation of society in both eras since women's bodies were largely regarded as sacred and could not be exposed to foreign men. While traditional forms of protest were increasingly relegated to the margins with the move towards modernisation and the adaptation to Western standards, these tactics continue to be employed by black women in post-independent African societies. Peripheral politics such as naked protests employed by black women are even more powerful in these contexts as it signifies a deliberate resistance to Western ideals that are complicatedly interconnected in traditional and cultural values in contemporary societies such as South Africa.

According to Oyewumi (2016:211), these shifts in cultural norms is largely a consequence of colonialism and the dominance of the West which continues to threaten the cultural values and epistemes around women's roles as mothers in postcolonial African societies. For instance, Oyewumi (2016:211) argues that this is evident in the negative transformation in the construction of motherhood in postcolonial Yoruba society which has been diminished to a gender category, a status that was non-existent in traditional precolonial Yoruba, in terms of Western feminist notions of motherhood. Western feminists' accounts of motherhood are based on a gender category as 'mother' is essentially depicted as 'woman', a status that is typically regarded as oppressed and subordinated by men (Oyewumi, 2016:214). Oyewumi (2016:214) argues that this model is based on a patriarchal lens that associates subordination with motherhood as it cannot view motherhood beyond powerlessness associated with the status of women. This is a prevalent construction of motherhood in the postcolonial as the West exemplifies the paradigm of liberated women due to the colonality of power and the consequential disparate power relationships between Africa and the West (Oyewumi, 2016:214). In view of this paradigm, Oyewumi (2016:214) argues that Africa as a continent is constantly depicted as the epitome of suffering, trauma, and the victimisation of women. What is even more concerning is that African academics conduct research on Africa based on "donor-driven research" determined by these narratives (Oyewumi, 2016:2014) which leaves no room to reframe the discourse on African cultures, women, and the values of motherhood. Oyewumi (2016:215) argues that the insufficient feminist research in Africa about endogenous conceptualisations of motherhood can be attributed to African scholars relying on funds from international donors that largely prescribes concepts from Western feminist research. Instead,

Oyewumi (2016:218) points to the need for African scholars to acknowledge their traditions and to reflect on these African realities in research on Africa.

These issues around African cultural epistemes on motherhood as a tool for social organising requires a critical analysis from an African perspective rather than through a Western feminist lens. African constructions of motherhood highlight a distinct association with leadership illustrated in the domain of grassroots activism (Oyewumi, 2016:216). In this context, motherhood maintains a constructive association with leadership as Oyewumi (2016:216) argues that Africans recognise that the essential role of mothers extend the confines of care-work and reproductive roles in the private sphere. Here motherhood demonstrates the normative values that supports ideas around the protection of the welfare of society as a whole and the advancement of peace, justice, and equality which further constructs motherhood as a symbol for humanising the state (Oyewumi, 2016:216). The identity and role of motherhood has therefore been an incentive to drive activism in African societies as it is viewed as a fundamental practice of leadership in many African cultures. Given the positive and empowering title of motherhood in many African cultures, Oyewumi (2016:217) illustrates how female politicians in Sierra Leone and Liberia drew on this title to garner votes which reinforced the relationship between motherhood and leadership.

The criticisms that the African conception of motherhood feeds into the dominant narrative of women as nurturers is rejected by Oyewumi (2016:218) as she argues that there is no issue with women serving since it represents the honourable standard of devoting oneself to the community for the benefit of the wellbeing of all citizens. These constructions of mothers as leaders and visionaries, as they protect the welfare of society for the advantage of future generations, is a stark divergence from the gendered constructions of motherhood that exists in nuclear Western families and conveyed by Western feminist scholars. However, Oyewumi (2016:218) cautions that we need to be cognisant of the reality of the world at present which is largely a Eurocentric universe where majority of African people do not have access to power. This means that despite the existence of African cultural epistemes around motherhood, this construction is mainly viewed through a Western lens in many postcolonial African societies. It points to the need to dismantle Westernised research as a model for any kind of transformation in an African context. The point of this overview is to provide a broader sense of the dominant social and cultural scripts, and the ways in which

women had to adapt to this to navigate public spaces through body politics in many precolonial and colonial African societies. The following cases will illustrate how naked protests organised based on the cultural resonance around motherhood in African societies point to the unique ways in which the spectacle of naked protests disrupt static ideas around protest politics in terms of who can be involved and how activism can be expressed.

5.2 Dobsonville, Soweto 1990, South Africa

On 12 July 1990, a group of mainly black women shack-dwellers disrobed to draw attention to the plight of Dobsonville residents' housing concerns, and to demand new homes. The women erected shacks between two new high-cost residential areas which was declared illegal by the Town Clerk, Tony Roux, who obtained a court order to evict the squatters and their shacks (Meintjes, 1994:1). The South African and municipal police arrived on the scene with a bulldozer and a casspir to demolish approximately 60 unsanctioned shacks on 12 July 1990 - the deadline for squatters to vacate their shacks. The squatters attempted to obtain a court interdict through the Soweto Civic Association (SCA) to counteract the razing of their shacks which was unsuccessful (Meintjes, 1994:1). This process was characterised as a public spectacle as the construction of the shacks occurred with pickets by squatters outside the town council offices to raise awareness around the predicament of the homeless in Dobsonville.

While Meintjes (1994:2) claims that it was the younger female shack-dwellers who stripped naked to deter the bulldozers from razing their homes, Diabate (2017:248) argues that archival footage shows numerous middle-aged women with exposed breasts. News articles in *The Sowetan*, the *Sunday Times*, as well as *The Business Day* have also framed the story around how black mothers and their destitute children were affected by the demolition. The protest gained widespread attention as Meintjes (1994:2) claims that images of the naked women made front page of *The Star* and appeared in various newspapers as well as national and international television news headlines. Lack of housing protests is not uncommon to South Africa however this protest was particularly notable as a result of the form that it took when the women blurred the divide between the public and private spheres, which patriarchal discourse thrives on, by exposing their most private selves in the public domain.

The naked protest emerged because of the 1950/60s policies under the Urban Areas Act that largely excluded women from owning land and access to housing (Meintjes, 1994:4). The Act was framed around a traditional and patriarchal system that provided access to housing solely to families that were characterised by a husband - as the household head - his wife, and children. This was particularly detrimental towards unmarried black women who were mostly head of households in disadvantaged regions in South Africa. Black women were therefore forced to live in backyard shacks and to remain tenants and were subjected to the obscure zone of precariousness, insecurity and illegality. When housing eventually became available, priority was given to those at the top of the waiting list and notoriously to those who paid (Meintjes, 1994:6). Several participants also revealed the underlying sexual power that councillors maintained as they would provide housing to women in exchange for sexual favours (Meintjes, 1994:6). Women's use of their bodies to convey their homelessness can also be seen as a public reclamation of their bodies that intricately played on the sexual objectification of women in sexual contracts to obtain houses. One of the male informants, Japhta Lekgetho, claimed that women acted as part of the plan as they are more likely to be listened to than men (Meintjes, 1994:9). However, it can be argued that the women were listened to as their political engagement demonstrated through this public spectacle was inimical to the masculine, patriarchal, social structure of Soweto.

Male informants also claimed that the action was sparked by men as they believed that results would not transpire without their involvement (Meintjes, 1994:11). There were clear differences in understanding between informants as the men claimed that stripping naked did not achieve long-term results as the police soon returned to raid illegal shacks. For the women, the aim was to raise awareness around homelessness and their central role in the struggle for housing as women rebuilt the shacks each time it was removed by the police which was already overlooked by male informants (Meintjes, 1994:11). While men were involved in negotiations and providing support, it was the women who devised the initial strategies of invading open land. The women eventually settled on plots by 1992 and duly felt that their struggles were successful. This case provides an overview of the ways in which women's roles in the society and in movement struggles are often invisibilized by male members and by authorities. The protest was therefore significant as the cultural resonance around motherhood which is often framed within gendered constraints was used to buttress the power of the naked protest and to assert the women's presence in society. This was

similar to the case of Liberian mothers who relied on the antithesis of their social and biological role as mothers and the threat of stripping in the public sphere as a shock tactic to obtain their demands. In both cases, the antithesis of mothers and their naked bodies exposed to men in the public sphere was essential to its power as it threatened and disrupted the patriarchal social order which deemed patriarchy untenable.

5.3 The 2002 Liberian women's peace protest

In the documentary film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (2008), Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee associates the start of Liberia's fourteen-year civil war with warlord Charles Taylor's bloody rise to power on 24 December 1989. Taylor attacked Liberia's capital Monrovia with an army of two hundred soldiers to oust then President Samuel Doe (Prasch, 2015:192). Armed conflict ensued between Taylor's rebel group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and Doe's Liberian Army which led to the assassination of Doe and the eruption of a brutal civil war that displaced over half of Liberia's population by the time Taylor was declared president in 1991 (Prasch, 2015:192). Liberia was engulfed with chaos as these militant forces split into various ethnic factions and rival subgroups that attacked the land, vandalised, and raped women. Approximately 76% of Liberia's population was living in poverty and 52% of this fraction was living in extreme poverty as a result of the chaos of civil war (Prasch, 2015:192). Furthermore, sexual violence and rape was rife as internationally sanctioned peacekeeping forces were implicated in and even incited violent crimes against women in addition to Liberian rebel factions who were killing and raping women. It was under these dire conditions that Gbowee claimed that death seemed more promising than life as women were living in constant fear for their lives (*Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, 2008).

Monrovia was declared a state of emergency by April 2002 as violence between the rebel groups and Taylor had escalated and the anti-Taylor rebel factions obtained power in northern Liberia (Prasch, 2015:193). The ongoing violence between rebel groups and the abysmal living conditions in Liberia prompted Gbowee to organise women of the Church to pray for peace on a weekly basis, which quickly spread to include Muslim women in unison with Christian women praying for peace to end the violence (Prasch, 2015:193). The women went around visiting other places of gathering such as markets, churches, and mosques to raise awareness to other women about their movement

for peace (Prasch, 2015:193). Gbowee emphasised shared maternal concerns to urge women to participate in the peace protests as they were sceptical about how their involvement and role as women could influence the peace-building process (Prasch, 2015:193). Despite Taylor's ban on all public protests, more than two thousand women - dressed in all white - joined Gbowee on 14 April 2003 to occupy a soccer field situated in the centre of Monrovia along Taylor's motorcade route. This group of women in white became known as the Liberian Mass Action for Peace (LMAP) movement and used nonviolent means of protests to establish a peaceful future for their children (Prasch, 2015:188).

Women's participation in LMAP grew exponentially with each day and peaceful protests continued irrespective of the weather as the women prayed, chanted, and held placards in the name of peace. Gbowee and the LMAP protesters used their platform to highlight the lived experiences of the women and children of Liberia who were the most afflicted by the war as the media largely focused on imagery of the violence and interviews with Taylor and the rebel leaders (Prasch, 2015:194). The LMAP protests was therefore a performative act as the women used their bodily presence as protesting mothers to highlight the invisible side to the story surrounding the Liberian Civil War - the women and their starving children – the victims who are often overlooked in this narrative. After finally meeting with Taylor and the rebel leaders, Gbowee emphasised maternity as the impetus for their protests and identified herself and the women as 'custodians of society' and claimed that they have a moral duty as mothers to protect their land for their children's future (Prasch, 2015:194). Taylor soon after revoked his agreement after reaching a ceasefire deal with the rebel leaders which reinstated violence in Monrovia.

Frustrated with the continued state of violence, Gbowee and a group of two hundred LMAP women linked arms and staged a sit-in outside the room where the peace talks were taking place (Prasch, 2015:196). Security guards threatened to arrest Gbowee for obstructing justice as the protesters filled the halls and vowed to stay and detain the delegates until a peace agreement was reached. Gbowee retaliated by threatening to strip naked in front of the assembly which did not only highlight her tenacity and desperation, but it also validated the revered status that mothers held in Liberian society. The cultural significance of deliberate public nakedness affords Liberian women with a traditional power to curse the men who witnesses the exposed body of an elderly or married

woman by revoking the life they had given to men (Prasch, 2015:19196). From a non-cultural perspective, Gbowee's action was particularly symbolic as it appropriated and revealed the systemic sexual violence perpetrated against mothers and their children.

Maternal status established Gbowee and the rest of the LMAP women as legitimate political actors as Gbowee's threat resulted in the peace talks to be taken seriously. West African peacekeeping troops arrived in Liberia two weeks after Gbowee's threat and within the same month Taylor resigned and escaped to exile in Nigeria, the rebels left Monrovia, and a transitional government was formed with the appointment of a provisional president (Prasch, 2015:197). The war was over and Gbowee and the LMAP activists were acclaimed as peacemakers across Monrovia. The deliberate assertion of the maternal status of the LMAP women and the cultural symbolism associated with these bodies was the underlying factor that rendered the naked protest powerful and significant. The threat of the naked protest was a culmination of various spectacles that can be read as a powerful form of subversion of a violent, patriarchal, social context where women were largely invisible as evident in media narratives around the Liberian war. This is similar to the naked protest by the Niger Delta women as motherhood was central to their power and leverage. However, the Niger Delta women's role in the subsistence economy and in agriculture served as additional leverage to be taken seriously as women played a central role in economic activities in sustaining the livelihoods of the people and their families.

5.4 Nigeria's anti-oil protests

On 8 July 2002, hundreds of mothers and grandmothers occupied Chevron's Escravos oil facility in the Niger Delta to negotiate 26 demands with management in relation to oil operations that were negatively impacting on their livelihood (Turner & Brownhill, 2004:67). It was a 10-day siege where the women not only held the entire foreign staff of male workers captive, but they also stopped the production of half a million tons of oil a day. Women were central to the subsistence economy in the Niger Delta as they engaged in subsistence trade and production, controlled urban food sources and its transportation and sale, and were key actors in the informal sector markets (Turner & Brownhill, 2004:80). This sector largely accommodates low-waged workers as it maintains a political economy which contributes to life for all. However, Nigeria's subsistence way of life was on the brink of collapse due to the destructive operations of transnational oil

companies. The women claimed that international oil companies made it unsustainable for people or anything to survive in the areas surrounding the pipelines and oil wells as these companies destroyed the natural environment (Turner & Brownhill, 2004:80). This was largely achieved through the deterioration of farmlands and fishing waters as a result of oil from broken and old pipelines that oil corporations failed to maintain, as well as the eradication of fresh water sources and forests.

In a 2003 report, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) illustrated a clear link between the discovery of oil in Nigeria and the increase in the rate of poverty which escalated from 19 million destitute people in 1970 to 90 million in the year 2000 (Turner & Brownhill, 2004:69). The report therefore revealed that the billions of oil revenue generated by transnational oil companies in Nigeria did not translate to the standard of living and was instrumental in the degradation of living standards. Oil communities in the Delta were thus heavily polluted, exploited, and underdeveloped, culminating in a “death economy” from the operations of oil companies (Turner & Brownhill 2004:70). These extreme environmental conditions were fundamental as to why women were at the forefront of Nigeria’s oil wars and why they wanted Chevron to leave their community. According to Tyler (2013:223), the women were engaged in political solidarity grounded in the spirit of shared motherhood which is outlined by the concern over their children’s livelihood and future.

This is evident in their demands that Chevron employ their children and that no other tribes work on their land as the community was struggling to survive since they could no longer rely on subsistence trade (Turner & Brownhill, 2004:67). The children were their mother’s only chance of survival as without employment, they were unable to care for their elders. Women were unable to teach their children to farm as the once-rich subsistence economy of the Niger Delta was reduced to a polluted wasteland by international petroleum corporations (Turner & Brownhill, 2004:67). The main demand that Chevron must leave their land was however not approved by the company negotiators which led to the women to use their most powerful weapon – their naked bodies. They bared their breasts, and some exposed their vaginas to impose “social death” on the male workers which was commonly thought to result in actual death (Turner & Brownhill, 2004:67).

Naked protest was the only tactic available to the women in the Niger Delta region to highlight exploitation and to reclaim a position of power. It is argued that in many rural communities in Nigeria, public undress on the part of women - particularly elderly women - is associated with some mystical powers that imposes curses such as madness and death on the enemy (Turner & Brownhill, 2004:71). The curse of nakedness is also symbolic for its life and death implications for the naked women as they submit themselves in protest with the understanding that they could be raped or killed at any point. In this context, women's anti-oil naked protests in the Niger Delta was about literally putting their lives on the line as they were prepared to die by exposing themselves in front of hundreds of men. A naked protest by these women is therefore not undertaken lightly as it has deadly consequences on both men as well as the protesting women. Naked protests are a feared act particularly for men in the Niger Delta as Tyler (2013:221) claims that a male manager at the Escravos oil facility noted that women produced men from their wombs hence they (the men) cannot see elderly women naked as it is prohibited in society as well as by their culture.

Though these protests did not produce much material change in the Delta, it has gained significant international attention and support which inspired the worldwide proliferation of naked protests on all seven continents, even on the Antarctica, as well as law suits against oil corporations (Turner & Brownhill, 2004:71). Women were critical to the social and economic life in the Niger Delta, yet their role and presence in the Delta was discounted when oil operations ravaged the farmlands which was a source of women's livelihood. The protest was therefore significant as the roles of mothers in the private sphere, in terms of rearing and teaching children about subsistence which routinely goes unnoticed, was used to underscore the power of the naked protest. It enabled the women to reverse the roles as the male staff became victims of the protesting women who therefore challenged the male dominated industry of oil mining as they stopped the production of half a million tons of oil per day. Similarly, to the Dobsonville and Liberian case, the protesting women asserted their power through body politics in the naked protests which is already a subversive form of protest politics as it challenges and highlights the dominant patriarchal social order of postcolonial society. Beyond the cultural significance of maternal bodies, naked protests are therefore a powerful means of protest as it undermines the divide between the public and private spheres which regulates and invisibilizes women's roles in broader social, economic, and political

struggles. The following chapter will provide an outline of the different ways in which naked protests can be read and perceived by the public in contemporary African societies such as South Africa. This will demonstrate how naked protests point to the broader policing of women's bodies through notions around the public/private binary as well as through the hegemony of patriarchal values underlined in the social script especially in contemporary, urban, public spaces.

6 CHAPTER 3: Contentions around naked protests

6.1 The 2016 naked protest at Wits University, Johannesburg

Violence between students and armed police during the FMF protest at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) on 4 October 2016 was at a turbulent point when three black women students engaged in a naked protest in order to call for a ceasefire (Ndlovu, 2017:68). These women stood topless and formed a buffer zone between mostly male protesting students and armed police who fired rubber bullets, stun grenades, and teargas. Ndlovu (2017:68) highlights the irony of the inherent masculinity of protests, represented by the men at the forefront such as the police and male protesting students, as she argues that most casualties were incurred by women. These young women activists used their bodies as a form of protest and exposed their breasts which was mostly received with hostility by the police and the public - evident in the online backlash and criticisms by the public. According to Mitchell, de Lange, and Moletsane (2017:323), Irene de Vos, counsel for the #RURReferenceList women students, noted that the university leadership and the police largely discriminated against protesting female students as they received hard-handed treatment compared to the male FMF students in the same town.

This naked protest received widespread attention particularly on social media platforms where the focus shifted from pertinent issues behind the protest to body shaming the topless women (Ndlovu, 2017:68). Online comments were directed at their morals and the standard of beauty of the women's bodies that were put on the line. It is for this reason that Ndlovu (2017:69) argues that the picket line objectifies women's bodies and privileges masculinity which thereby eradicates both the visible and the invisible work of women in the FMF movement. Ndlovu (2017:69) contextualises the naked protest as a means to reassert the role of women's bodies on the frontline and a negotiating tool to defuse the violence that the masculine bodies failed to do. The naked protest was thus seen as necessary to mediate the anticipated violence on the day as students vowed to continue with the protest unless their demands were attended to. Ndlovu (2017:70) also argues that the women's work in the FMF movement was emotionally heavy as they constantly had to perform their vulnerabilities in order to appeal to the public. It is through this emotionally heavy work undertaken by women in the FMF movement that the female protesters came to understand the fungibility of black women's bodies (Ndlovu, 2017:70).

The women also experienced different types of violence in comparison to their male comrades such as verbal abuse by private security and policemen, as well as sexual harassment (Ndlovu, 2017:74). For instance, a separate demonstration during the FMF protests called “Black Women Subjected to Men with Big Guns” by a group of female students at Wits University has been instrumental in highlighting the assault and sexual harassment of black women on campus at the hands of police (Lujabe, [2016](#)). According to Lujabe ([2016](#)), Maria Wanyane, clinical social worker at Wits Gender Equity Office, claimed that the office received sexual harassment reports but that this information could not be disclosed. These claims were also evident in the petition calling for the resignation of Professor Adam Habib, Vice Chancellor of Wits University at the time, as the United Nations #HeforShe Impact Champion by Wits FMF Marginalised Bodies ([2016](#)). The petition stated that the deployment of heavily armed police and private security on campus essentially enabled the sexual violation of black women students. According to the Wits FMF Marginalised Bodies ([2016](#)), black female students raised these concerns with management in a petition signed by more than 500 students and academics which pointed to the private security guards’ “alleged” sexual harassment of students.

The direct confrontation by the naked protesters, and exposure of their breasts to policemen and private security, meant that black women had to physically put their bodies on the line as they called for a ceasefire while receiving comments about their bodies by policemen and the public. These women received harsh criticism from the public including from influential South African figures such as local comedian Skhumbuzo ‘Skhumba’ Hlophe who body-shamed the topless women on radio station Khaya FM (Ndlovu, 2017:75). Skhumba claimed that the protest was “distasteful” and compared Wits university to the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) as he claimed that the women’s bodies resembled “grannies” with big tummies, stretch marks, and sagging breasts (TshisaLive, [2016](#)). The women also received backlash from the Acting National Police Commissioner at the time, Khomotso Phahlane, who questioned their sense of morality and claimed that the women’s actions were unnecessary as they were taking the FMF protest overboard (Kubheka, [2016](#)).

The naked protest was particularly unique in this context as it sparked online debates that highlighted African patriarchal values conflictingly integrated with Victorian ideals enforced under British colonial rule that associated women's bodies with morality. While the public backlash did not eradicate the power of the naked protest to impede the violence, it consequently highlighted the ongoing policing of black women's bodies which was heavily regulated under the South African Apartheid regime. The naked protest was therefore significant as it resurfaced important conversations around the freedom of black women's bodies in urban public spaces which brought patriarchy to the forefront as women's bodies are increasingly policed by black men in the context of South Africa (see e.g., Vincent, 2008). It is important to explore how naked protests are perceived and interpreted in contemporary South Africa in order to understand how this form of protest powerfully confronts intrinsic patriarchal values permeated in public space.

6.2 Interpreting peripheral protest politics in contemporary public spaces

According to Coly (2010:654), the colonial visual history of black African womanhood and the preoccupation with the black female body has led to a postcolonial corporeal angst towards the African female body. There has since been a tendency in postcolonial narratives to therefore de-corporealize and de-sexualise discourses around black women's bodies. This entailed the move towards covering up the body in layers of clothing and refraining from the production of literary and artistic work that would draw attention to the African female body (Coly, 2010:654). It is however only in recent times that the modern generation of African scholars and artists have attempted to explore this precarious terrain in order to produce a counter narrative of African women's bodies and sexualities. This was often done using undress and nakedness of the black female body as a rhetorical element in postcolonial visual discourse (Coly, 2010:657). The deliberate act of undress has also gained significance at a grassroots level as black African women have historically used their naked bodies as a protest weapon to highlight atrocious environmental and economic conditions that is detrimental to their livelihood.

Postcolonial counter narratives of African womanhood, that has been historically burdened with colonial inscriptions, has largely relied on cultural sentiments around motherhood as a defining means to assert agency and grievances in protest movements. Mother-activism or 'motherism' is constructed on the basis of women's social and biological identity as mothers and has been used

in precolonial societies as a political approach in resistance movements to focus on issues that affected women and their role as mothers (Gasa, 2007; Miller, 2009; Sultana, 2013; Tamale, 2017). Motherism therefore plays an important role in providing a political platform to unite women within the given African society around a common cause. In this context, motherhood presents a cultural sense of both practice and icon as women's identities as mothers become valorised within their respective society's social and political realms (Lewis, 2001:6).

Coly (2010:656) suggests that the emphasis on motherhood in representations of the naked black female body is also used to undo any sexual undertones inscribed in images and photographs and is based on an 'epistemology of respectability' prevalent in black visual treatments of the female body. This construction also challenges dominant Western notions of femininity which Lewis (2001:6) argues is often used to equate African women's difference to alternative feminisms. Motherism and motherhood in the African context is thus read as synonymous with Western notions of feminism. An alternative concept of feminism is pertinent particularly for activists who reject the imposition of Western ideals on African women's lived experiences. Notwithstanding the significant opportunities and advantages that motherhood provides women in contexts where political opposition is highly regulated, Miller (2009:70) argues that activism centred around motherhood as a political strategy poses particular constraints for black women and relies on patriarchal cultural values to construct the black female body as powerful.

Sultana (2013:10) cautions that the very nature of naked protests is an unpredictable terrain as it is intended to be transformative but most often ends up focusing on women's bodies and resurfacing colonial ideologies about black bodies. This argument is also echoed by O'Keefe (2014:1) who claims that body protests should not be taken as a successful feminist strategy as it fundamentally re-appropriates patriarchal signifiers. O'Keefe (2014:3) notes that it is important to examine the positionality of bodies in activist movements that are intended to resist the very structures that it tends to re-appropriate. For instance, it is argued that mother-activism perpetuates patriarchal constructions of motherhood as the essence of women's worth. This point is buttressed in Lewis' (2005a:22) argument that motherhood is rooted in colonial and racist views that identifies African women's agency solely in relation to their biological and social role as mothers.

The Western construction of motherhood within African societies on the basis of subjection and service plays into the idea that women only perform their agency through and for others (Lewis, 2005a:22). This conceptualisation stems from male-centred nationalism prevalent in many African countries which exalts motherhood as personal and social duty. For instance, representation of the black female body is often associated with notions around the motherland and nationhood which frames women as a reference to national pride (Tamale, 2017:20). Women's bodies therefore become valuable for its alignment to national pride and its ability to shift the needs of society. This association does not deconstruct dominant ideologies surrounding the black female body as Lewis (2011:201) cautions that contemporary forms of othering are not always noticeably or overtly racist and that it is often played out as positive affirmations of the black body.

In a subsequent paper, Lewis (2005b:382) claims that women's identities and roles constructed around maternity represent the foundation of their radical alterity which is still conceptualised through images and signifiers provided by early anthropological bias. This bias is often illustrated in the tendency to emphasise the notion of culture in relation to significant protest movements coordinated and led by black women which further ingrains the dichotomy between the West and Africa. The preoccupation with cultural difference in recent intellectual politics and thought often seems radical to the extent that inherited concepts such as 'feminism' are discarded for a new language that attempts to convey particular pre-colonial or postcolonial agendas (Lewis, 2005b:383). This is most relevant to the concept of motherhood in research which is used to describe the 'feminist' work by non-Western women that dates back to the pre-colonial context in order to convey the agency of women in the respective society. However, Lewis (2005b:383) cautions the problematical, over-simplistic, idea that language can be deployed to promote an alternative worldview as this implies that words and their meanings can be carefully detached from a globalised cultural repertoire that has been validated by centuries of Western discursive dominance. To create a new language, or to reclaim pre-colonial modes of thought, understates the ways in which contemporary theories, terminology, and language use have ultimately become creolised (Lewis, 2005b:383). This means that our current understandings and conceptualisations of the pre-colonial and the postcolonial will constantly be involved in Western discursive practices.

While this interpretation of motherism as reinforcing gendered constraints around women's roles in society is a common concern in contemporary scholarship, I argue that motherism provides a powerful illustration of black female bodily praxis which has the potential to undermine the hegemonic Westernised association of humiliation and degradation with black female nudity (Coly, 2010; Prash, 2015). Rather than perpetuating patriarchal discourses of motherhood, mother-activism is a clear demonstration of naked protests as subversive politics as it confronts hegemonic notions around black women and mothers and their presence in public space. These bodies are also associated with cultural symbols that constructs the deliberate public undress of black women as a powerful threat towards men which was established before the advent of colonial rule in African societies. Oyewumi (2016:211) uses precolonial traditional Yoruba to highlight how the dominance of the West as the canon of knowledge has essentially imposed categories and meanings on women's bodies that did not exist in precolonial African societies. The argument is that the historical meanings associated with black women's naked bodies cannot be invalidated with Western colonial discourses that seek to impose notions of shame and humiliation on a traditional form of protest.

While the previous chapter provided a broad overview of some of the cultural mores of naked protests in an African context, the following section will delve into these ideologies as a means to illustrate the ways in which this discourse around naked protests has been put up against Western ideals of gender. It will demonstrate how black women's bodies cannot be read without considering the cultural symbolisms ingrained in historical practices where naked protests initially served as a traditional form of protest to confront men and keep them in line in the community and was later used against the colonial regime. Understanding this history will highlight the ways in which naked protests provide an empowering platform which threatens to subvert the dominant social order at the time and importantly, it enables women to literally expose their presence in the public sphere which is primarily a patriarchal domain reserved for the endeavours of men.

6.3 Symbolic cultural meanings of naked protests

An anthropological analysis and fieldwork conducted on women's bodies in Yoruba illustrates that women's genitals are symbolic in African rituals as it emits strong powers (Stevens, 2006:593). The human body plays a crucial role in rituals performed in African communities as it represents

a symbol of power that is projected through particular body parts, with the female genital being the strongest. The regulation of genital power is therefore seen as the underlying reason for dressing in some African cultures as it is argued that the exposure of women's genitals consequently releases this power, harms the vulnerable, and contaminates the sacred (Stevens, 2006:595). Stevens (2006:595) further argues that senior black women are well aware of their power and draw on the mere threat of using this to pressurise the perpetrator to take them seriously and give in to their demands. However, it is argued that few analysts at time understood the symbolism behind this performance as genital power and cursing is still a taboo topic in social discourse within African communities, and its cosmological, social, and 'magical' meaning is complex in itself (Stevens, 2006:596).

The naked bodies of women in many African communities and societies in the public sphere represent a symbolic form of protest as it is considered to embody three overlapping types of power such as: symbolic, biopower, and cosmological power that is used to challenge the state (Abonga et al, 2019:8). The first type includes biopower which refers to the body as a key site of control and thus an important tool for protest as the control of bodies is central to governance. This explains why public nakedness is viewed as a breakdown of self-discipline and ultimately as the state's failure to govern its people (Abonga et al, 2019:11). The second type is symbolic power which refers to the body as a gendered symbol that constructs the naked body as a powerful symbolic tool (Abonga et al, 2001:11). The naked bodies of black women, which disrupts these gendered scripts, invoke beliefs that are commonplace in African societies particularly amongst senior women. It is argued that naked protests are even more powerful when the protesting women are mothers and/or married as most African cultures believe that these bodies represent the highest form of curse (Tamale, 2017:7). This is primarily based on the cultural belief that the deliberate nakedness of elderly mothers or women in the public domain can revoke life since they are able to produce it (Abonga et al, 2019:12).

The 1992 naked protest by Kenyan mothers in Nairobi's Freedom Park is an illustrative example of what these women describe as a successful traditional method to curse the Moi government at the time (Tamale, 2017:9). Kenyan society also maintained cultural beliefs about the curse of naked women's bodies and that the act of stripping naked in front of men mature enough to be

their children symbolically retracts that life and ultimately declares social death upon them (Tamale, 2017:10). This leads to the final type of power; cosmological power which refers to the shared cultural knowledge of both profane and sacred forces in the universe that is inhabited by various forms of powers in the world (Abonga et al, 2019:12). Here naked protest attains its power from the cosmological idea of the naked curse. Cosmological power constructs naked protests as threatening as it enables the impact of the protest - through beliefs of affliction resulting from the curse – to perpetuate beyond collective action (Abonga et al, 2019:13). This form of power is useful to naked protests in contexts where violence is often used to stop protests. These forms of power intersect in naked protests to construct a powerful form of collective action that creates room for political voice in oppressive contexts.

The historical and social beliefs of the symbolic powers of black women's bodies therefore constructs naked protests led by black women as a powerful means of political action. This discourse enables black mothers and senior women to assert their agency in the public sphere where black women's bodies are increasingly scrutinised in contemporary African societies. Diduk (2004:39) argues that it is precisely the essentialist definition of women and their associations with maternity, spiritual powers, and custodians of life in all its forms that is central to their power. However, Abonga et al (2019:12) argues that the symbolic power of the naked curse is only effective with women who are past the reproductive age as it is believed that their bodies cannot attract sexual desire from bystanders. Diduk (2004:36) explains that naked protests do not threaten the fertility of the senior women which therefore enables them to participate in these actions. While these arguments do not suggest that senior women are not at risk, it points to the dangers of protesting naked and the vulnerabilities of young black women as they are at a greater risk of being sexualised by the voyeuristic male gaze and targeted as an act of vengeance in national conflict. This is highlighted in Sutton's (2007:140) argument that naked bodies of resistance can result in social outrage and violent punishment as the human body is transformed into sexual commodities.

The harsh public criticism against the protesting women in the 2016 naked protest at Wits University in South Africa exemplifies this point as the women's bodies were targets of sexual harassment by the male FMF comrades and sexualised by the public for its corporeal deviance. This highlights Sultana's (2013:10) and O'Keefe's (2014:1) point about the unpredictable terrain

of naked protests especially in contemporary urban spaces where women's bodies are exposed to public scrutiny that could have detrimental effects on their mental wellbeing and safety. Eileraas (2014:41) notes that the naked protesting bodies of women do not ever belong to them as the exposed skin and flesh subjects the body to the touch and gaze of others in the public sphere. This means that public interpretations of naked protests in contemporary societies are often imposed onto the women's bodies without fully understanding the intentions of the protest.

Naked bodies that do not conform to patriarchal ideals incite discomfort, disturb and anger bystanders, and therefore confronts the public with issues that are often disregarded such as the hegemony of patriarchal values permeated in the public sphere that polices black women's bodies and renders it invisible (Fanghanel, 2019:16). The power of naked black women's bodies in protest is further highlighted by the argument that rebellious bodies are sacred and set apart and is therefore both dangerous and fragile since the sacred cannot be touched (Fanghanel, 2019:11). The fear incited around rebellious bodies therefore compromises the risks involved in naked protests as these bodies are seen as dangerous and demoralising to the patriarchal social order. Fanghanel (2019:16) claims that naked protests can only truly become revolutionary when we consider the dynamic intersection between systems of power, politics of space, and the ethics of desire. This has been illustrated by the ways in which naked protests by black women subverts patriarchy and violent authoritative powers embedded in the ethics of desire and in public space.

The following chapter will explore how colonial ideologies and powers worked to entrench deep-seated patriarchal values that are still perpetuated in contemporary African societies through African patriarchy and cultural mores that are used to justify the policing of women's bodies. This overview will reinforce my argument that naked protests by black women provide a powerful form of activism as it is an explicit manifestation of defiance of the dominant social order in the relevant context. Moreover, black women's naked protests are especially significant as it draws on cultural symbols and traditional tactics, which was interpreted as a symbol of the primitive under colonial rule, to reassert their presence in contemporary society. Understanding the harsh history of colonialism and the many ways in which it operated to subjugate and disenfranchise black African peoples, where the black female body in Africa was located at the lowest rank in the social hierarchy, will illuminate how naked protests by black women in post-independent and

contemporary African societies is a symbolic representation of defiance against deep-seated institutional powers. It will further demonstrate how a traditional mode of protest and peripheral form of politics in the contemporary can pose a threat to the dominant social order which therefore triggers apprehension in bystanders.

6.4 Understanding dominant patriarchal mores:

6.4.1 The emergence of colonial ideologies

An examination of the history of colonial practices and ideologies, and its dehumanising effects on marginalised groups of people, is important to understand how the postcolonial naked protests raised grievances that are fundamentally linked to the harsh practices and ideologies established during colonialism and Apartheid. This background is also useful to understand why and how certain ideas about morality and negative comments about black women's bodies emerge. The point is to show how postcolonial naked protests subvert dominant norms and ideologies that were entrenched by colonial powers and authoritarian regimes in African societies. According to Loomba (2015:25), dominant ideologies of any given society represent and reflect the beliefs and values of the ruling social class. These beliefs gain currency and disseminate to persuade oppressed groups to ultimately reflect the interests of the ruling system. This is evident in the hegemony of patriarchal values and mores that came to dominate colonial South Africa, Nigeria, and authoritarian Liberia (see e.g. Chapter 2) as a result of political repression, that was then perpetuated in these postcolonial societies. Ideology therefore operates to obscure oppressed groups from reality and the actual condition of their own oppression. At the same time, it follows that there is no unanimous ideology within one social group as societies are comprised of heterogeneous groups distinguished along various divides such as race, class, and gender (Loomba, 2015:27). Since different people can possess different ideologies, Loomba (2015:29) claims that ideology does not point to the question about whether certain notions are true or not but rather how people are led to believe in a particular point of view. In order to understand these questions, Loomba (2015:29) outlines communist Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to unpack the ways in which the interests of the ruling class come to be the dominant ideas in every epoch.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is described as power that is obtained through a mixture of consent and coercion (Loomba, 2015:29). Consent is important for the ruling class to achieve

control by constructing subjects who readily comply with the dominant class and regime. Ideology is thus essential to this process as it acts as the medium through which particular ideas are disseminated and ultimately accepted as the truth (Loomba, 2015:29). In other words, ideologies are held to be true as people are influenced to believe a particular view of life through hegemonic processes which draws on people's values and systems of meanings and then transforming these to produce a perception of reality and of other people. For instance, in the context of colonial Igbo society, the consent of Igbo men as warrant chiefs and agents of colonial administrators was fundamental for the colonial regime to achieve control and to entrench a patriarchal society based on Western ideals where women were regarded as subordinate to men (Chuku, 2009:82). Ideologies are therefore able to regulate social relations and classify people into various groups which essentially enable them to recognise their social standing in contrast to others.

French communist theorist Louis Althusser went a step further by arguing that in modern capitalist societies, hegemony is not only achieved through force by the police and army as part of repressive state apparatuses, but also through conditioning subjects to comply with the values of the system (Loomba, 2015:33). Althusser argues that consent is therefore achieved through ideological state apparatuses such as political systems, the family, religious institutions, schools, and the media. For instance, these institutions were instrumental in constructing 'African' womanhood in postcolonial societies which has been shown is largely based on African patriarchal values ingrained by colonial powers (see e.g. Chuku, 2009; van Allen, 1972; Vincent, 2008). However, this view of ideological apparatuses does not account for the intricacies of institutions as well as the complexity and potential of humans to engender social change. While these standpoints are still a matter of debate, it nonetheless highlights the ways in which ideology and social practices constitute each other in terms of patriarchal ideologies that inform and shape gender roles. It is important to consider the fact that society consists of a complex structure that consists of various forms of relations of power within and between different social structures. To overlook this point is to disregard the human capacity for social resistance demonstrated by the extent of naked protests to defy authoritarian powers despite repressive state apparatuses to control black women's autonomy.

6.4.2 Colonial power and discourse in constructing the ‘other’

The operations of power are deeply involved with knowledge about the ‘other’. This is most evident in Edward Said’s work on Orientalism which outlines how the construction and dissemination of knowledge about the Orient was ultimately an ideological appendage of colonial power in Europe (Loomba, 2015:43). Orientalism as a scholarly discipline was supported by other disciplines such as history, literature, anthropology, archaeology, and philosophy, to highlight Western representations of non-Western cultures. Orientalism therefore draws on the concept of discourse in order to restructure the study of colonialism (Loomba, 2015:43). This process, with the support of literary texts from other disciplines, established particular means of thinking and seeing which consequently strengthened the operations of colonial power. In the context of naked protests, Oyewumi (2016:215) illustrates how these ways of interpreting black women’s naked bodies is still evident in the dominance of Western feminist frameworks that have negatively reconstructed the cultural and symbolic meanings around motherhood that was central to protest strategies in many African societies. Moreover, these negative perceptions of black women’s bodies are further buttressed by research on Africa funded by foreign donors that prescribes Western discourses on African cultural epistemes (Oyewumi, 2016:218). This process is therefore argued to be central to the construction and perpetuation of colonial societies. It is played out through the weight of certain texts that are bestowed with such authority that it is able to produce knowledge and the precise reality it appears to portray (Loomba, 2015:44). Such knowledge and reality are argued to ultimately construct a tradition - what Foucault refers to as discourse – of which the weight or material existence is essentially liable for the texts developed out of it.

This is also highlighted in Tamale’s (2017:13) argument that socially ascribed meanings to gendered bodies through religion, law, and culture exist through discourse and has operated throughout history to mark the naked human body with various cultural meanings. Discourse shapes our world of experience and meaning as it is through discourse that we are able to analyse information, classify people, and legitimate power (Tamale, 2017:13). Dominant discourses can influence us to adhere to and comply with conventional norms. It is therefore argued that humans are subjects of cultural discourses and narratives, and that we do not have control over the meanings and narratives ascribed to our bodies. This means that our interpretations and view of reality is based on cultural, historical, and socially constructed discourses that allow us to make

sense of our bodies (Tamale, 2017:15). The cultural script inscribed on women's bodies are different to that of men, varies across cultures, and are therefore illustrated and perceived differently in different contexts. Conceptualising the body as discourse implies that the body can communicate and therefore to be interpreted in specific historical and social contexts. The naked protests under review have pointed to the ways in which the meanings that were imposed on black women's bodies reflected the dominant discourses of the social context. This has been demonstrated by the fact that naked protests were revered in precolonial African societies due to the cultural and symbolic meanings attached to black women's naked bodies. However, these meanings were challenged by the dominance of Western scholarship and its prescribed discourses that viewed motherhood through a Western lens which mainly regards it as a subordinate identity since it constructs mothers as women first. In this sense, the naked protests exemplify a defiance and subversion of dominant Western colonial discourses imposed on black women's bodies.

A discourse analysis allows us to outline the relationship between ideas and institutions, the unseen and the visible, and the marginalised and the dominant (Lomba, 2015:47). Importantly, it enables us to recognise the ways in which power not only operates through the institutions which govern our everyday lives, but also through literature, language, and culture. This is important to understand how colonial power functions by constructing a discourse about the other or the Orient in terms of producing a particular manner of thinking that is evident in various scientific and political texts as well as in the work of Oriental studies (Lomba, 2015:47). It is argued that this contention between the self and the other – Europe versus the Orient – had a significant effect on studies of colonial discourses in other regions and influenced colonial attitudes towards other marginalised groups such as Africans. Lomba (2015:48) illustrates how Western scholarship, particularly human and social sciences, were grounded in various demeaning assumptions that always differentiated the West from Oriental non-European people. The point of discourse analysis is therefore to question colonial Western scholarship as the canon of knowledge. This was also raised by Oyewumi's (2016:218) concern with the dominant use of Western frameworks to understand the cultural and symbolic meanings of naked protests in African societies. Questioning this framework will therefore highlight African cultural epistemes and discourses that constructs the naked black female body as powerful and capable of inciting fear in men and the opponent.

Loomba (2015:54) highlights how the interaction between political, economic, cultural, and intellectual processes work together to establish and perpetuate colonialism. This is outlined in terms of the 'knowledge', stereotypes, and images of colonial cultures and subjects that are connected to judicial and economic structures of control. The concept of ideology is important to understand how colonial discourses about Africa are perpetuated in contemporary societies in the reading of black women's bodies in the public sphere as a site of contention and apprehension. Colonial ideologies provided and enforced a different representation of reality not only through established structures of knowledge (Loomba, 2015:57) but also through stereotypes. Stereotyping is defined as a method of processing information rather than a lack of 'factual' knowledge (Loomba, 2015:60). Colonial stereotypes are thus used to maintain a false sense of difference between the self (European/western) and the 'other' (all non-Europeans). This is exemplified in the ways in which dominant Western scholarship and frameworks construct Africa and black women as in need of fixing (Oyewumi, 2016:214). These stereotypes feed into the narrative of black women as mainly victims and consequently constructs naked protests through a Western lens which portrays these protesters as desperate, immoral, and despondent, rather than brave and empowering. The dominant Western narrative of black African women as victims and thus despondent, desperate, and immoral in terms of naked protests have been buttressed by Western colonial science which was involved in producing racist ways of conceptualising human beings and their differences (Loomba, 2015:60).

The discourse of race is argued to be a product of Western science and was used to explain African people's cultural attributes, their civilisation, and was used to enforce a biological hierarchy and promote ideas of racial supremacy (Loomba, 2015:62). It is therefore argued that colonialism transformed the process of knowledge production and shaped the conditions for its reception and distribution. As such, intended meanings of naked protests in the postcolonial may also be lost on audiences especially where knowledge and information is predominantly processed through a Western colonial canon (Coly, 2010:659). This is illustrated by the ways in which the 2016 naked protest during the FMF movement was mostly criticised by the public for reinforcing dominant narratives attached to black women's bodies. Even though these women employed a traditional form of protest in an African society, patriarchal ideologies entrenched by the West was imposed on this naked protest and the women's bodies.

6.4.3 Constructing ways of seeing the naked female body

Colonial discourse and power are not only maintained through literary texts produced in institutions such as the education and legal system, religious institutions, or the market, but also through photography as an additional mechanism to justify colonial practices. According to Coly (2010:654), colonial ethnographers used photography to gather and form evidence of African primitivism and the ensuing need to civilise Africa and its people. Photographs of the naked native body was used to further this kind of research as science declared that the naked body manifests fundamental facts about human qualities and development. The camera was therefore used as an emblem of anthropological truth-telling and modern legitimacy as it was an integral part of science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Levine, 2013:8). In the contemporary, the media through the camera lens has been instrumental in providing evidence to perpetuate colonial narratives around black bodies in protest. For instance, Xaba (2017:98) argues that the media strategically focused on certain protest activities by black students on historically white universities which ultimately perpetuated the narrative of black students as violent and hence deserving of the police and State antagonism.

Coly (2010:654) argues that the black female body was at the forefront of colonial photography and has been a prime subject of the colonial taxonomy of bodies in constructing bodies of evidence. Levine (2013:10) argues that these photographic subjects were not individuals but rather representatives as their bodies were exposed literally and figuratively to demonstrate racial characteristics. Photography was also used in such a way to emphasize the body as a means to underscore ideas around commonality as opposed to individuality. For instance, the images that circulated on social media of the topless women during the FMF protest at Wits University were used to make inferences about African womanhood. Here the criticisms against the naked protesters pointed to the need to regulate women's bodies to maintain gender roles. Vincent (2008:3) argues that comments about young black women's bodies are framed in a moralising tone in terms of the need to rectify unruly behaviour against women who deviate from the 'appropriate' way of expressing African womanhood.

Colonial images of black women's bodies appeared in journals intended for the intelligentsia, on postcards, as well as in exhibitions, and was consistently presented as a legitimate illustration of

why colonialism was needed (Levine, 2013:14). Comical and informative captions would often accompany these images and photographs as a sales pitch however, Levine (2013:14) argues that the most successful sales strategy was always sexuality. The colonial lens largely read women's bodies through the discourse of sexuality (Tamale, 2017:3). The female body is inscribed with a prominent sexual script and is therefore regarded as a sexual body more than the male body. This is evident in the monetisation of the naked female body for its most valued male consumer in media, advertising, and cinema (Tamale, 2017:12). Moreover, Tamale (2017:5) argues that this sexual script is also underlined in colonial missionary doctrines that equated naked women's bodies with witchcraft, the devil, and sin, in order to endorse covering up the female body. This moralistic order is still evident in the criticisms against naked protesters in contemporary societies where morality is a central argument used to repress naked protests

Images of naked black African women emphasised the division between the unavailable, clothed, and purified body of the white woman and the ostensibly receptive sexuality of the black female body. Levine (2013:15) notes that while there are comparable photographs and deliberations of naked colonised men, the female breast was paramount to debates around colonial nakedness. Here Levine (2013:15) puts forward the argument that a photograph of a black woman's breasts is essentially a photograph of a naked woman. However, the appearance of naked breasts and hence the age of black women played a significant role in the ways in which these images were received by audiences. Images of heavy, flaccid, and pendulous naked breasts operated differently as Levine (2013:16) argues that it was not only a reminder of women's reproductive role, but it also illustrated the aesthetic deviance of the primitive black African body, according to the Western gaze. In view of this gaze, Abonga et al (2019:12) and Diduk (2004:36) demonstrated how naked protests by mothers in African societies are regarded as powerful since these bodies disrupt this hegemonic lens in terms of the ways in which naked female bodies should appear in public. The criticisms of the 2016 naked protest at Wits University can also be attributed to this gaze as the online public response to this protest was mostly focused on body shaming the women's exposed breasts rather than understanding the symbolism of the naked protest within the given context.

Colonial photography, captions, literature, and the discourse used to portray the black female body is underscored with a sexual charge and points to what Levine (2013:21) refers to as the complexity

of the erotic's of colonial power. This was outlined in regular depictions of the group image of bare-breasted black African women as the antithesis of desire, yet at the same time as a sexualised body, deviant, relaying a divergence from the hegemonic colonial script and everything that the colonizer represents (Levine, 2013:21). Black women's bodies have not only been the subject of voyeuristic consumption as Lewis (2005a:15) argues that these bodies have also historically featured as the subject of pain and trauma. Lewis points to the ways in which black African women have come to represent the symbol of a troubled Africa which is evident in common media depictions of African women as victims of discrimination and unjust humanitarian practices. These images have buttressed ideas of black women in a constant state of precarity such that Sutton (2007:142) argues it is difficult to reimagine and reclaim the narrative around black women's bodies especially in the context of naked protests. The argument here is that it is difficult to express a vision of decolonisation and resistance that offers an approach for the development of an emancipatory black female body politics without validating historically entrenched ideologies about black women's bodies. The hegemony of colonial discourses and ideologies that has infiltrated almost every scholarly discipline, social institutions, and public space, has negatively impacted on the ways in which naked protests are framed in the postcolonial. Reclaiming ways of reading naked protests are even more complex as public space is underpinned by patriarchal mores based on gendered roles instilled by colonial powers.

Levine (2013:23) claims that the colonial discourse around the naked black female body is mainly based on the presumed inability of these women to understand the conventional divide between the public and private. The public/private divide is particularly complex for black women as their social positioning locates them at the lowest level on the racial hierarchy which renders their bodies socially invisible in the public domain. However, black women's bare breasts establishes their visibility and essentially their material existence as Levine (2013:24) argues that these bodies become visible largely for the purposes of entertainment. It is within this context that naked protests can be viewed as a symbolic act of resistance to underlying colonial powers and deep-seated patriarchal values, as well as an endeavour to assert black women's material existence and visibility in society (Coly, 2010:659). The naked protests under review has outlined the many ways in which women's material existence in the public sphere was largely disregarded despite the central roles that they played in their respective societies. This was amplified in the culmination

of the naked protest at Wits University as students pointed to the growing divisions within the FMF movement as a result of male leaders undermining the role of black feminists and queer students in the movement. It therefore points to Oyewumi's (2016:216) caution to recognise the reality of the contemporary world which is predominantly driven by Western ideals as the FMF naked protesters could not escape the patriarchal ideologies imposed on their bodies in the public sphere.

Coly (2015:15) argues that it is important to acknowledge the complexities of gender and the existence of the colonial factor notwithstanding an insufficient basis to consider such a presence. This will illuminate the ways in which naked protests are perceived in public space in certain African societies. However, the body is both flexible and fixed in its socio-spatial context as the same naked body can be read with the discourse of shame and humiliation, apprehension, discomfort, as well as empowerment in different contexts (Settler and Engh, 2015:128). This is mainly attributed to the contention between historical and cultural constructions of African women's naked bodies in comparison to the adverse Western colonial depictions of these bodies. The fluidity of black women's symbolic bodies can therefore pose as a potential threat to the dominant social script as these bodies are imbued with historical meanings and can be used to convey underlying symbolic messages. The point of this chapter was to demonstrate how the criticisms and negative construction of naked protests are fundamentally rooted in colonial discourses and its subsequent patriarchal ideologies. This illuminated how naked protests are symbolic and powerful as it essentially subverts deep-seated colonial narratives about naked black female bodies. As such, naked protests trigger apprehension as it confronts and undermines colonial discourses and patriarchy which has operated to subjugate women. The following chapter will provide a lens into the African context by illustrating how colonial ideologies around black women's bodies were played out and evolved in African societies to regulate women's bodies. It also illustrates how discourses about black women's bodies in the postcolonial cannot be isolated from Western discursive dominance based on colonial ideologies as it is infiltrated in the law to perpetuate the control of women's bodies especially in public space. This chapter intends to exemplify how apprehensions around naked protests essentially points to the inadequacy of patriarchy to control women's bodies.

7 CHAPTER 4: Regulating women's bodies: constructing socially invisible bodies

7.1 The naked female body in Africa

The colonial project of modernity was driven by the triple C's namely clothing, civilisation, and Christianity, and is reflected in postcolonial African countries where anti-nudity bills maintain the discourse of the uncivilized, immoral, dirty, and naked African body (Coly, 2015:18). Clothing in postcolonial Africa is therefore used to gauge African societies' contemporariness where the female body is the billboard of the nation's modernity and is therefore enlisted to re-signify African states. For instance, the San and the Karamojong are African societies that are still viewed as primitive and backward for opposing the Western dress code. The 19th century civilising mission imposed religious views from the Catholic Church which initiated a counter-reformation that was argued to be stricter and rigorous in its religious principles and spirituality (Tamale, 2017:6). In colonial and Apartheid South Africa for instance, Protestant religious traditions and thoughts have played a central role in shaping ideas about the female body (Settler & Engh, 2015:127). The influence of the church infiltrated the state's narratives around the bodily rights of black people which was heavily constrained during South Africa's colonial and Apartheid era. This perpetual policing of black women's bodies continued well into the contemporary state and has remained a site of contestation (Settler & Engh, 2015:130).

The intricate relationship between the state and religion is evident in the policing over women's bodies that are exercised under the guise of national interest where women are integral to notions of nationalism and pride. Goodson and Living (1991:10) argue that the status of women in various cultures is a central indicator of attitudes toward women's bodies in the given society. For instance, this is illustrated by the ways in which senior women and mothers in certain African societies are revered as their naked bodies are regarded as sacred and powerful. It is therefore a taboo to see these bodies exposed in front of sons and strange men in the public (Diabate, 2017; Tamale; 2017; Tyler; 2013). The imposition of Western-influenced culture on African societies raises questions around how nudity or 'indecent' dress is accounted for which is a constant feature as part of some African cultural events and festivals. Western constructions of nakedness and dress is therefore ambiguous in itself as nudity, nakedness, and indecent dress are often used interchangeably and does not take social and cultural contexts into consideration. Tamale (2017:12) distinguishes

between a nude and naked body and illustrates the conceptual difference where nudity implies display and elicits sexual connotations while nakedness implies autonomy and agency in the deliberate removal of clothes. Postcolonial African countries have attempted to redefine the notion of nakedness by constructing it as the appropriation of Western ‘modern’ clothing regarded as indecent, such as the mini-skirt and tight pants, rather than deriving from wearing traditional attire or a lack of clothing (Coly, 2015:20). These items are largely regarded as “unAfrican” in many postcolonial African societies as women who dress in these items are accused of being brainwashed by Western cultural imperialism (Vincent, 2008:2).

This counter narrative instead constructs ‘unclothed’ or partially dressed white female bodies as deprived of morality and culpable of the same condemnations posed against black women’s naked bodies. However, this reconceptualization of nakedness highlights African societies’ adoption of the colonial preoccupation with clothing in order to distinguish itself from the West. Postcolonial African societies are therefore involved in a complex entanglement where selective colonial ideologies and cultural ideals that are essentially harmful towards women’s autonomy are used to validate Africa’s independence from the West. The counter narrative used to criticise the West’s notion of ‘modern’ clothing as indecent inevitably perpetuates the policing of women’s bodies and dress. The following sections will explore how the policing of women’s bodies are reinforced through underlying African patriarchal notions entrenched by the colonial regime which seeks to maintain ideas of ‘African pride’ through women’s dress.

7.2 The preoccupation with clothing in postcolonial African societies

It is argued that many African cultures utilised basic garments, constructed from animal skin and plant fibre, to cover their genitals and their bodies due to the historically warmer weather in Sub-Saharan Africa (Tamale, 2017:4). Today however, most African societies have taken a different stance towards a semi-clothed or naked black female body in public. This change is argued to have concurred with the colonial modernisation and civilising mission as a means to justify their control over African people (Tamale, 2017:4). European Christian missionaries imposed a new dress code starting with Buganda in mid-1800s and created an ankle-length Victorian dress for women, also called “gomesi or busuuti”, and a long tunic for men (Tamale, 2017:5). The gomesi later became a national dress in Uganda and is still popularly worn today by women in Buganda and Busoga.

Vincent (2008:2) argues that various African leaders took a personal interest in women's dress in the immediate postcolonial period in Uganda, Zambia, Kenya, and Malawi, among other African countries. According to Vincent (2008:3), African women who did not comply with the norms set out by these leaders were publicly disciplined as a means to protect 'familial honour', maintain African culture, and to rectify moral degeneration in the relevant African societies.

These African patriarchal notions of maintaining 'African culture' in relation to female dress for instance through the anti-nudity bill in Nigeria, the mini-skirt ban in Uganda, and the disciplining of women in 'indecent' dress by men at taxi ranks in South Africa (Coly, 2015; Vincent, 2008), are therefore similar to colonial ideologies around female dress and morality. This thesis adopts Coly's (2015:12) analysis that postcolonial Africa's preoccupation with clothing the black female body is situated in discursive conventions and categories produced under colonialism. These include antithetical gestures around clothed/unclothed black female bodies and the negotiation between tradition and modernity (Coly, 2015:12). Coly (2015:20) refers to this process as a postcolonial contra-modernity where female dress becomes a site of negotiation between the colonial and postcolonial worlds and gestures. Colonial discourses of clothing were thus used to inscribe notions of African women's sexuality and to scrutinize the black female body in a distinct way as a representation of Africa.

Clothing was used to justify the colonial project to reform the unclothed black female body which created a hierarchy among African bodies where unclothed bodies symbolised uncivilised and immoral Africans while clothed bodies represented civilised and religious Africans (Coly, 2015:14). O'Keefe (2014:1) refers to the preoccupation of women's state of dress as rape culture where there is an inherent relationship between clothing and consent, and which holds women responsible for being targets of sexual harassment and assault. The relationship between clothing and consent has particularly life-threatening implications on the non-conforming, black female body as a result of the oversexualisation in colonial discourses. This is most evident in the attacks on black women in Zimbabwe and in Johannesburg South Africa, who were targets for donning clothing that was regarded as "unAfrican" by largely black men (Vincent, 2008:2). These attacks were motivated by African patriarchal ideologies, characterised by traditional gendered power relations and norms to 'protect' African culture, as a method of control over women's bodies and

to ultimately reinstate women's inferior status in the social hierarchy. The following section will demonstrate how colonial powers sought to regulate black women's bodies through myths to enforce structural measures of control.

7.3 Colonial mythmaking as a method of control

Postcolonial as well as gender studies scholars (see e.g. Mohanty, 2003; McClintock, 1995; Lewis, 2011) have shown how depictions in literature and in the popular imagination of the black female body as over-sexed, uncivil, and superstitious are part of an underlying history of Orientalist and colonial representations of the 'other'. While both African men and women have been characterised in terms of bodily and sexual deviance, gender provides an additional platform to further discriminate against the black female body in African states. The story of Saartjie Baartman is a prevalent example of the discrimination and prejudice engendered against black women's bodies and their sexuality in South Africa. Sarah Baartman represents the ways in which a racist colonial regime inscribes notions of the black African woman as 'other' to be displayed and gazed upon. Baartman, originally from South Africa, was identified as Khoisan and had a unique feature - steatopygia – also known as possessing protruding buttocks (Osha, 2008:80). This feature was used to transform Baartman into an object of commercial exploitation and trade where she was brought to London in 1810 and then to Paris in 1814 to display her body for two shillings for scientific curiosity and entertainment in freak shows (Iannaccaro, 2015:37). Baartman's physique became a site of fascination which was used in racial science to draw generalised conclusions about the African female body and sexuality.

Zoologist and anatomist George Cuvier, constructed a plaster cast of Baartman's body which was explicitly described as grotesque, pickled and preserved her genitals and brain in jars, and exhibited it at the Museum of Man in Paris (Parkinson, 2016:5). The repatriation of Baartman's remains finally returned to South Africa in 2002, 192 years after she was brought to Europe (Parkinson, 2016:6). Scientific racism used racialized notions of Baartman's body to produce ideologies of the 'nation' as her story and image represents the colonial exploitation and oppression of black people in South Africa. Baartman represented the figure of racial inferiority and the savage sexuality of black women constructed by racist British colonial powers (Settler & Engh, 2015:129). Levin (2005:98) argues that Baartman's story and her body is often used in South

Africa's political nation-building project as a representation of the harsh Apartheid regime in order to reconstruct and to imagine a humane post-Apartheid nation. The cultural significance of Baartman is still relevant today as her history of abuse and trauma is still used within black womanhood to show how the legacy of racialized stereotypes are perpetuated in the post-Apartheid and post-democratic South Africa. Colonial mythmaking around Baartman reveals how bodies, categorised along racial and gendered subordination, convey deep cultural meanings and the ways in which black female bodies are inscribed with historical social inscriptions. The image of Baartman has therefore become a permanent symbol of Westernised attitudes towards black women's bodies in South Africa and towards Africa in general.

These discourses reveal the ways in which the colonially produced depictions and rhetoric of the black body as a site of disease, labour, and violence is maintained and perpetuated in post-Apartheid South Africa (Settler & Engh, 2015:126). For instance, Settler and Engh (2015:134) show how discourses about South Africa's missionary medicine at the time would produce correlations between the black body, disease, and sin. Medicine maintained an important role in Africa during the nineteenth century as European settlers used science and medicine to legitimise control over the 'dangerous' black body. Settler and Engh (2015:140) illustrate how medicine facilitated discrimination as it provided a model for the regulation of movement of indigenous people of Africa. For instance, the authors argue that forced removals of black people in cities around Cape Town into townships was not merely a product of racially oppressive policies but rather a consequence of the notion of the black body as a site of disease (Settler & Engh, 2015:141). The fixation with the hygiene of black bodies in South Africa was fundamental to health policies which were used to regulate these bodies and their communities as social structures are maintained and ordered based on the notion of the contagious threat and the dirty 'other'. This is highlighted by Sultana's (2013:4) argument that the discourse of hygiene in terms of the body is used to humiliate as it implicitly associates dirt with particular groups in specific social locations.

Alongside this fixation with hygiene was the fetishization about African sexuality and the black body which formed the basis of colonial discourses of health (Settler & Engh, 2015:141). The customs and manners of indigenous people were observed to show that the black body was the epitome of savagery. The unclothed primitive body in the colonial context therefore presented a

serious threat to society and required discipline in order to maintain the health, sanitation, and morality of the colonial society. These notions essentially created depictions of the black woman as a symbol of fertility and exotic sexuality and at the same time as endowed with unruly sexuality that endangers the social and moral order of society. Settler and Engh (2015:142) point to the gendered nature of white anxiety about black sexuality which primarily frames black women's bodies ironically as both a barrier against disease and a vessel thereof. This framing not only reinforced prescribed ideas around black women's bodily behaviour but it also incited apprehension and perpetuated unnecessary surveillance of black women's bodies in the public sphere. Scrutiny over black women's bodies also reveals underlying apprehension around the idea that the black female body is linked to society's moral decay and other social ills (Settler & Engh, 2015:131). The association between the black female body, presumed unruly sexualities, and anxieties around hygiene and disease inevitably assigned black women to the unskilled labour market to perform menial labour literally regarded as 'dirty' and degrading work.

Black women were particularly stigmatised as they were tasked with the literal and material work of reproduction which was largely confined to domestic work such as housekeepers and cleaners (Settler & Engh, 2015:137). The historical representation of black women's labour in South Africa is therefore associated with reproduction and domesticity and involves the care work required to maintain households and the family structure which is often regarded as unskilled and degrading tasks. Domestic work is also closely linked to ideas around womanhood as Settler and Engh (2015:137) argue that a good worker is expected to be a good mother – maintains the home and keep the clean, white, employer's family fed and happy which would ultimately preserve the white employer's image as a good wife and mother. The labour market was historically defined in racialised and gendered ways in South Africa and was viewed as a system to regulate the black body in the interests of wealth accumulation.

The black body exists in the world differently to the rest of society as these bodies are commonly articulated and aligned to narratives of violence. Black women's bodies are at the centre of these depictions as they are often a casualty in national violence which rests on the belief that the domination of women of a particular society would inevitably entail ultimate control over that society (Settler & Engh, 2015:139). These bodies are regulated as sites of national identities which

emphasises the relationship between gender and nationalism that frames black women's bodies as a site of contestation. Policing over the black body is therefore enforced through these colonial myths that justifies the measures of control. The tendency to stigmatise black women as the main source of social moral decay in South Africa exemplifies how colonial depictions of the black female body as deviant persists in the postcolonial and post-Apartheid context. This is largely illustrated by legal discourse that not only give life to deep-rooted colonial narratives, but it also perpetuates it through the regulation of black women's bodies in the contemporary. The centrality of the black female body as the fundamental cause of the social ills outlined in this section exemplifies the subversive power of naked protests as it symbolises a reclamation of black women's bodies which was severely disenfranchised and regulated. The following section will expand on the law - in terms of criminalising immorality – and how this is implemented in the postcolonial context to control black women (Tamale, 2017:5).

7.4 Structural control and colonial ideologies

The female body is a symbol of powerful influences from an amalgamation of colonial powers in law, education, and culture and religion, which were key elements part of the colonial mission to control African peoples under the guise of development and enlightenment. Written and customary law exemplifies this amalgamation for instance through the chastisement for indecent assault on women's bodies but not on men (Tamale, 2017:20). The law is viewed as one of the most important markers of narratives around women's bodies as it inscribes bodies with meanings, symbols, hierarchies, and rules (Tamale, 2017:21). It is also a key mechanism in constructing women's bodies as society interprets and reads these bodies according to the symbols and characteristics created by the law (Tamale, 2017:31). Glazer (1993:114) argues that the law has a significant influence on women's perceptions of their own bodies and on people's behaviour in terms of how they feel about others as well as themselves. For instance, airline policies demonstrate the ways in which the law operates in industries that legitimises a normative standard of female attractiveness. This is exemplified in the maximum weight and height limits, as well as cosmetic requirements that recommend all female employees to wear makeup as part of their customer-service appearance (Glazer, 1993:145). Legal discourse therefore contributes to the construction of an environment that influences our ideas around women's demeanour and subsequently validates the

preoccupation with women's bodies particularly when employment heavily depends on appearance.

The concern over women's bodies is highlighted by the ways in which legal discourse constructs and reinforces the standard body, social norms, establishes choice and conduct, and punishes women who deviate from the law. For instance, the criminalisation and sanctioning around naked or semi-clothed women in a public space conveys a firm message about how society should feel about women's bodies as well as how women should conduct themselves in the public domain (Glazer, 1993:115). This is also illustrated in the context of the FMF naked protest as former Acting national police commissioner Phahlane claimed that the police were lenient on the protesting women despite the fact they engaged in public indecency which he claimed is an offense (African News Agency, [2016](#)). Tamale (2017:23) illustrates the dominance of the law in governing women's bodies and conduct by referring to the case of the Ugandan society. Notions of morality are instilled in the British-designed Penal Code introduced to Uganda under chapter XIV "Offences against Morality" (Tamale, 2017:23). This code underscores morality as a framework for women's public existence where rebellious women are liable for legal disciplining. Women's sexuality is a common factor that constitutes all morality offences in Uganda which operates to control particular expressions of sexuality (Tamale, 2017:23). This is demonstrated by the criminalisation of prostitution which is predominantly confined to the sellers who are generally women rather than to the buyers who are primarily men (Tamale, 2017:23). This legal moralism is based on the problematic assumption that there is a uniform moral consensus in a pluralistic Ugandan society and that the law excludes democratic freedom and human rights (Tamale, 2017:23). These laws work to perpetuate patriarchal objectification of women and to preserve the patriarchal system by focusing on the impact of the exposed female body on bystander men and society's moral order.

Tamale (2017:21) argues that while the law reflects patriarchal social relations there are also various ways to interpret the law as it can both address and mystify reality. Legal discourse is underpinned by the influence of natural law which is based on the principle of morality and the ideal of right and wrong in regulating human behaviour (Tamale, 2017:22). The irony is that natural law theorists view everything natural as moral yet nakedness – a natural state of being - is

viewed as immoral when displayed in public space (Tamale, 2017:22). The paradox of law prescribes when nakedness is considered 'lawful' as nude entertainment which harbours a largely male audience is exempted from scrutiny while topless and naked protests in the public sphere are typically condemned (Glazer, 1993:141). Glazer (1993:116) argues that this reasoning follows the logic that that which could arouse men can only be displayed when men want to be aroused. This illustrates how the law reinforces patriarchal values that condone the exploitation of women's naked bodies in the private sphere while denying the freedom for women to use their bodies as a site of contestation in the public sphere. Butler (2006:26) argues that the inevitable public dimension of our bodies entails that the body does not belong to one particular person since bodies are constructed as a social phenomenon in the public sphere.

Naked protesters in the public sphere are also confronted with legal caveats to acquire the right to protest as protesters are required to provide evidence that their actions are not harmful to the public interest (Tamale, 2017:27). This means that the rights of women who partake in naked or other embodied protests are determined by their duty towards the public interest which is an ambiguous concept in itself. The concept of public interest raises questions around whose interests are protected and points to a misconception about a fixed meaning around public interest as this inevitably changes in different contexts as it relies on the dominant social mores of a society. It is thus important to understand the significance of naked protests in this context as women do not have tangible access to their bodily rights in the public domain as the notion of the public interest is used to determine what kinds of protests are validated or not. This concept is further used to regulate women's bodies in the public by imposing rigid ideas of 'appropriate' public conduct and dress which is largely based on a patriarchal script. Gqola (2019) argues that the main patriarchal script in South Africa imposes appropriate dress codes on women in the public and that women are conditioned to comply with these to minimise the risks of being targets of violence and to bear the burden of responsibility. The exemplar of law provides a clear illustration of the challenges faced by black women in the public sphere which curtails certain bodily freedoms and resistance activities. This hostile context therefore constructs naked protests by black women in contemporary African societies as even more significant as it illustrates a clear defiance of the legal, political, and social order which has detrimental consequences on rebellious women. The following section will provide a closer analysis of these discussions which will demonstrate why

naked protests is not merely a last resort but rather a necessary means to call for the need to dismantle entrenched patriarchal social mores underpinned in public space.

8 Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

It is noteworthy that naked protests in African societies have historically involved senior women in contestation over social inequalities such as land rights, housing, and precarious economic conditions and drew on the cultural symbolism of motherhood to highlight their grievances against men and the colonial regime. However, these protests were largely regarded as unique and powerful for its symbolic meanings attached to the naked maternal bodies of women in the relevant society rather than the ways in which the protest itself is a form of subversive politics. This thesis therefore provides a different lens into naked protests by black women in African societies by exploring the significance of naked protests in relation to the ways in which black women's bodies were and continue to be policed by institutional powers such as colonialism, African patriarchal values around culture, and patriarchal mores entrenched in the social norms of contemporary public space. This allowed for a contemporary reading of naked protests involving black women that goes beyond culture which is already a contested concept. The point is to show how these forces contribute to different perceptions and interpretations of naked black women's bodies in postcolonial African societies which is central to the construction of disruptive bodies and therefore key to its unruliness and its potential to disrupt rigid understandings of black women's bodies.

The 2016 naked protest at Wits University in Johannesburg, South Africa provides an important lens into the central arguments around public undress as a protest tactic in contemporary African societies. It highlighted how young black women in South Africa are complexly situated between the contemporary and the cultural worlds where selective use of tradition and culture are used to regulate women's bodies in the public. The naked protesting female students had access to resources and thus the power to use a different means of protest in line with conventional protest tactics but instead opted to use their body as a weapon (Lewis and Hendricks, 2017:15). Their access to resources to protest differently sets this naked protest apart from the naked protests by black South African women in the 1990s, the 2002 Liberian women and the Niger Delta women, who primarily used their nakedness as their only means of leverage. This therefore raised questions around the historical significance of naked protests and its power to disrupt social norms through a form of peripheral protest politics. The public backlash against the form of protest also underlined Mitchell, de Lange, and Moletsane's (2017:321) concern about what defines a struggle as political

and who defines it as activism. This protest therefore pointed to the problematic hegemony of patriarchal mores permeated in public space where naked protests occur which regulates appropriate conduct and activities as a means of protest, who is permitted to use this form of protest, and in what context this is considered acceptable. More importantly, it provided a critical lens into the value of naked protests which entails an understanding of the dominant norms of the society, conventional modes of protest, public space, and how power is negotiated through the body (Lewis, 2009:135).

An examination of the naked protests in relation to these conventions in the relevant societies provides a broader understanding of the ways in which it threatens the dominant order. The power of naked protests to shock, stop violence, and to assert protesters' grievances is not simply based on women's exposed breasts in the public sphere since this is a common sight in some ritual and traditional practices in certain African societies. This power derives from the sight of women's exposed breasts that appears without permission in the public domain (Nkosi, [2016](#)). It is therefore considered a taboo to see maternal bodies exposed in the public as these bodies inflict social death on men as the enemy (Abonga et al, 2019; Prash, 2015; Tamale, 2017). Here social death can be interpreted as the public emasculation of men and the patriarchal social script as the women exposed their most private selves, which is reserved for the private pursuits of their partners, to foreign men in the public. Naked protests therefore symbolise women's reclamation of their bodies to be seen in the public sphere on their terms and to assert their powerful role which is often unappreciated. While this spectacle was a common practice in precolonial contexts, the colonial regime, that entrenched patriarchal values through Victorian ideals in various African societies, consequently constructed a different lens to view black women's naked bodies.

One of the main arguments posed against naked protests by women in contemporary societies is that it offends public morality and is often compared to elements of pornography (Tamale, 2017:29). Naked protests are also criticised for glamourizing sexual violence through its depiction of women's bodies being pushed around by security and police and the general appearance of screaming women (Fanghanel, 2019:3). The main view against the use of nakedness as a protest tactic is that it makes the female protesters complicit in not only perpetuating the injustices that they oppose but also the context which enables objectification, abuse, and essentially for rape

culture to survive. Public undress as a protest tactic is seen as embodying heterosexual male fantasies that is rooted in pornography which prescribes the ways in which women can be sexual. This has inevitably led to greater policing of women's bodies in the public sphere particularly by black men through African patriarchal ideals that were similarly bolstered by colonialism.

Contemporary South Africa has seen a rise in private citizens and particularly black men who assume the role of custodians of the society's moral order (Vincent, 2008:3). Consequently, young black women have been subjected to intense scrutiny and public surveillance as they are viewed as vulnerable to 'unAfrican' ways of being which essentially goes against 'appropriate' cultural mores. The selective use of tradition in the guise of protecting 'African culture' is used to justify the policing of black women whose naked bodies threaten the moral decline of society. This points to Vincent's (2008:3) argument about the moralising frame used to construct young black women's bodies as a means to rectify unruly behaviour against women who deviate from the appropriate way of expressing African womanhood. These notions have been played out in everyday public life where black women are often harassed and physically assaulted for their choice of clothing as seen by the 2008 mini-skirt attacks in Johannesburg South Africa (Vincent, 2008:1). The point is to illustrate how the disciplining of black women's bodies that do not comply with the moralistic order of society is informed by African patriarchy which frames women's bodies as a symbol of morality, similarly to patriarchal ideologies established under colonial rule. Tamale (2017:29) notes that the argument of public morality points to the interests of the patriarchal capitalist as the naked commodified bodies of women portrayed in mass media for the voyeuristic male gaze would ultimately be banned if the argument was truly about public morality.

Sexual violence and rape against women can also be seen as a violent means of policing women's bodies and keeping them in line through the assertion of male dominance. The LMAP women and other maternal bodies were extensively policed in the 2002 Liberian Peace protest and suffered from brutal sexual abuse and rape as they could not escape the widespread sexual violence throughout the conflict and even after it ended (Prasch, 2015:190). This underscores Lewis' (2009:13) construction of public space as a central site of masculine entitlement and violence where black women's bodies are disciplined for deviating from the patriarchal social order. Women's increasing resistance to compliance becomes a symbol of the failure of male authority

to enact order. The sexual objectification and harassment of women's bodies in the public sphere is seen as a violent means to maintain this order. The consequences of sexual harassment, assault, and rape are therefore very real risks for women involved in naked protests especially in societies underpinned by patriarchal ideals. Understanding this context therefore frames naked protests as even more exceptional and powerful as women literally put their bodies on the line in naked protests. These risks are even more menacing for black women due to the historical trauma of oppression, slavery, and sexual violence perpetrated by the colonial and Apartheid regimes which framed black bodies as essentially sexual bodies in need of discipline and control to be regarded as civilised beings. The historical legacy of colonialism and its ideologies are central to making sense of conventional practices, dominant social mores in society, and how the body navigates power through space. It is therefore important to understand this history in order to make sense of why naked protests performed by black women are so contentious in South Africa and other contemporary African societies.

Understanding how colonial powers entrenched norms and constructed black women's bodies is fundamental to the subversive power of naked protests. The point of naked protests is to shock audiences and to draw attention to protesters' demands. However, this thesis demonstrates that this requires an understanding of the underlying factors that contributes to its success in alarming bystanders and bringing operations and violence to a standstill. Naked protests demonstrate a complete embodied resistance to the hegemonic order that prescribes public conduct, conventional forms of public demonstrations and organisations, and imposes meanings and symbols on women's bodies. Moreover, it is a symbolic form of resistance that rejects the historical colonial powers that ultimately disenfranchised black women and their existence in public space. The value of naked protests therefore derives from its ability to incite important conversations about the current state of affairs and the role of women that often goes unnoticed in protest movements and society in general. It highlights broader systems of power and control that essentially polices women's bodies in the public sphere. Eileraas (2014:41) argues that the deliberate undress of women in the public domain disrupts normative social conventions in order to elicit a moment for reflection. When topless activists use their body as a strategy of protest, they are essentially posing the question: "what is my body and life worth to you?" (Eileraas, 2014:42). Naked protests

underscore questions of whose lives matter and are valued within collective memory as history has shown how the experiences of black bodies are often repressed and erased from iconic movements.

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