TRANSGRESSIVE MATRIARCHS: AN EXPLORATION OF FEMALE AGENCY AND RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN TELENOVELAS

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation, is the result of my independent research and investigation. It has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or qualification at this or any other institution. All sources of information and literature that have been used in the research are duly acknowledged and referenced.

Signature: _____ **Date: 24 October 2024**

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DEDICATION

Kenyan Member of Parliament Millie Odhiambo:

> Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me this opportunity. Mr Speaker, I wish to start by saying that, uh, one of my favourite books is, 'Good girls never get the corner office'. Mr Speaker this is in response to what you were telling me earlier in the morning when you were urging me to be a good example to the girls, the younger ones who are doing their first term. Mr Speaker, if they are good girls they'll never get the corner office. Be as bad as Millie Odhiambo, you'll be the mother of this house. I'm a bad girl, and as a bad girl I am here serving my fourth term. So do not be treated like the African culture where you are told to have decorum, dress nicely, be kind, be nice. I'm telling you; you'll go nowhere. Be a bad girl like me and you'll get somewhere. (Odhiambo 2024)

For my mother, Dr Emily Hope Lebogang Mpshe, and my grandmother Elizabeth Mpshe, thank you for being 'bad girls.' It is in you both that I have seen the transformative potential of my own identity as a Black woman.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of transgressive Black womanhood in two South African telenovelas, examining whether acts of transgression disrupt existing depictions of the matriarchal figure onscreen. Drawing on the works of Sisonke Msimang, Pumla Gqola and Sabine Binder, specifically their analyses of the iconography surrounding Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, this paper interprets the two Black female protagonists under this study within a political and historical framework. Through close textual analysis, this study examines the narrative construction and characterisation of Lindiwe Dikana from (*The River* 2018 - 2024) and Harriet Khoza from (*The Queen* 2016 - 2023) assessing the extent to which these characters transgress social and cultural boundaries. In addition, it investigates whether their transgressions perpetuate stereotypical portrayals or complicate the traditional depiction of the Black matriarch in South African television.

This study finds that, while the character constructions of both Lindiwe Dikana and Harriet Khoza are rooted in heteronormative portrayals of traditional gender roles—where both are established as wives and mothers—they transgress prescribed notions of motherhood and challenge gendered social norms of femininity. Moreover, the analysis reveals that these characters not only subvert sociocultural expectations surrounding motherhood and femininity but also defy societal norms related to widowhood, as exemplified in the case of Harriet Khoza. These transgressions emerge as modes of resistance, alternative expressions of identity, and the exercise of agency within patriarchal structures. In the analysis of *The River* (2018–2024), this study draws on Viraj Suparsad's (2022) concept of 'complicated femininity' to explore the moral ambiguity of Lindiwe Dikana, a complexity seldom attributed to Black matriarchal figures in mainstream media. In contrast, the examination of *The Queen* (2016–2023) utilises Sabine Binder's notion of 'violent female masculinity' to illustrate how violent acts can be interpreted as transformative, particularly when they serve to transgress and destabilise constructed norms of femininity. This study concludes that the episodes selected from the respective telenovelas offer a nuanced and complex portrayal of Black matriarchal figures, presenting innovative and layered representations of Black women on screen.

INTRODUCTION

BLACK WOMEN AND TRANSGRESSION

My witness informs my interest in transgressive Black women on South African screens. The observation of the manifestations of these women in my life led me to seek out and consider their representations on television and in the public domain. I was raised by a collective of Black women who, according to cultural practice and socially constructed notions of femininity, are transgressive. My mother, maternal grandmother, nursery school principal, and primary school teachers were women who strived for selfhood, even as mothers, daughters, and sisters. Much like me, the ideas or the language of feminist discourse were first their lived experiences before they were learned formally in literature.

Mamphela Ramphele writes, *On Being Black and Transgressive*, 'I think the most important difficulty or the greatest difficulty one faces in any system, in any part, is that you become unpopular' (Yates et al., 1998: 92). This rings true to my observations. I was cruelly made aware that Black women who transgress sociocultural boundaries are often marginalised by society and even ostracised by their own families for refusing to conform to the gendered script of Black womanhood as defined by culture and society. They understood that they were more than that. It was their personal politics that shaped their identity and womanhood. There was a profound knowing and awareness that they were complex, multifaceted, and, most importantly, three-dimensional human beings.

These experiences and observations drew me towards work on transgressive Black women and invoked a curiosity about what the fictional representations of transgressive femininity might look like on screen. How are Black women who transgress framed onscreen? How are they constructed? What sociocultural or sociopolitical structures do they transgress, and what are the implications of their resistance or violations? In this study, I focus on Harriet Khoza *The Queen* (2016 - 2023) and Lindiwe Dikana *The River* (2018 - 2024) because they depart (to a certain extent) from existing constructions of matriarchs. I explore how the protagonists in the selected texts exhibit transgressive behaviour with an ambiguous portrayal, suggesting active negotiation of gender and power within the telenovela genre. The two matriarchs examined in

this study initially appear to be framed within traditional gender roles. However, they subvert these normative depictions through their criminal activities. *The River* (2018 – 2024) capitalises on the contradiction of Lindiwe Dikana's construction. By employing a non-linear narrative structure, the show introduces her to the audience on a loader tractor and attempting to kill her daughter, Itumeleng Mokoena. However, moments later, she is framed as the traditional wife and mother in the establishing scene. Lindiwe oscillates between and transgresses the dichotomies of good and evil from the beginning. In the case of *The Queen* (2016 – 2023), the show establishes Harriet Khoza as a dutiful wife and mother, but this 'ideal wife and mother' framing is contrasted with a later scene, where she is exchanging money with a hitman who orchestrated the murder of her husband.

Further, having identified the texts and their female protagonist as transgressive[1], it became apparent, through my observations that depictions of this kind of matriarch[2] in a leading role are a rarity. Apart from Sonto Molefe *Gomora* (2020 – 2023), the beginning of my inquiry into transgressive matriarchs in South African telenovelas revealed that not only is there a scarcity of such portrayals but, there are also limited examinations of transgressive Black women in South African television scholarship. The landscape of South African television scholarship is characterised by the impact of the racialised history of the nation and its influence on South African television (Smit 2016; Jacobs 2019; Hlobo and Skosana 2023). Alexia Smit identifies that the history of South African television reflects a contrast between 'separateness' and 'connectedness' (Smit, 2016: 1). The idea of 'separateness' symbolises the apartheid national broadcasting policy while the idea of 'connectedness' speaks to the political shift towards democracy and a focus on promoting a unified national identity of the 'rainbow nation' (Smit, 2016; 1). The 'rainbow nation' discourse has also been central in the fabric of the dramas and soap operas that have emerged in post-apartheid South Africa. Existing studies that focus on Black women in soap operas consider; the representation of their bodies (Thabethe 2008),

[1] My theorisation of transgressive is informed by Pumla Gqola (2001), Julian Wolfrey (2008) and Christina Foust (2010) conceptualisations of transgression. By 'transgressive' I mean; actions by Black women, which are deliberate violations of patriarchal boundaries. These actions represent resistance, subversion, and transcendence of heteronormative norms, offering alternatives to existing norms and redefining the boundaries of what is acceptable for Black women.

[2] According to Dorothy Hobson, the 'matriarch' in British soap operas is a well-established soap opera convention, depicted as 'married, widowed and a mother' who holds the position of authority and respectability within the community (Hobson, 2003 as cited in Neophytou 2012: 4). On the other hand, Cheers characterises the matriarch as an assigned role, highlighting the centrality of motherhood in the character and their position as an overseer of their families or social group (2017: 34). Throughout this dissertation the term matriarch is used to refer to female characters portrayed by Black women who are mothers, both married or widowed and serve as heads of their families and businesses.

gender stereotyping (Motsaathebe 2009), and representations of femininities (Neophytou, 2012.). While Onuh (2015) and Nehanda (2020) investigated matriarchal figures of *Uzalo* (2015 – Present), *The River* (2018 – 2024), and *The Herd* (2018) the studies focus on their representation and traditional female stereotypes.

In contrast, Viraj Suparsad's article on Sonto Molefe in *Gomora* (2020 - 2023) offers an alternative view to existing matriarch studies. Suparsad engages the concept of 'complicated femininity' and its representation in South African television through the matriarch (Suparsad, 2022: 1). Rather than taking a moral stance, Suparsad argues for the importance of depicting multifaceted representations of womanhood to challenge established patriarchal norms that women are confined within (Suparsad, 2022: 12). Suparsad's study provides an essential foundation for future research, including mine. My study provides an extensive examination of the matriarch on South African television through ideas of transgression. Furthermore, this study is also in conversation with Suparsad's ideas about complex Black womanhood and the need for nuanced engagements when reading the portrayal of matriarchs.

In addition to interpreting Black matriarchs in a nuanced manner, Suparsad highlights that often, patriarchal societies impose gendered norms on women, which are reinforced through media portrayals to uphold the existing social order (Suparsad, 2022: 1). These patriarchal norms tend to produce a stereotypical Black matriarch who is only depicted within motherhood and seldom challenges the existing status quo. Commenting on stereotypical depictions of Black women both Landers (2018) and Blose (2020) make similar findings in their studies of *Uzalo*, *Generations; The Legacy* and *Isidingo: The Need* respectively, they observe that the matriarch is essentialised to her role of mother, she succumbs to patriarchal ideologies at play in the narrative and often her identity is shaped by the men in her life (Landers 2018 & Blose 2020 in Suparsad 2022; 2).

Stereotypical representations of the Black matriarch have also been perpetuated through tropes. During the apartheid regime, the national restrictive and discriminatory policies dictated the kinds of depictions of Black people that would be on screen. Thus, they propagated specific ideas about Black people in society. Black women were often portrayed as domestic workers or maids. *The Villagers* (1976 – 1978) was one of South Africa's first and 'culturally significant' television dramas (Jacobs, 2019: 71). According to Jacobs (2019), the drama centred on the McRae family, and the plotlines addressed issues of class and 'manners' among English white

South African's (Jacobs 2019: 71). *The Villagers* was notorious for averting its attention away from racial politics to the extent of casting the role of the domestic servant to a white woman, despite many low-skilled workers being Black (Jacobs, 2019: 71). While, the drama did not cast Black actors in these roles, they perpetuated the invisibility of Black women.

The 'mammy figure' is another stereotypical trope that has been associated with Black female characters on screen. Knoetze (2016) finds such representations in *7de Laan*, noting that most of the depictions of all 'brown' females in the soap opera are reduced to the 'the wise, motherly type,' a mother figure who is always sympathetic and lends advice (Knoetze, 2016: 39). In like manner, Vannessa Lynn Neophytou points to a variation of the 'mammy figure' in her study of *Generations: The Legacy*. The audience members affectionately referred to the character of Ruby as 'Mam Ruby.' The soap constructed Ruby as the 'mother of the community,' a symbol of motherly care and a nurturer. She embodied the counsellor of the community, offering help in the form of practical needs (Neophytou, 2012: 6). Furthermore, Neophytou problematises the fact that despite Ruby being a business owner, she is seldom depicted outside of the kitchen (Neophytou, 2012: 6). Thus, the soap limits her to the domestic sphere and does not engage the multifaceted nature of her character. In the soap opera, she is categorised as the 'strong woman/matriarch,' yet her construction also exemplifies the 'mammy' archetype, thereby revealing the overlap in the portrayals of these two distinct character tropes. Furthermore, the centrality of motherhood is a common theme across both characterisations.

Mzansi Magic has embraced the rise of the Black matriarch as a protagonist in the last seven years, through characters such as Queen Mosadi Kwena *The Throne* (2018 -2019), MaNgadi *The Herd* (2018 - 2019), Lindiwe Dikana *The River* (2018 -2024), Harriet Khoza *The Queen* (2016 - 2023) and Sonto Molefe *Gomora* (2020 - 2023). To date, a relatively small body of literature is concerned with this phenomenon. Indeed, it requires scholarly scrutiny, particularly an investigation of the construction of these characters. Are they portrayed as complex, three-dimensional, multifaceted characters, or do they simply add to the existing depictions of typical representations of the Black matriarch? I aim to explore this question in this study.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TELEVISION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Following the inauguration of democracy, soap operas have emerged as instruments for the reconfiguration of South African national identities, while also serving as sites for reflection on social and political transformations. These programs were broadcast on the national channels of the country, TV2, 3, and TV4, to act as tools for altering perspectives on race and promoting 'aspirational politics'[3] within the Black South African community (Jacobs, 2019: 63). The SABC added three more channels between the years 1982 and 1985 (Pecora et al., n.d.). Furthermore, the representation of Black women in soap operas carries significant political and cultural implications within post-apartheid South Africa, where issues of race, gender, and identity remain deeply intertwined with the nation's tumultuous past.

In addition, the introduction of television in South Africa during the mid-1970s was brought about by the apartheid government, which had initially resisted the medium. In contrast to other developed countries, such as those in the global north, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) did not commence its first broadcast until two decades later (Smit, 2016). According to Jacobs (2019), the government wholly owned the initial television channel, and for over fifteen years, SABC TV held an unparalleled monopoly[4] (2019: 67). Although South Africa initiated its transition towards democracy in the 1980s and subsequently conducted its inaugural democratic elections in 1994, it is nonetheless pertinent to note that throughout the majority of the twentieth century, the populace of South Africa endured a system of racist governance dominated by a white minority (Jacobs, 2019: 67). Furthermore, during this period, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) functioned as a medium of communication that served the interests of the apartheid government (Jacobs, 2019: 67).

Considering this history, television dramas during apartheid were targeted explicitly at white viewership, predominantly showcasing white actors and employing exclusively white production teams (Jacobs, 2019: 67). However, these shows were not officially categorised as

[3] The story lines and characters of *Generations* represented the aspirational politics commonly associated with the Black middle and working class in South Africa, while also emphasising discourses surrounding Black empowerment. The television series, *Isidingo*, portrayed the compromises and reconciliatory politics that characterised the political and economic transition. Both television programs and soap operas, in general, were primarily focused on the cultivation of an "aspirational viewer" (Jacobs, 2019).

[4] In 1986, the establishment of a subscription-based broadcaster called Electronic Media Network broke the television broadcast monopoly held by SABC. (Pecora et al., n.d.).

soap operas as this label was reserved only for popular American soaps *Loving* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, the local apartheid dramas exhibited similarities reminiscent of the soap opera genre in terms of their form and narrative (Jacobs, 2019: 71). This suggests that local apartheid dramas were intended for a specific demographic and, through their narratives, effectively portrayed the 'imagined worlds of white South Africa' (Jacobs, 2019: 71).

Drawing on and shaped by the socio-political transition in the nation, soap operas aired on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) following 1994 assumed significant roles in the construction of national identities and political ideologies. These televised dramas also played a crucial role in contemplating and comprehending the profound changes resulting from the conclusion of apartheid, the establishment of a new political agreement, the emergence of democracy, and the establishment of an entirely new constitutional framework, among other changes (Jacobs, 2019: 68). The soap operas garnered the highest viewership on local television and presented narratives that served as exemplars for transforming racial attitudes, particularly within the Black South African community. Moreover, these shows played a significant role in fostering aspirational politics (Jacobs, 2019: 64). The focus of local drama had changed, prompting the entities responsible for producing soap operas to actively participate in the political transition and establish new standards for a 'new' South Africa (Jacobs, 2019: 64). While *Generations* (1993-2014) has been widely regarded as the inaugural post-apartheid soap opera, Jacobs challenges this claim and asserts that *Egoli*, which debuted on the cable channel M-Net in April 1992, holds the distinction of being the first soap opera aired in post-apartheid South Africa (Jacobs, 2019). Anderson (2003) echoes Jacobs (2019) concerning soap operas, noting that South African soap operas during this time were created within a guideline that served to promote 'one nation viewing' and 'rainbow nation TV' (2003: 151). Despite being an Afrikaans soap opera, SABC 2's 7*de Laan* (2000 – 2024) also forms part of this configuration as a 'non-racial drama series to unite viewers' (Knoetze 2016: 33). The soap opera constructs a community that seems to have realised a racially integrated society and shies away from commentary on the nation's history. Knoetze (2016) observes that the soap's fictional community mirrors the aspirational values that are in line with the 'rainbow nation' agenda (2016: 34).

One could argue that the importance attributed to changing views on race and 'aspirational politics' in post-apartheid television outweighed the attention given to gender issues, as we will observe in the following section. Studies by Neophytou (2012), Thabethe (2008), and

Motsaathebe (2009) corroborate this perspective. Through their examination of *Generations* (1993 – 2014), they illustrate how initial portrayals of Black women were dominated by considerations of race and class rather than gender. Consequently, there is a need to critically analyse portrayals of Black female characters with a focus on agency and transgression, to address this imbalance on screen.

Generations (1994 – 2014) *and Isidingo* (1998 - 2020)[5] were two of South Africa's most enduring and highly regarded soap operas, both held prominent positions in the prime-time television lineup of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) for approximately the initial two decades. Both television shows are considered influential and significant, as they strongly relate to the political transformations during South African liberation. The narrative arcs of these television programmes and subsequent ones aired on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) were aligned with the newly established public objective of fostering a specific type of audience, referred to as the 'aspirational viewer' (Jacobs 2019). This 'aspirational viewer' was characterised as being receptive to the ideals of capitalism and the market economy and was expected to flourish within the altered landscape of political and, presumably, economic liberation (Jacobs, 2019).

Isidingo (1998 – 2020) and *7de Laan* (2000 – 2024) have officially ended their run on SABC 3 and 2 respectively. However, *Generations* has had a remake since 2014 and is now known as *Generations: The Legacy.* These are important to mention when understanding their impact on the images of Black female characters that have emerged in the post-apartheid era. The framing of the Black matriarch in these early post- apartheid soap operas did not significantly challenge the marginal position of Black women onscreen. It is evident that gender-related issues were not central to the narrative across all three soap operas. While class and race were addressed in *Generations* through ideas of the 'aspirational viewer', the Black woman remained behind. Furthermore, in *7de Laan*, she continued to be portrayed as invisible and stoic, with her role associated with servitude and domesticity, despite tangible changes in the new democratic era. The selected texts examined in this study, created two decades after the dawn of democracy attempt to redress these representational issues.

[5] The television series was titled *Isidingo: The Need* from its inception until 2001.

WHY TRANSGRESSION?

The concept of transgression as a theoretical framework is pertinent when considering the historical, political and cultural positioning of Black women in South Africa. Engaging with the discourse of transgression allows for the interrogation and disruption of sociocultural and socio-political boundaries that have historically marginalised and oppressed Black women. More importantly, this approach is essential for understanding the intersectional nature of oppression, which extends beyond race and gender to include class and sexuality. For instance, in the context of political struggle, Mamphela Ramphele's observation of the Black Consciousness Movement reveals that women's ideas were only valued when the women represented or inherited positions from the men in their lives. They had to assume what Ramphele coins as the 'honorary male status', a role that rendered them 'worthy' of being heard (Yates, et al, 1998: 91). This is indicative of the multiple layers of oppression Black women face due to their race, gender and class. In this context, women who were deemed transgressive were those who rejected the systemic injustices, refused to be silent and defied the limitations and sexist stereotypes imposed upon them. Noting the marginal position of women Ramphele asserts that:

> I think the focus on Black men has the unintended consequence of actually triggering in some of us the sense that we're more than just Black people who are oppressed; we were also Black women who were oppressed both by the very system that oppressed Black men and by the Black men themselves – the very sense of being silent, being invisible (Yates et al. 1998: 90).

By transgressing the cultural or social prescriptions of female behaviour, Black women resist oppression and 'take up space', challenging their traditional invisibility and creating room for representation and influence in previously marginalised domains. As Ramphele reminds us,

> In fact, there were times when he had difficulty with my being so determined and so insistent, so vocal in my opposition to things because he thought I was overstating things. I probably was, because if you have to move from silence, to be heard you literally have to scream. And I used to scream at those meetings, and they would silence me. I'd tell them, "You are talking rubbish", and they never forgave me for that (Yate et al, 1998: 93).

Black women who 'talk back' challenge social norms and redefine the identities of Black women, which have historically been shaped by racist and patriarchal systems in cultural

practice. Transgression, then, reveals what is deemed 'acceptable behaviour' for Black women and how these ideas are rooted in the political history of the country and are a construct of the hegemonic cultural and societal norms that maintain social order. Racist and patriarchal systems often perceive Black women who exist outside of these boundaries as threats or deviant. The iconic status of Winnie Madikizela Mandela as a symbol of transgressive Black womanhood is significant, as her individual public acts of transgression can be argued to have inspired collective activism, revealing the interrelated nature of personal empowerment and communal action. Suparsad's reflection suggests that Winnie Madikizela Mandela's defiance of the prescribed roles for Black women was a profoundly political act (2022: 6). Madikizela Mandela's contribution to reframing Black female identity opened new ways for Black women to express themselves and challenge traditional boundaries. These emergent forms of being can be said to be manifesting in fictional representations on screen. However, endorsing such transgressive depictions carries the risk of reinforcing harmful stereotypes that have long been associated with Black female characters in fiction and historical representations of Black bodies. The colonial discourses that produced 'essentialist attitudes towards African sexuality and corporeal difference' exemplify this concern (Lewis, 2011: 201).

For as far back as colonialism, the Black body and in particular the Black female body has been depicted through the reductionist lens of colonial settlers, who have represented it as 'grotesque, uncivilised, crudely sexual' (Lewis 2011: 199). In this context, the mere existence of the Black female body constitutes a transgression 'against nature, divinity or man' (Owen et al; 2007: 2). Ronit Frenkel's analysis of the 'Black Venus stereotype' concerning Sarah Bartmann[6] reveals how gender intersected with the white male representations of Blackness (Frenkel, 2008: 2). One could argue that the embodied experience of being perceived as the 'image of racialised sexual alterity' is itself a transgressive act (Frenkel, 2008: 2). As the following chapter will demonstrate, African literature is replete with representations of the 'deviant Black woman', perpetuating the 'mother and whore' dichotomy propagated by African male writers.

For example, the 'angry Black woman' trope which emerged during slavery in America, has its iterations on South African television through characters such as Patricia Kopong *The Lab*

[6] Due to the inconclusive evidence regarding Sarah Bartmann's birth name and the problematic Dutch spelling variations that incorporate the diminutive suffix '-tjie' (Gqola, 2018: 66), I have opted to employ the same spelling as feminist scholar Pumla Gqola. This approach acknowledges Bartmann's 'given' name on her baptismal record (Gqola, 2018: 66).

(2006 – 2009) and Dineo Mashaba *Generations* (1994 – 2013). The stereotype is defined by traits such as 'manipulation', 'aggression' and controlling behaviour, which reinforces a lack of empathy towards Black women (Webber, 2021: 8). These reductive and harmful caricatures can neglect the nuances of Black women's experiences, invalidate their struggles and contribute to internalised racism and sexism. Placing the trope in the sociopolitical context of America, Wendy Ashley (2014) argues that the features of 'the angry Black woman' may be indicative of how Black women navigate their oppression (2014: 28). To prevent treating Black women as abnormal, their portrayals should provide context for their anger and depict them with depth and complexity. Ashley (2014) further asserts that the 'basic function of anger is survival', citing examples of African American activists, such as Rosa Parks who used her rage about social injustice into 'justified and organised activism' (2014:28). As Ashley (2014) succinctly put its 'oppression, discrimination, and social inequality contribute to a facade that negatively categorizes culturally sanctioned, appropriately assertive responses as a violation of norms' (2014: 28).

However, the argument can still be made that transgressive actions of Black female characters can enable transformation and help to reconsider how we understand Black womanhood. It is essential to portray the complexity and agency of Black women, as, representing them as submissive or passive can perpetuate oppression. Additionally, individual acts of defiance may catalyse broader social movements, as seen with Winnie Madikizela Mandela's influence on feminist discourse in South Africa. When examining criminal or violent behaviour a nuanced approach is required, in the same way, 'men are given room to not be defined by one action or choice alone so the same should extend to women' (Suparsad, 2022: 7). Given the underrepresentation or misrepresentation of Black women on screen, often there lies a responsibility on single characters to carry the weight of Black women in their community. Thus, violent transgressions when performed by Black characters should not be interpreted as reinforcing stereotypes, but rather as challenging and reframing public perceptions of Black fictional characters. The ethical implications of the depictions of Lindiwe Dikana and Harriet Khoza, raise important questions, but it is crucial that Black women are portrayed across the full spectrum of emotions, behaviours and experiences, even those behaviours that may be considered 'negative'. What is important then, is that the narrative provides context and avoids the essentialisation of these characters to a limited set of traits. Both *The River* and *The Queen* do so for the matriarchs in this study.

The questions raised by Chappell and Young (2017) in *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction and Film,* are applicable in addressing the significance of transgressive Black female characters in South African television. They query why the figure of transgressive woman remains central in contemporary narratives, even in a post-feminist period that has claimed to have achieved gender equality (Chappell and Young; 2017: 1). First, Black female characters who have defied social and cultural norms remain subject to patriarchal and misogynistic projections, leading to simplistic characterisations and binary representations of good and evil. Second, the growing depiction of the transgressive matriarch in South African television may also reflect or speak to the broader paradoxical sociopolitical and sociocultural position of Black women in the country. Scholars such as Ronit Frenkel and Pumla Gqola have highlighted the disconnect between the country's high representation of women in parliament and the persistent gender-based violence and conservative gender discourse in the private sphere (2008; 1) (2015: 64). Gqola's critique suggests that while gender-progressive debates may exist in 'official public spaces', the domestic and intermediary domains remain governed by entrenched patriarchal norms; where even 'highly empowered' women are expected to conform to traditional feminine ideals, or what she has coined as the 'cult of femininity' (2015: 65). This complex and contradictory sociocultural landscape may be shaping the representation of the transgressive Black matriarch in South African television.

The above arguments demonstrate the significance of transgression and its necessity when engaging Black women's position within systems of patriarchal oppression. Across various contexts, the discourse of transgression brings to light Black women's effort to reshape and assert their identities, as well as their contributions to cultural and social transformation.

The primary aim of this study then, is to explore how the transgressive behaviours of the matriarchal characters Lindiwe Dikana *The River* (2018 – 2024) and Harriet Khoza *The Queen* (2016– 2023), disrupt and complicate the portrayal of the matriarch archetype in South African television. Through a character analysis, narrative examination and a focus on specific themes, the study investigates how the transgressions of the selected matriarchs challenge and expand upon existing depictions of the Black matriarch. In addition, the study seeks to compare contemporary matriarchal figures with the traditional matriarch archetypes commonly portrayed in South African television.

This study also seeks to contribute to understanding how gender and transgression are portrayed on South African television. Furthermore, it aims to offer insight into the evolving representations of matriarchal figures in contemporary television. The analysis will focus specifically on the characters in this study, examining specific episodes and scenes that exemplify their transgressive behaviour.

By offering a comprehensive examination of how these characters introduce nuance to the matriarch archetype, the study aims to inform future scholarship on gender depiction on screen and potentially shape the approaches to how we depict and interpret Black women who transgress societal norms. Importantly, this study aims to move beyond reductive and stereotypical characterisations and interrogate these complex and multifaced portrayals of these transgressive figures. In doing so, it seeks to reveal insights about Black women's complex social positioning in various contexts.

Considering these discoveries, this study's research question is: To what extent does Harriet Khoza and Lindiwe Dikana's transgressive nature add complexity to the depiction of the matriarch archetype on South African television?

THEORY

This study combines feminist television criticism and Black feminist theory.
In order understand the relationship between feminist discourse and television, it is necessary to consider the influence of the feminist movement in the global north towards the critique of images of women on screen.

The origins of feminist television criticism can be traced back to the 1970s, and the 1980s, when second-wave feminist from the United States and Europe turned their attention toward popular television texts (Brundson & Spigel, 2008). Charlotte Brundson and Lynn Spiel (2008) provide a thorough examination of the advancements within the television industry, the establishment of television studies as an academic discipline, and the intersection of feminist movements with cultural and political contexts.

Brundson and Spiegel assert that during this period, the impulse of feminist critics stemmed from the need to speak out and disassociate themselves from the traditional role of the 'housewife' (Brundson & Spigel, 2008). The soap opera, a prominent genre of the twentieth century primarily focused on women-centred narratives, was the first subject of inquiry by feminist critics. In addition, the depiction of the dichotomy between the traditional housewife and her liberated counterpart, commonly referred to as the 'new woman[7]' or 'working girl', was set in situational comedies and dramas that took place both in the domestic and workplace was too an area of investigation (Brundson & Spigel, 2008). Thus, at the time, feminist critics were concerned with the housewife and the 'repetitive temporal structure;' the routine tasks performed by her, and the narratives intended for her which were the images of women as housewives.

Above all, feminist television critics contested the prevailing notion that private and public spheres are inherently separate, positing that the traditional role of women as housewives confined to domestic spaces perpetuates the perception of politics as a public domain predominantly occupied by men (Brundson & Spigel, 2008). Feminist television critics, similarly, to second-wave feminists, espoused the notion that the 'personal is political' (Brundson & Spigel, 2008). In the context of South Africa's history of apartheid and the ongoing struggles with inequality and social injustice, the personal experiences of women can be seen as political. Feminist writer Lauretta Ngcobo's work in African literature gives insight into the apartheid government's construction and regulation of motherhood as a means to control and exploit Black labour (Timlin, 2017: 23). Assuming a Marxist feminist ideology, Ngcobo (1990) argues that 'unproductive labour' such as domestic and caregiving work, should be recognised as 'reproductive labour' that contributes to the upkeep of capitalist society, rather than being dismissed merely as personal (Ngcobo as cited in Timlin, 2017: 23). Instead of sustaining the romanticisation of motherhood, Ngcobo's writing explores the intersections of apartheid law and Nguni customary law, revealing how patriarchal oppression operates within these systems and the resulting personal and political struggle of women (Timlin, 2017: 24).

[7] Pumla Gqola (2016) identifies the New South African Woman (NSAW) as a trope that emerged in the first two decades of post-apartheid South Africa (2016: 120). The trope was characterised by a shift from 'hegemonic apartheid femininities and imagined agentic existence of women', manifesting both as fictional, journalistic constructions as well as actual historical figures (Gqola, 2016: 121). The trope was an attempt to redress the restrictions, and the multiple layers of oppression faced by women. Yet, unlike her counterparts in other nations who are undergoing political transition and the 'new woman' portrayed in American soap operas of the 1970's, the NSAW does not entirely 'transgress the stereotypical roles of good wife' (Gqola, 2016: 122). Instead as Gqola puts it, 'she represents evidence of women's empowerment but not necessarily feminism' both fictional representation and in actuality (Gqola, 2016: 122).

Whereas feminist television criticism primarily originates from the United States and Europe, feminist interventions in cultural texts and the images of women have manifested themselves in the African continent in distinct ways. Commenting on the representation of gender in African cinema, Sheila Petty's (1996) perspective aligns with the views espoused by critics of the global North. Petty observes that the issues of women, often confined within the domestic realm, receive inadequate attention in favour of public sphere interests and nationalist concerns. She further argues that women's issues tend to be marginalised and overshadowed by what is seen as more significant concerns of the nation-state (Petty 1996 cited in Dipio, 2014a). This prioritisation of national matters over women's issues is also evident in the South African context. Early television soap operas in the new democracy prioritised a narrative of a 'rainbow nation' and 'one nation viewing', often neglecting gender-progressive images of women on screen. Both Motsaathebe (2009) and Knoetze (2016) align with this view in their examination of post-apartheid portrayals of women in *Generations* (1994 – 2014) and *7de Laan* (2000 – 2024) noting that they either depicted women as subordinate to men or maintained stereotypes that were produced during the apartheid era of television.

Brundson and Spigel (2008) note that some early feminist television scholars criticise the soap opera genre for essentialist and derogatory images of women. Rebecca Feasey, alert to these observations, presents an intriguing view in her chapter titled *Soap Opera: Challenging the "Good" Mother Stereotype*. According to Feasey, the soap opera genre attempts to claim the public sphere as a personal realm and in doing so, makes both spheres indistinct (Feasey, 2012). She contends that the genre in and of itself is a site for women to exert their influence not only within the confines of the domestic sphere but also in the public domain. Their presence, discourse, and expressions of emotion disrupt conventional social hierarchies and gender norms within the genre (Feasey, 2012). Although the soap opera genre possesses the capacity to subvert traditional gender norms (Knoetze, 2016), one could argue that the inaugural post-apartheid soaps in South Africa failed to actualise this emancipatory potential, opting instead to perpetuate the colonial and apartheid-era stereotypes, such as the 'mammy' figure.

Moreover, Feasey argues that the prominence of female characters, the portrayal of empowered women, and the influence of the matriarch figure all serve as sources of potential gratification for female viewers and potential aggravation for feminist critics of television (Feasey, 2012). Brundson maintains that.

> although the strong woman must withstand repeated buffetings of fate due to the formal demands of the genre, seeing these women live through crisis after crisis does not detract from audience interest in and investment in such figures. (Brundson 2008 as cited in Feasey).

It is noteworthy to point out here that the strong woman in the soap opera genre overlaps with the 'strong Black woman' trope attached to Black female characters which will be explored in greater depth in the subsequent sections. For Feasey, soap operas offer a platform for portraying influential female figures, consequently affording women a fictitious representation infrequently accessible within mass media. The genre portrays women from various social classes, age groups, and personality types, providing multiple avenues for identification and fostering empathy among female audience members. The presence of robust and psychologically plausible female characters, rather than relying on stereotypes, contributes significantly to the understanding of women's engagement with this genre (Hobson 2003, as cited in Feasey 2012). The issue of race complicates the ideas that are suggested by Feasey. Black female characters who have been constructed as 'robust' and 'psychologically plausible' have often been relegated to the archetype of the 'villainess'. Of course, this is not unique to Black female characters, but a genre convention of the soap opera, that presents a range of feminine identities (Neophytou, 2012; 4). The 'villainess' is premised on the subversion of the societal and genre ideals of womanhood, she is juxtaposed against other female characters, thereby reinforcing the ideal notions of femininity (Neophytou, 2012; 9). Characters such as Ntsiki Lukhele[8] and Kethiwe from *Generation*s (1994 – 2013) were reviled not for being morally flawed but for refuting the expected codes of 'passivity, virtue, nurturer and mother' (Neophytou, 2012: 9). At the time Lukhele simply departed from the stereotypes of Black female characters, by being portrayed as assertive, having autonomy and being outspoken. The

[8] Pamela Nomvete's autobiography, 'Dancing to the Beat of the Drum', explores her experiences of fame and public reception stemming from her portrayal of the character of Ntsiki. She reflects on her onscreen persona as the 'bitch' character consumed her real-life identity, resulting in her isolation to avoid being accosted (Nomvete, 2012: 23).

key issue with such representations is that they seldom offer redemptive arcs, instead portraying villainy as innate to their character, which is often not the case for male characters of similar archetypes. Lukhele's downfall on *Generations* was depicted through the use of soap opera genre conventions, punishment and death. Her demise was not only gruesome as she was poisoned to death, but she was also killed by a male antagonist, which in itself presents a range of subtextual interpretations. Sibusiso Dlomo's, role in killing Ntsiki Lukhele could be interpreted as a reinforcement of hegemonic patriarchal ideals, that symbolises justice or punishment of the 'deviant' woman.

Feasey posits that the female viewer can derive 'pleasure' and a sense of empowerment from the soap opera, which celebrates women's strength, power, and control within the domain of family life. In addition, she points out that this is especially true when considering that the soap operas 'most devoted viewers are predominantly younger, working-class women, many of whom spend their days caring for young children at home' (Geraghty 2005 as quoted in Feasey 2012). Feasey's observation that female viewers derive pleasure and empowerment from soap operas that embrace women's strength and power within the domestic sphere resonates with the curiosity that prompted my examination of transgressive presentations of Black female characters on television. In patriarchal African cultures, the domestic domain is often a space where women are expected to maintain hetero-patriarchal values, even at their own expense.

As with the second wave of feminism, feminist television criticism has its inadequacies; the images of women with which these theorists are concerned are largely limited to those of white middle-class women. Bonnie Dow argues that television's images of feminism are most entirely transmitted through white, middle-class, heterosexual female protagonists (Dow, 1996). She asserts that this emphasis on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women has dominated contemporary feminism and is in alignment with the demographics of television's intended audience in some national contexts (Dow, 1996). Dow addresses the implications of the deliberate omission of diverse women (race, class, and sexuality) and their various forms of feminism in her book, *Prime-time Feminism*. However, it is not this study's primary objective to unpack the shortcomings of feminist criticism further but rather to advocate for the use of a feminist framework in the study. Existing scholarship on South African television has investigated representations of Black female characters (Neophytou, 2012; Thabethe, 2008; Motsaathebe, 2009; Onuh, 2015; Nehanda, 2020). This study, however, examines portrayals

of Black matriarchal figures through a Black feminist thought framework that accounts for the intersections of gender, race, and class.

I situate the analysis of the selected texts within Black feminist thought which also emphasizes the importance of transgressing prevailing norms to understand marginalised voices. In her article*, Ufanele uqavile: Blackwomen, feminisms and Postcoloniality in Africa*, Pumla Gqola, examines the contributions of Black women's writing to discussions on gender, race, and postcoloniality. Gqola argues that this work has played a significant role in pushing boundaries and advancing new perspectives in these areas. According to Gqola (2001), contemporary theories about spaces centred around Black women are no longer solely focused on responding to white feminists, colonialism, patriarchy, and apartheid. Instead, these theories aim to reshape the world creatively, wherein internal differences are not perceived as a danger but as a valuable 'source of energy' (2001: 19). In her conclusion, she draws on the work of Nokhuthula Mazibuko, *Lady was a Mshoza*, to contemplate and envisage the endeavours of Blackwomen in the realms of postcolonialism, feminism, and Africa as performing something similar to Abomoshoza. These women were 'highly visible in townships, amapantsula were dangerous men and women' (Gqola, 2001: 19). The movement held a prominent position within the community, as its connections with 'glamour, transgression, and agency were perceived as appealing,' thereby influencing numerous individuals to become part of it (Gqola, 2001: 19).

> *Abomshoza,* the female, *mapantsula,* were transgressive women, dangerous women who questioned prescriptions on female behaviour in South African townships. They refused to be victims and were considered 'bad girls.' They prioritised their own needs and pushed the boundaries of what it meant to Black women in those days. From their narratives, several differences also emerge on the nature of their transgression and the limits they placed on their own behaviour. Although none of them live dangerously now, they all articulated a proudly womanist[9] consciousness. This was expressed in the level of agency and independence they teach younger Blackwomen[10] and girls, and a stern anti-gendered violence stance[11] (Gqola, 2001: 19).

[9] Womanist theory emerged in the 1970's and 1980's, developed by African American scholar and activist Alice Walker, in response to the inadequacies of white feminism and its failure to address the racial oppression experienced by Black women and women of colour (Harris, 2010: 3).

[10] In this article, Gqola does not explicitly unpack the rationale for the combined spelling of 'Blackwomen'. However, one can infer that the choice of this spelling is derived from Desiree Lewis observations of the development of feminism in South Africa in the early nineties, about Black women. That their identities and oppression are inextricably linked, operating within intersecting hierarchies as articulated in Black feminist thought (Lewis, 2013; 94). That is, how race and gender are mutually constitutive, such that Black women's experiences are shaped by and shape their racial identities, precluding the possibility of a unitary or 'essential' gender identity (Lewis, 2013; 94).

[11] Gqola makes parallels between the female Mapantsula in Nokuthula Mazibuko's documentary titled *Lady was a* Mshoza (2002) and Blackwomen's writing.

Gqola's invocation of Abomshoza as transgressive Black women seeks to describe how African feminist work is constantly challenging the meaning of what it means to be a Black woman. Gqola posits that the work of Black women can be seen as activist work, influenced by discourses on anti-racism, feminism, and postcolonialism (Gqola, 2001: 19). This transgressive behaviour is conceptualised as the embodiment of these influences.

Gqola's reference to Abomshoza is situated within a specific temporal context. However, this occurrence extends beyond its historical moment if we consider the women who marched to the Union Buildings, Pretoria in 1956 to protest pass laws as transgressive. In another time much later, those who led the #TotalShutDown in 2018 and marched to the Union Buildings to address the plague that is gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa. Here, transgression for Gqola, connotes deviance, protest and crossing a boundary. It brings to light the issues of race and gender that Black women must continually navigate and highlights the political nature of their transgressions. Gqola's exploration of transgression lies in the context of literary and cultural studies, however, it resonates with and can be applied to reading the images of Black matriarchs in this study who have been constructed (to an extent) to transgress patriarchal ideologies and social prescriptions of Black womanhood on screen. This study focuses on fictional characters rather than real-world political activists. However, I interpret the political background as informing conceptions of women and power in post-apartheid South Africa.

This conceptualisation of transgression is close to that of Christina Foust who speaks to transgression in the context of social and political rhetoric. Foust sees transgression as a mode of resistance that manifests as a 'violation of propriety' (Foust, 2010: 3). She describes transgressions as actions that disrupt norms within a particular context and by doing so demonstrates the arbitrary nature of social order as well as its need to be constantly 'maintained' to remain stable (Foust, 2010: 3). Thus, transgression has two main functions for Foust; disrupting social order and enacting alternatives to existing norms, transgression, then becomes an instrument for social change (Foust, 2010: 4). The idea of transgression as a tool for social and political change can be located within the broader sociocultural and sociopolitical context of the matriarchs in this study. Gqola and Foust's analyses of transgression provide a useful framework for interpreting both matriarchs in this study, especially Harriet Khoza in

The Queen, as they acknowledge the potential for transgressive acts to be understood as forms of resistance or protest, aimed at challenging the status quo. This perspective is particularly pertinent to the current study, which has previously argued that the depiction of the Black matriarch on South African television is predicated upon upholding social order and preserving patriarchal ideologies within society. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how the matriarchs expand and transform the portrayal of the matriarchal figure by moving beyond her traditional role in maintaining social order.

In contrast to the above, Julian Wolfrey in, *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time*, conceptualises transgression as more complex than merely violating restrictive social or cultural norms. Instead, Wolfrey cautions against the notions of 'acceptable deviance' and the 'binary oppositions' that often shape the ideas of transgression (Wolfrey, 2008: 3). Specifically, Wolfreys argues against the assumption that transgression is solely a violation, defiance or disruption of the status quo. Wolfrey posits that transgression can be seen as a dynamic and subversive act that interrogates and redefines the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or possible within a given context (Wolfrey, 2008:3). Thus, transgression allows for the transformation and formulation of novel meanings and possibilities that challenge established norms (Wolfrey, 2008: 4). Wolfrey's contention regarding the transformative nature of transgressions aligns with this study's previous arguments about how Black women explore alternative modes of being. Thus, these portrayals suggest that beyond subverting norms, the portrayals of crossing boundaries avail new possibilities. Wolfrey asserts that for an action to be considered transgressive, there must be an established set of rules or norms that the action violates. This study examines the cultural constructions of motherhood and widowhood, as well as the socially prescribed definitions of femininity, which constitute the established norms under investigation. The social structure relies on certain fundamental principles or axioms that define and delineate its identity and boundaries (Wolfrey, 2008: 4).

Wolfrey's definition of transgression is important for what it includes. The idea that beyond rebellion, transgression facilitates the emergence of novel significances, is a critical perspective when examining the transgressions depicted by Lindiwe Dikana *The River* (2018 -2024) and Harriet Khoza *The Queen* (2016 – 2023). Dikana and Khoza's criminal activities not only subvert societal prescriptions of femininity but depart from established representations of the matriarchal figure onscreen.

This study draws on the theoretical framework of Gqola, Foust and Wolfrey's conceptualisation of transgression to analyse Harriet Khoza's *The Queen* (2016 – 2023) and Lindiwe Dikana's *The River* (2018 – 204). Wolfrey's assertion that transgression can only occur where boundaries exist is a key premise informing the analysis, as the crossing of these boundaries is crucial in illuminating the necessity for transgression (Wolfrey, 2008). Furthermore, the analysis of Black women's transgression provides valuable insights into the societal limitations and pressures faced by Black South African women.

In this study, 'transgressive' will be used to describe utterances enactments or representations of deviance. These actions are characterised by; a deliberate violation of acceptable behaviour for Black women as prescribed within patriarchal structures; actions that can be considered as a mode of resistance, subversion and transcendence of established boundaries of heteronormative behaviour; acts that offer alternatives to existing norms. Thus, the matriarchs examined in this study through their various transgressions can be read as symbols of change as they enact motherhood, widowhood and femininity in novel meanings thereby redefining the boundaries of what is considered acceptable for Black women.

Furthermore, because this study conceptualises transgression as a discursive and performative act through which Black female protagonists subvert, negotiate and reconstruct the intersecting structures of patriarchy and social cultural norms, the idea of transgression then is understood as a critical site of resistance, subversion and meaning making. To further frame the analysis, I draw on three interlinked thematic dimensions of transgression; motherhood, widowhood and criminality each serving as a conceptual anchor through which the complexities and disruptive capacities of the matriarchal figures are examined.

Motherhood

I situate and define motherhood within the African context. In many African societies motherhood is said to be influenced by religious mythologies and local lore. It is predicated on self-sacrificing/giving and much more in the name of one's children. According to Akujobi in Africa, motherhood is an expectation and a woman's primary function is to be a mother 'child-bearer' regardless of her skills, desires and talents (Akujobi, 2011). Ngcobo echoes Akujobi in recognising that Africans perceive motherhood to be an expression of the fullness of womanhood. In the case of the matriarchs in this study motherhood is a contested terrain, where maternal subjectivity is intertwined with moral ambiguity, emotional manipulation and

criminality. Their roles as mothers challenge traditional African beliefs concerning motherhood and transcend the typical depictions of nurturer and selflessness, rather, they demonstrate maternal authority as intricate, placing motherhood as a productive site of transgressive possibility.

Criminality

In both texts under this study, Lindiwe and Harriet's engagements with crime transcend legal transgression. Their criminal behaviour suggests a rejection of conceptions of femininity constructed as docile, submissive and nurturing (Binder, 2021). The matriarchs' criminal transgression serves as a means of subversive agency. Most importantly, these criminal acts are seldom presented as senseless or gratuitous; rather, they are contextualised within social restrictions and are positioned as rational responses to socioeconomic marginalisation, patriarchal betrayal, or familial protection.

Widowhood

Widowhood emerges within this study as a liminal and catalytic condition that allows for and facilitates transgression. In South African television, the widow often appears as a subject position through reductive, moralising tropes. Widows are typically seen on television as passive bearers of grief, the embodiment of loss, or as morally ambiguous individuals associated with witchcraft, opportunism, or extreme ambition, especially when they inherit wealth. The study challenges and destabilises these limiting representations by drawing attention to characters such as Harriet Khoza. As a widow, Harriet has a socially ambiguous status which enables her to be free of patriarchal control.

Furthermore, her identity is not reducible to her late spouse, as is true when following Zulu traditional mourning customs. Her state of widowhood is depicted as a time of transformation, allowing her to regain power, redefine her identity, and exert matriarchal authority. In this sense, Harriet's transgressions challenge the normative assumptions that widowhood must be synonymous with submission, silence or invisibility. Widowhood serves as both a narrative device and a societal condition that justifies their transgression.

These concepts provide a robust and nuanced foundation for examining the varied forms of transgression that identify the matriarchs at the heart of this study. They present a contextually grounded, intersectionally informed theory of female transgression that is sensitive to the politics of depiction on post-apartheid South African television.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how the transgressive nature of Harriet Khoza and Lindiwe Dikana adds complexity to the depiction of the matriarch archetype on South African television. McKee (2001) and Smith, (2017) both describe textual analysis as a method used to analyse and examine messages as they appear through texts (2001: 3); (2017: 1). The method chosen is a textual analysis and discursive approach to their characterisation in the context of their respective shows, *The Queen* (2016 – 2023) and *The Rive*r (2018 – 2024). The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the recognition of the value of the interpretive model and its literary underpinning.

I will employ close textual analysis to investigate the thematic elements, narrative techniques and semiotic systems that produce transgression onscreen. This close textual analysis encompasses a multimodal examination that is complemented by a narrative analysis. In doing so, this approach recognises that meaning in televisual text is both a complex interplay of images, sound, narrative structure, performance and dialogue. Accordingly, I undertook detailed scene transcriptions, of both visual elements (framing, costume, body language), editing patterns (cuts pacing shot transitions) and dialogue. A critical synthesis of these multimodal elements was performed to determine the on-screen encoding of transgression. This attention to the formal elements is further informed by narrative analysis, which allows for a close reading of structure, character arcs and recurring tropes. By analysing how narrative techniques - such as exposition, character development, plot and moral ambiguity – shape the audiences' perceptions of characters such as Harriet Khoza and Lindiwe Dikana, this study investigates the adherence to and subversion of genre conventions in their portrayal. This combined methodology permits a more comprehensive analysis of how television's ideological functions are executed through aesthetic decisions, and how gendered power is narrated and visually represented. Through this framework, I attend to the ways in which Black womanhood, widowhood, motherhood and criminality are mediated, contextualised and contested across various semiotic levels. This allows for a nuanced analysis that transcends content to consider the form and structure of representation, which is vital in an emotionally charged and stylised medium such as the telenovela. This approach aims to address the limitations of a strictly scientific approach. Smith argues that some of the limitations of a scientific approach manifests as reductionism; the method neglects the complex, subjective and the 'interpretative' elements

of human experiences' that are key in comprehending sociohistorical occurrences or settings of culture (Smith, 2017: 3). Furthermore, it acknowledges the many ways in a text can be understood and utilised. As well as how meaning is 'revealed and experienced, with emphasis on 'sense-making, description and detail' (McKee 2003 in Smith, 2017: 3). Furthermore, the study employs Black feminist thought as a theoretical foundation for analysis.

The primary data sources for this study are the selected episodes from *The Queen* (2016 – 2023) and *The River* (2018 – 2024), specifically those featuring significant character establishment, development and plotlines clearly depicting acts of transgression. Due to this, a structuralist narrative theory guided the selection of scenes for close analysis, which is premised on the idea that not all narrative instances possess equivalent semiotic importance. Roland Barthes posits that narrative meaning arises from a series of functionally distinct units, each contributing uniquely to the development of the plot, character arc, and ideological constructs (Barthes, 1990: 171). This study adopts a more discriminative selection process, where scenes are chosen based on their structural significance within the broader narrative arcs of Harriet Khoza and Lindiwe Dikana. In doing so, the analysis preserves the integrity of the serial format and recognises the formal properties of television storytelling. This method also allows for a more context-sensitive reading of transgression, wherein its meaning is shaped not only by recurring themes (e.g., motherhood, widowhood, criminality, power) but also by the character's placement within a dynamic narrative structure. In this way, the study foregrounds the semiotic weight of specific events and resists reducing character complexity to generalised thematic patterns.

This approach is further aligned with televisual narrative theory, which emphasises temporality, accumulation, and episodic rhythm as constitutive of meaning in long-form storytelling. It thus enables an analysis that is both theoretically rigorous and medium-specific. The aim of this study, then, is not to provide a narrative trajectory of the selected texts but to identify where and how the matriarchs of this study exemplify transgressive acts. The first ten episodes are often used to establish the characters and plotlines of a show thus providing enough evidence for exploration. This close textual analysis of the transgressions of two Black matriarchs aims to investigate the implications of such portrayals on screen. Further, by conducting a reading of these texts, my interpretive position is highlighted. This study acknowledges the 'autonomy of the texts as signifiers in their own right, independent of the intentions of the author, producers, and the reception of the audience' (Fürsich, 2009).

Furthermore, it is critical to consider the narrative and aesthetic elements that demonstrate transgression in the text to enrich the methodological depth of this study. Both telenovelas in this study use flashbacks, climatic revelations, ellipses, and character arcs to help the audience grasp the moral ambiguity and power dynamics at play. These techniques not only illustrate the internal dialogue and emotions of Harriet Khoza and Lindiwe Dikana, but they also affect how their actions are morally considered and emotionally received. For example, the use of flashbacks frequently humanises seemingly cruel decisions by grounding them in past trauma, confounding the audience's perception of these women as entirely immoral. Even in scenes of obvious transgression, climactic moments, such as a character's emotional collapse after committing violence, rely on pace and tone adjustments to induce sympathy. Furthermore, character development arcs commonly shift between redemption and relapse, maintaining a cyclical logic of power, vulnerability, and survival that is consistent with Black feminist readings of complexity in Black femininity (Gqola, 1998; Msimang, 2018).

The introduction of this study highlighted the burgeoning presence of the Black matriarch as a central character on South African television, particularly on the Mzansi Magic channel. Mzansi Magic, a pay-tv satellite platform, is positioned to cater to the interests and experiences of the Black South African middle class, offering a space for cultural representation and narratives that resonate with their specific perspectives and lived realities (Smit & Bosch, 2020).

In addition, Mzansi Magic, a pay-tv satellite platform, seeks to be an 'authentic South African entertainment channel' by focusing on locally produced content (Abiolu & Teer-Tomaselli, 2018: 10). Unlike the national broadcaster SABC, which is guided by a nationalist mandate, the Mzansi Magic structure provides Black South Africans with ‘socially relevant programming’ (Smit & Bosch, 2020: 15). This creates an interesting space for exploring depictions of Black female characters outside the dominant national discourses that govern SABC programming. Lindiwe Dikana's *The River* (2018 – 2024) and Harriet Khoza's *The Queen* (2016 – 2023) were selected as they form part of the inaugural introduction of the Black matriarch in a leading role on television. This means that as protagonists they are central to the events of the narrative structure.

The exploration of the research question is limited to the two matriarchs in the study and may not represent the full spectrum of matriarch archetypes. Critics of textual analysis contend that a singular focus on the text alone fails to provide a comprehensive understanding and is presumed to yield partial conclusions that must be supported by audience responses to the production context. However, Frusich argues that these assumptions shortchange the central contribution of textual analysis, which is its capacity to illuminate and examine critically the fundamental ideologies and cultural significances inherent in media texts (Fürsich, 2009). According to Jason Smith (2017), other critiques of textual analysis from a qualitative approach are that multiple readings of a text are broad and may reflect a researcher bias in the analysis (Smith, 2017: 4). However, Smith contends that posing a specific research question and engaging in a reasonable interpretive reading can address these limitations (Smith, 2017: 4). I am cognizant of the fact that the meaning is not fixed, which means my interpretations of Lindiwe Dikana and Harriet Khoza only present possible ways of reading their portrayals. Smith asserts that the research question in the qualitative approach is 'grounded in the relevant literature of the subject area being studied', positioning the current study into conversation with previous studies (Smith, 2017: 4).

While this study offers a critical and original contribution to the scholarship on South African television and Black matriarchal representation, it is necessary to acknowledge several limitations that shaped the scope, focus, and interpretive boundaries of the research. Firstly, the decision to centre the analysis on only two characters—Harriet Khoza and Lindiwe Dikana was informed by a structuralist narrative theory and the centrality of these figures within the narrative structure of *The Queen* and *The River*, respectively. However, this narrow focus may inadvertently limit the generalisability of the findings. These characters, while richly complex and transgressive, do not exhaust the spectrum of Black matriarchal representation in South African televisual narratives. Their social positioning as affluent, urban, and heterosexual elite women potentially omits the diverse realities of working-class, rural, queer, or differently situated Black women within the broader cultural landscape.

Secondly, while the study integrates Black feminist theoretical frameworks, the textual analysis primarily foregrounds narrative and character dynamics, with limited engagement with audience reception or ethnographic perspectives. This omission limits opportunities to interrogate how audience interpret, resist, or reconfigure the meanings of transgression as represented on screen.

Thirdly, the study could have benefited from a more sustained discussion of the industrial and creative processes that shape character construction. While the role of the channel has been explored, a detailed engagement with the creative choices made by scriptwriters, directors and producers could have benefited the study more as well as the structural forces that constrain or enable these choices would have provided a richer account of how antiheroic femininity is ideologically and aesthetically mediated.

Finally, the analysis is limited by its linguistic and formal scope. The study primarily examines English-language dialogues and does not fully attend to the multilingual or visual aesthetics (e.g., mise-en-scène, costuming, sound design) that also contribute to meaning-making within telenovela storytelling. As such, future research might adopt a more interdisciplinary or multimodal lens to capture the fuller semiotic range of these texts.

Despite these constraints, the limitations themselves offer productive avenues for future inquiry. They do not undermine the validity of the findings but rather illuminate the partial and situated nature of all interpretive research, particularly in media studies where representation, reception, and production intersect in complex ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the focus of this study is on the matriarch in the telenovela narrative structure, in South African television the dominant portrayals of Black female characters began in the soap opera genre. Thus, it is necessary to begin looking at the formation of these characters in this genre. In addition, it appears that the genre categories (soap opera, telenovelas, and drama) have been used interchangeably over time, even by broadcasting channels (TVSA 2016 & 2018). Despite these overlaps in defining the television shows and how they have been adapted, the selected texts in this study do fall under the category of telenovela according to their respective channel releases. This section provides a review of the existing scholarship on the portrayal of Black female characters in South African television.

As was pointed out in the introduction to this paper, the post-apartheid era has maintained the stereotypical images of Black female characters on screen. In her article, *Madam and Eve*, Gail Smith critically examines how Black bodies have gained visibility in mainstream media. Smith focuses explicitly on the portrayal of Eve, a Black maid character, in the cartoon series Madam and Eve. She argues that Eve is portrayed in a manner that essentialises her as a domestic worker, thereby perpetuating a stereotype of marginalised Black femininity (Smith, 1996: 33). According to Smith (1996), the cartoon strip is predicated upon Black stereotypes that fail to confront the prevailing dominance of white supremacy (1996: 34). Smith (1996) argues that the legitimisation of white stereotypes regarding Black experiences fails to acknowledge the significance of constructing Black female subjectivity as a form of political resistance (Smith, 1996: 34).

Furthermore*, Generations* (1993 – 2014) *and Isidingo* (1998 – 2020) garnered recognition for their ground-breaking narratives that delve into racial and class discourse, thus playing a significant role in the nation's societal transformation. It is worth noting, that these shows have faced scrutiny regarding their portrayals of Black women, albeit to a lesser degree in the case of *Isidingo*. Thabethe (2008) explores the portrayal of Black African women, specifically focusing on how their bodies are represented. She observes that Eurocentric ideas of beauty in the show are imposed on Black bodies, such as, 'thinness, straight hair, western style of clothing' noting that 'there is a perpetuating of the stereotype that whiteness is synonymous with beauty' (Thabethe, 2008: 82). In a similar vein, Motsaathebe (2009) analyses gender stereotyping in *Generation*s (1993 – 2014). He argues that while men and women are depicted in significant roles, there is still a tendency to portray men as more superior than women (Motsaathebe, 2008: 445). According to Motsaathebe, the show fails to enhance the position of female characters, instead portraying them as lacking in strength, despite assigning them roles of responsibility (2009: 45). Nzimande (2021) acknowledges Motsaathebe's argument, although she argues that it has shortcomings concerning audiences' reception/interpretation of the images produced on television. She comments, 'people actively choose what to accept and what to reject' (Nzimande, 2021). Nzimande's stance resonates with the cultural environment of an informed audience, as in one that can analyse and discern what they consume.

However, she overlooks the plausibility of television shows being used as instruments for shaping public opinion and safeguarding specific ideologies (Burgess, R, C M et al., 2011). For instance, depicting women who are in professional positions as submissive and dependent

on male intervention could serve a specific agenda rather than reflect reality. These portrayals along with the 'maid' Eve (Madam and Eve) the 'mammy figure' of Mam Ruby (*Generations)* and Charmaine Beukes (*7de Laan*) have contributed to the constructions of early depictions of Black female characters in post-apartheid South African television. Milton (2008) argues that such stereotypical representations reflect the symbiotic relationship between race and gender, they simply sustain 'apartheid stereotypes' (Milton 2008 cited in Knoetze 2016: 39).

Indeed, these stereotypes have also manifested themselves in the portrayal of the Black matriarch. Much of the literature on the matriarch figure in South African telenovelas, acknowledges the characterisation of this archetype with the binaries of good and evil and the centrality of motherhood in the characters' identity (Onuh, 2015; Nehanda, 2020; Suparsad, 2022). Nicolette Nehanda (2020), in her study, illustrates both stances. She concludes that traditional female stereotypes are maintained in South African telenovelas. Nehanda questions the portrayals of Lindiwe Dikana in *The River* (2018 - 2023) and Mngadi in *The Herd* (2018) asserting that the matriarchs of the respective shows are portrayed within binaries, as 'quintessential housewives, house servants, docile, dull, ugly and dependent on men as, immoral, violent and promiscuous Jezebels' (Nehanda, 2020: 121). For Nehanda, constructing the two matriarchs through the evil seductress trope not only reinforces the binary of good and evil but reflects a lack of dynamic images of Black women. Nehanda suggests that this echoes the fatal woman of 1940s America who was portrayed as resisting traditional gender and familial roles (Fletcher 2007:6 in Nehanda 2020: 42).

Similarly, Onuh (2015), in her study, examining the representation of two Zulu matriarchs in *Uzalo* found that the female characters were constructed within good and evil binaries, 'portrayed within the parallel worlds of crime and religion, heroine and villains, good and bad' (Onuh, 2015). In addition, her findings also revealed that the oppositions were not 'clear-cut,' as the two characters were constructed to have complex personalities. Both characters exhibited traits of the other. While Onuh's study observes the contradictions in the character's construction, she does not engage the implications of these contradictions; instead attributes them to the rigid readings of the binary oppositions. Both Onuh and Nehanda's studies' approaches do not allow them to engage the ambiguities in the characterisations of the matriarchs.

Commenting on depictions of the Black matriarchs in the South African telenovela genre. Nzimande observes that the characters of Mkhabayi (I*sibaya),* MaNdlovu (*Imbewu*), and MaNcgobo (*Uzalo*) serve as exemplars of 'strong' women and offer alternative representations of Black women. However, this description and characterisation as 'strong' places these women within the 'strong Black woman' trope which immortalises the detrimental stereotypes and expectations surrounding Black women. The 'strong woman/matriarch' is also a soap opera convention that is characterised by traits of independence, problem-solving skills (often of other characters), domesticity, 'pillar of strength' or her friends and preserving or enduring betrayal from romantic relationships (Neophytou, 2012). The 'strong Black woman' trope originated and was formulated to deny the systematic victimisation of Black women in the United States of America, and the impact of this trope creates a contradiction where Black women are socialised to rely upon their victimisation to obtain help. The trope associates the Black woman's body with resilience, self-sacrifice and caretaker - 'mammy' (Cater & Rossi, 2019). Ultimately, creating perceptions around Black women as the perfect model of a slave, rendering them as not worthy of help and deflecting responsibility for abuse. Therefore, the 'strong' woman/matriarch character type in the soap opera has the undertones of the strong Black woman trope of the United States when applied to Black female characters on South African television. Msimang (2018) argues that the word 'strong' is contentious, I argue, that especially when applied to Black women (2018: 28). Instead, when speaking about Black women she offers the word 'strength' to describe an individual's capacity to endure pain (Msimang, 2018: 28). The shift here is that where 'strong' is associated with 'stoicism', 'strength' acknowledges the humanness of Black women and does not celebrate the notion of Black women as being 'ever-hardy' and 'never vulnerable' (Msimang, 2018: 29).

The matriarch is not an innate stereotype but an assigned role; described as a woman who exercises her authority over a family, group or state (Cheers, 2017). The literature on the matriarch suggests what Neophytou argues in her study that these characters remain firmly constructed within the discourse of heteronormativity and the dichotomies of good and evil (Neophytou, 2012). Thus, they do not go beyond the pervasive images of matriarchs whose identities have been confined to the 'ideal' mother[12] within the heterosexual context, not framed beyond their identities as mothers and as I have illustrated in the introduction, they are

[12] The motherhood mystic is based on normative assumptions of femininity which informs the identity of mother (Neophytou, 2012.).

seen in relation to their male counterparts. Moreover, in keeping with the ideas of Black matriarchs in heteronormative and patriarchal societies they are to uphold the values and beliefs of patriarchy in the context of cultural and social norms. Further, as evidenced by Onuh's study, the burden of morality is also placed on these women, hence the continual construction within binaries. It is these characterisations that render the matriarch onscreen as stereotypical and reveal what Knoetze points out 'that representations of gender and race are interrelated' (Knoetze, 2016: 39).

Whereas soap operas have been criticised for their stereotypical gender roles, the telenovela navigates issues of gender differently. Tufte (2009) argues that the telenovela is governed by spatial and temporal locations within which women exist, that is usually in the household and other areas in this space. There is also what Tufte calls the 'hybrid space' where both men and women interact in a common social setting, 'where power struggles will ensue since there is no clarity whether the space falls within the jurisdiction of the male or female domain' (Tufte 2008 cited in Nzimande, 2021)

This hybrid space is the dominant arena in which Lindiwe Dikana and Harriet Khoza are depicted. For instance, Lindiwe's negotiation with her employee Thapelo Mokoena happens in her home office which mirrors the typical masculine undertones of a 'man cave' often assigned to businessmen on screen. It features an antique dark brown bookshelf, a similar coloured leather chair and a wooden dark brown office table which is neatly organised next to a whiskey canister. Lindiwe Dikana not only transgresses the genre convention concerning space but also asserts her power in that domain, claiming it as hers. Conversely, in the selected scenes of examination, Harriet Khoza is seen mostly in the kitchen, bedroom and backyard which are 'predominantly women areas' in the telenovela context (Tufte 2008). However, power struggles of gender do arise in these spaces as she uses these domestic domains to transgress mourning rites, thereby negotiating agency and asserting power in this space.

The telenovela is one of the most significant cultural manifestations in contemporary Latin America. The most popular television networks broadcast telenovelas both during the day and at night. Telenovelas are a massive business in the Latin American media market and have been exported to more than 130 countries worldwide, in addition to their cultural relevance in Latin American society. Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela, Peru, and Chile. The narrative format of the telenovela is derived from radio dramas between the 1950s and

1960s, films in Brazil as well as the melodrama literature and theatre of Latin America (Rios & Lin, n.d.).

In addition, despite the genre's adoption of social merchandising[13] and taking the form of a 'naturalistic tone', central to the telenovela genre is the melodrama narrative which lends its focus to personal and family relationships (Lopes 2010 & Borelli 2005). This is evident in the construction of Harriet Khoza *The Queen* (2016 - 2023) and Lindiwe Dikana *The River* (2018 - 2024). Moreover, what characterises the melodrama is its engagement with current affairs, that are presented through intimate relationships. It achieves this by merging sociopolitical issues and interpersonal relationships (Caminhas, n.d.).

According to Rios & Lin (2021), the narrative framework of the telenovela differs from the soap opera due to its conclusive end. Similarly, Landers (2018) observes that though soap operas and telenovelas exhibit numerous similarities, they also have subtle variances, noting the narrative framework of the telenovela as the most noticeable difference. Typically, telenovelas last six to nine months and include 150 to 250 episodes. The second distinction is the didactic aspect of telenovelas - storylines with a moral or religious undertone. Another distinction is the telenovela's emphasis on conflicting binaries, in which virtue triumphs over evil. Yet, the absence of closure in soap operas ends in a lack of ideological closure (Frey-Vor, 1990: 8 in Lander 2018). Despite some distinctions, soap operas and telenovelas are intertwined. The two forms are categorised as continuous serials, with melodrama as an essential component. Both serve as modes of social representation that instil and reinforce traditional values through repetition. The shared motif of a family is the most apparent similarity. Given that the discussions of this study are informed by and consider the historical and sociopolitical representations of Black female characters to engage issues of transgression, I will use the telenovela serial as the primary reference for my study. Furthermore, the telenovela's 1990s narrative structure which embraced social merchandising, accommodates the political nature of the arguments presented here. This study considers the telenovela in a similar manner to Hamburger, that these texts' assumptions of debating national issues, present themselves as fundamental political actors (Hamburger 2011).

[13] Social merchandising is a narrative approach that brings together public discourse and political issues into a specific plot or storyline, intending to convey educational and pedagogical themes.
(Rios & Lin, n.d.)(Rios & Lin, n.d.) (Rios & Lin, n.d.)

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

In chapter one of the study, I analyse Lindiwe Dikana's *The River* (2018 – 2024) using this study's theorisation of transgression. This application situates transgression as a dynamic and subversive act that questions and redefines what is considered acceptable or acceptable within a given context, thus, encouraging reconceptualisation of boundaries and exploration of new horizons. This framework allows me to explore how her transgressive actions not only violate or disrupt social norms of femininity but also alter and create new meanings and possibilities for the representations of the Black matriarch on screen. Wolfreys emphasis on alternative perspectives and understandings stemming from transgression enables me to build on Viraj Suparsad's conception of 'complicated femininity'. I foreground Sisonke Msimang and Pumla Gqola's work on Winnie Madikizela Mandela to employ a historical and political framing of transgressive Black womanhood that is relevant for interpreting the sociopolitical undertones that shape the portrayals of Black womanhood in the context of South Africa.

In the second chapter, I also use this study's theorisation of transgression to analyse the resistant nature of Harriet Khoza's portrayal in *The Queen*. The examination of Harriet Khoza foregrounds and frames the concept of Widowhood, providing context for the transgressions against cultural norms. The study's definition of transgression is useful in examining how transgressions disrupt prevailing norms, values, and power structures within the context of patriarchal cultural practices. Furthermore, it emphasises the need for alternative discourse and practice, drawing attention to the issues faced by marginalised or suppressed individuals, thus fostering critical awareness and dialogue. I consider how Harriet Khoza's transgressions reveal and contest the underlying assumptions and power dynamics that sustain cultural mourning rites, highlighting resistance and activism.

The study set out to determine whether Harriet Khoza and Lindiwe Dikana's transgressive nature adds complexity to the depiction of the matriarch archetype on South African television. The conclusion chapter begins by highlighting that the selected matriarchs in this study are both constructed within heteronormative and patriarchal structures. Moreover, through their transgressive acts, they both complicate and subvert these assigned roles of mother, wife, and

widow. For both characters, transgression allows for new ways of exercising agency and autonomy. In doing so, they subvert the notions of stereotypical Black womanhood.

Furthermore, the application of ‘complicated femininity’ where Lindiwe Dikana is concerned and ‘violent female masculinity’ in Harriet Khoza’s case critically engage the acts of violence and criminal behaviours of both characters and demonstrates how transgression complicates the prevailing dichotomy of good and evil and is a catalyst for transformation where Black women have previously been marginalised. I conclude that Lindiwe Dikana and Harriet Khoza's portrayals of Black matriarchy are full of depth and complicated, pushing past the reductive stereotypes of the strong and ethically upright Black woman. Both characters' transgressions challenge historical and cultural prejudices, providing portraits of novel significance that embrace complexity, moral ambiguity, and the potential for transformation.

CHAPTER ONE

LINDIWE DIKANA *THE RIVER* (2018 - 2024) POWER, MATERNAL INSTINCTS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF CRIMINALITY.

Winnie Madikizela Mandela: The Quintessential Transgressive Black Woman.

> What did those terrible years in the 1980s mean? Was the woman who supposedly had participated in those beatings the "real" Winnie? Had she been caught in a moment of madness or had she always been there, lying in wait, ready to reveal herself at the right time? Underpinning all these questions was a deep anxiety, a bigger question: what kind of African woman – what kind of African mother – was capable of murdering children? (Msimang, 2018: 12)[14].

> She was ungovernable and rebellious which is what the ANC exhorted all Black people to be. Winnie set things alight and meted out her own forms of justice, and in doing so, she did what ordinary members of the ANC were asked to do at the time. The hypocrisy is obvious: the party leaders urged others to undertake these acts but did not wish to get their own hands dirty. Worse, they were ashamed when Winnie adopted the violent tactics they advocated. She was a woman and a wife, so her actions were deemed to be repugnant (Msimang, 2018: 14)[15].

In *The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela*, Sisonke Msimang reflects on the public discourse surrounding Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's legacy after her death. Msimang observes that Madikizela-Mandela's legacy was reduced to that of a 'fallen and murderous woman' and was indicative of the hegemonic racist and sexist ideas of femininity perpetuated by the apartheid regime. Madikizela-Mandela, once revered as the 'mother of the nation', was perceived to have 'fallen' from this mythologised ideal of motherhood and Black womanhood when she engaged in political violence, defying the expectations of submissiveness. Part of the constructions of Black womanhood during apartheid relied on colonial ideas that depicted African women's maternal instincts as innate and harmless, not only to their own children but to their white oppressors (Msimang, 2018: 12). Msimang (2018) argues that Madikizela-Mandela challenged

[14] Msimang Sisonke in, "The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela" 2018.
[15] Msimang Sisonke in, "The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela" 2018.

these restrictive notions of Black womanhood by 'simply being herself' (2018: 12). I echo the sentiments of Msimang about these simplistic narratives, that, 'Winnie was not the only African National Congress (ANC) leader who displayed 'recklessness and fiery rhetoric,' but 'she was the only woman who was visibly doing so' (Msimang, 2018: 13).

This chapter's examination of Lindiwe Dikana *The River* (2018 – 2024) as a transgressive Black matriarch appropriately employs quotes that capture the unapologetically radical and transgressive nature of Winnie Madikizela Mandela who is described as, 'ungovernable and rebellious' by Msimang. Madikizela Mandela's refusal to conform to the essentialist ideas of Black womanhood sets up double transgression; first; by subverting the reductionist binaries on Black womanhood and socially gendered norms and second; by transcending these boundaries and existing beyond their confines. I visualise Lindiwe Dikana's transgressions against the mythology of Black motherhood and hetero-patriarchal notions of femininity as performing something like that of Madikizela-Mandela's transformative acts.

This study does not view the character of Lindiwe Dikana as a representation of reality but as a fictional construct. While Msimang's notion of 'ungovernable and rebellious' may aptly describe Lindiwe's matriarchal strength, it should still be understood as a symbolic gesture that reflects the pervasive patriarchal structure. It is also important to note that Lindiwe is not a political figure and as such her actions should not be read as political crimes. Lindiwe can be viewed as being shaped by the broader South African landscape, even though her role functions in a specific context. A nuanced examination is required to comprehend Lindiwe's character, her transgressions and their implications.

It is worthy of mentioning here, that in my dissecting the literature around transgression as it applies to Black women, I found that the iconography of Winnie Madikizela Mandela and the complicated nature of her legacy was a recurring motif in existing scholarship and all the areas of my inquiry; Musila (2008) and Msimang (2018) on transgressive femininity, Sabine Binder (2021) on Black female perpetrators as well as Suparsad (2021) complicated Black womanhood.[16]As I have argued earlier in the study, the relevance of this work stems from how conceptualisations of Black womanhood and motherhood have been shaped by the political

[16] Viraj Suparsad's study of Sonto Molefe *Gomor*a (2020 -2023) evokes such conceptual imaginings.

history of South Africa. This is further compounded by the underrepresentation of Black women in various social spaces. This scholarly attention on Madikizela-Mandela as a defiant and disruptive matriarchal figure is emerging within South African television studies and underscores the significance of the arguments, I aim to make in my exploration of transgressive Black womanhood embodied by Lindiwe Dikana *The River* (2018 -2024). Nevertheless, it remains important to acknowledge that the matriarchs in this study are fictional characters who are not influenced by real-world political and social conditions. Furthermore, they are negotiating contemporary concerns about power and status rather than issues of political struggle. Thus, unlike Madikizela-Mandela their actions are not rooted in political activism in its broader sense.

This chapter presents a character and narrative analysis that establishes Lindiwe Dikana in *The River* (2018 -2024) as a matriarch to consider the transgression at work in the scenes. I examine scenes that feature the themes of motherhood, violence and criminality.

I build upon Viraj Suparsad's concept of 'complicated femininity' which he has theorised on the complex nature of womanhood concerning the characterisation of Sonto Molefe (Gomora)[17]. Suparsad's (2022) idea provides a useful starting point for discussions on transgression and Black women as they relate to the Black female character on screen. This approach addresses the complex nature of Black womanhood and its ability to transcend essentialist binaries. Further, the concept of 'complicated femininity' reads the transgressions of Black female characters as subverting social order and the 'heterosexist racist expectations' which are socially prescribed for women (Suparsad, 2022: 12). Suparsad (2022) asserts that this kind of depiction and complex characterisation is seldom afforded to Black women (2022: 12). Suparsad (2022) argues that due to societal moral precepts, characters such as Sonto Molefe are classified as villains and create a clear contrast to the ideal simply because she engages in criminal activity (2022: 4). Like Suparsad, I lay aside the moral assumptions and the tendency to oversimplify, overlooking the nuanced and complex nature of such characters (Suparsad, 2022: 4). Further, I briefly parallel Lindiwe Dikana's criminal activities against the anti-heroine character type, to explore what her transgressions might reveal about the socially

[17] Gomora is a South African telenovela M-Net Original Production which was produced by Seriti Films. It was broadcast on Mzansi Magic a paid satellite television platform DSTV. It was created by Gwydion Benyon, Phatushedzo Makwarela and Kutlwano Distele. Show ran from March 30, 2020, until 20th October 2023. https://www.tvsa.co.za/shows/viewshowabout.aspx?showid=5617.

constructed boundaries of female perpetrators. In this chapter and throughout this study transgression is; a deliberate violation of acceptable behaviour for Black women as prescribed within patriarchal structures; actions that can be considered as a mode of resistance, subversion and transcendence of established boundaries of heteronormative behaviour; acts that offer alternatives to existing norms

I conclude that Lindiwe Dikana complicates the traditional Black matriarch onscreen, she subverts the socially and culturally constructed notions of motherhood. Furthermore, her criminal behaviour undermines socially established norms concerning femininity. Thus, her transgressive acts, go beyond existing depictions of the Black matriarch and offer new ways of existing.

A synopsis of The River Season One

The narrative of *The River* follows the lives of Pretoria residents and is set against the backdrop of South Africa's mining industry. A river separates the affluent and the impoverished. Lindiwe Dikana's desperate attempts to maintain her mining company, lead her to murder an employee who discovered a diamond. This murder becomes a catalyst for further horrific events and brings to light past truths that could collapse both the Dikana and Mokoena family.

The ideal and the myth of Black Motherhood and Wifehood

Musila (2020) argues that the socially constructed gendered scripts of 'good motherhood and political widowhood' imposed on Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's life stem from 'heteropatriarchal nationalisms attempt to control' the feminine identities she embodied (2020: 600). The socially constructed notions of African womanhood I would argue, are also reflected in the outdated portrayals of African women within African literature and film. These representations have been historically created by African male artists and writers, who have mythologised and idealised the African woman as a mother figure. Dipio (2014) asserts that the predominant representation of African women as idealised mothers is often equated with the symbolic 'Mother Africa' (Dipio, 2014: 16). However, Dipio cautions that this venerated

depiction of motherhood is limiting. Quoting Nfah-Abbenyi, she maintains it serves to embed women's subordination and lack of autonomy by portraying them as fixed, static embodiments of virtues like fertility and piety (Nfah-Abbenyi 1997 cited in Dipio 2014: 16). Remi Akujobi (2011: 7) in her article *Motherhood in African Literature and Culture*, observes that critics of African literature contend that the idea of 'Mother Africa' often depicted in male literature is a tool to silence women (Akujobi 2011:7). In their work Diop and Akujobi reflect Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's critical examination of the Mother Africa trope. Ogundipe-Leslie argues that a crucial feminist objective is to dismantle male-defined stereotypes portraying the African woman as a revered or perpetually suffering maternal figure. Additionally, her position is rooted in the notion that the strength of patriarchy stems from its ability to confine women as guardians and primary conduits of social norms, which hinders their ability to free themselves from the oppressive hold of tradition (Ogundipe-Leslie in Dipio, 2014: 18).

In *African Motherhood - Myth and Reality*, Lauretta Ngcobo asserts that in many African cultures, the 'ideal wife is defined through her relationship with her husband and her children' (Timlin, 2017). As previously made evident in African literature, Ngcobo observes that women's identities are forged and constructed by these assigned roles. Furthermore, she argues that failure to succeed as a 'good' wife and mother leads to harsh treatment and often renders these woman characters who fail to conform to traditional expectations merciless critique by the male writers, thus 'dying for their mistakes' (Timlin, 2017). Ngcobo describes these types of novels as 'punitive literature' designed to mythologise the real-life difficulties encountered by wives and mothers as 'heroic, while condemning women who question or challenge the ideal of the 'suffering mother', thus 'reinforcing patriarchal structures within the cultures that they depict' (Ngcobo 1986; in Timlin, 2017).

The above ideas, developed by scholars and feminists, serve as a backdrop against which I consider Lindiwe's transgressions within motherhood. Further, the heteropatriarchal nationalist discourse around motherhood has also influenced the images of the Black matriarch on South African television. As previously argued, they impose gendered norms on women and perpetuate these ideas through media representation (Suparsad, 2022: 1). Unsurprisingly, the Black matriarchal figure is often the character through which these ideas are promoted. Like other matriarchs in South African telenovelas, Lindiwe Dikana's *The River* (2018 – 2024) central feature is the role of the mother, thus the theme of motherhood merits examination. Within the realm of television, the 'maternal mammy figure' or the 'mammy trope' is a

dominant and frequently used trope that has rendered stereotypical depictions of the Black matriarch on South African screens. This close textual analysis then, aims to examine the characterisation of Lindiwe Dikana and her criminal activities and how her transgressions as a mother and perpetrator complicate the stereotypical Black matriarch on screen.

The patriarchal ideologies that manifest themselves in both male writers' representation of women as 'Mother Africa' in literature and patriarchal African society perpetuate binaries within which women are expected to exist. These dichotomies of good and evil also emerge in the construction of the matriarch on screen as evidenced by (Onuh, 2015; Nehanda, 2020). Dipio asserts that these binaries are far removed from complex real women, arguing that patriarchy is opposed to change, particularly when women try to interrogate the existing conditions (Dipio, 2014).

Lindiwe Dikana and Motherhood

The opening scene of the first episode of *The River* frames Lindiwe Dikana as a ruthless, vile and cold killer. Lindiwe is introduced to us in a loader tractor, driving towards a shallow grave. In this grave is Itumeleng Mokoena, who is bound and tied down. She is visibly terrified and desperately begging for her life while Lindiwe proceeds to bury her alive. The opening scene of the first episode establishes Lindiwe as the 'monstrous mother'. The audience learns later in the narrative that Itumeleng is her biological daughter; this scene serves as a precursor to the later events. According to Neophytou (2012), in a heteronormative society, the ideas of the 'ideal' mother are deeply mythologised and are attached to the women's identity (2012: 7). In this scene, Lindwe's actions disrupt these socially constructed notions of motherhood because, unlike the 'ideal' mother who is expected to be complete in her role of motherhood and thus 'fulfil' her role in society, Lindiwe's attempt to kill her daughter becomes doubly transgressive. The motherhood mystique which is premised on normative assumptions of femininity invokes the same observations of Ngcobo, where in the cultural context a woman's identity is closely aligned with her assigned roles of wife and mother.

A few scenes later, in the same episode, a flashback scene depicts Lindiwe abandoning her infant baby in a nearby river. This black-and-white sequence presents the audience with an image of her younger self. She is holding a newborn baby. Lindiwe's breathing is weighty; she is panting and keeps looking back to ensure she is neither not seen nor followed. The camera cuts between the present Lindiwe and her younger self, underscored by the echoes of a wailing infant and the heavy breathing of young Lindiwe. In the flashback, she settles the restless infant beneath the tree and takes off, leaving her alone with a blanket and a necklace. In the present, Lindiwe holds her lower abdomen (where her womb is), appearing to be disturbed by the memory. In this scene, Lindiwe subverts the ideas of 'self-sacrifice' that often characterise the ideal mother (Akujobi, 2011: 7). Although the flashback depicts a younger Lindiwe, the act of abandoning a child transgresses not only the culturally established norms of the 'sacredness' of motherhood but that a childbearing woman expresses her womanhood to the fullest (Ngcobo in Remi 2011: 2). Ngcobo observes that in most traditional African societies a childless or barren woman is perceived to be incomplete (Ngcobo 1986, 148 in Remi 2011: 3).

In African American literature, Parvin Ghasemi (2010) observes that the societal perception of mothers abandoning their children is condemned (2010: 240). In addition, society places the burden of ensuring the welfare and well-being of the family on mothers, even those who lack the financial capacity to do so (Ghasemi, 2010: 240). This societal expectation is particularly punitive towards mothers who deviate from the prescribed norms of motherhood (Ghasemi, 2010: 240). Furthermore, Ghasemi's observations resonate with Ngcobo's views on the concept of motherhood in the context of Apartheid and Zulu Customary law and the varied ways in which patriarchy is sustained by both these systemic structures, where the ideal wife and mother is marked by her success in raising her children and being a 'good wife' (Ngcobo, 1986: 148 in Timlin, 2017). 'Black maternity and Black mothers have historically and culturally been stigmatised since', as Barbara Christian argues, such romanticised images have functioned as narratives for insurmountable societal dilemmas or issues (Ghasemi, 2010: 237). Myths of this nature depict Black mothers as matriarchal figures who are paradoxically incredibly powerful and protective, benevolent, and completely self-sacrificing beings whose identities are inextricably linked to the care they provide (Ghasemi, 2010: 237). Both Ngcobo and Ghasemi reveal this in their examination of motherhood as it relates to African/ African American women as a 'myth' maintained by heteropatriarchal values, and for Ngcobo, one that is predicated on extreme binaries, mothers and wives are considered either heroic for adhering

to cultural standards or condemned for defying the 'ideal of the suffering mother' (Ngcobo 1986). Lindiwe Dikana, in her multiple motherly roles, subverts the 'myth of ideal motherhood' imposed by culture. Her relationships with her children, biological, adopted, and stepchildren transgress the expectations placed on Black mothers by culture.

Motherhood is also used to define what 'real women and responsible women' are (Akujobi, 2011). Lindiwe contrasts this ideal in her relationship with her nephew Zolani. She rejects the patriarchal cultural expectation of being the custodians of morals. Lindiwe's relationship with Zolani is riddled with manipulation and coercion. She introduces him into her life of crime and Zolani is not only an accomplice to her crimes but often used to do Lindiwe's dirty work and orchestrate some of her murders. Akujobi (2011) observes that in many traditional African societies' motherhood is viewed as a moral transformation where a woman comes to terms with being different in that she ceases to be an autonomous individual because she becomes attached to her child (Akujobi, 2011: 2). Even though Zolani is not her biological child, by virtue of being a maternal figure in his life, African culture dictates that Lindiwe assumes the role of mother towards him. Because Lindiwe's relationship with Zolani defies the 'responsible woman' she also transgresses the idea of being a custodian and transmitter of social values which is perpetuated by patriarchy in African cultures.

It can be argued that the opening episode of *The River* depicts Lindiwe Dikana as a matriarch who is departing from the maternal, nurturing archetype of 'Mother Africa' to the harder and crueller persona of a ruthless businesswoman. Indeed, this characterisation in the establishment of her character could potentially reinforce harmful stereotypes. However, to return to the arguments made about the need for nuanced analysis of such transgressions against social norms, these expressions even of anger in the case of the 'angry Black woman' trope should not be easily dismissed because of what they illuminate about the multiple layers of oppression faced by Black women. Further, the non-linear narrative structure of *The River*, which cuts between past and present, provides the audience with expository information, thereby allowing the audience to comprehend Lindiwe's transgressions more broadly.

In contrast to the above, Lindiwe is also depicted as the 'ideal mother'; nurturing, loving and a homemaker in the domestic space. While she maintains her individuality and appears to be self-seeking even at the expense of her children, Lindiwe demonstrates traits associated with the ideal mother, who is marked by how well she takes care of her family. In multiple episodes,

she upholds patriarchal ideas of domesticity and homemaking (Sarwar, 2022: 4). For instance, in the earlier scenes of the first episodes Lindiwe is seen in the kitchen beside her domestic worker preparing breakfast for her family. In another, she spends time with her daughter, cooking meals for guests. Lindiwe is portrayed as the esteemed, self-sacrificing, hardworking mother in the home. Here Lindiwe's domesticity could be signalling the 'cult of femininity' that Pumla Gqola argues all women, even 'empowered women' are expected to maintain in their private lives (2015: 65). Nevertheless, her conformity to these ideas of homemaker could also be read as a deliberate choice. Undoubtedly, Lindiwe willingly embraces this aspect of her identity as mother and wife in the same manner she rejects other ideas of ideal motherhood. Further, by choosing which parts of motherhood to perform, she self-governs, forging her own standards of motherhood.

Lindiwe is not limited to any one stereotype, and this is what makes her complex. She both resists and complies with the boundaries of the traditional and patriarchal stereotypes of motherhood. She is relentless in her pursuit of survival; she is self-seeking, which makes her transgressive. While her actions may be questionable towards her children, she believes she does all she can to protect and care for them. Further, what is worth calling attention to is her pursuit of self. Selflessness is a feature that characterises the ideal mother, and it is also a feature that marks her worth and value in society. Interestingly, Lindiwe's sense of self-worth does not come from her role as a mother. Instead, she desires to acquire wealth which seems to be at the centre of her desires. For Lindiwe, maternal failure would be, not being able to provide for her children. The role of the provider is historically and traditionally associated with the man in the family, whose fundamental role is to meet the material needs of the family. Cadena et.al asserts that the rise of the antiheroine figure signifies a type of rebellion by challenging and exceeding societal standards and anticipations for women (2016). Women characters who prioritise their careers over motherhood, seek employment in male-dominated fields, and crave 'dysfunctional relationships' are among those who challenge conventional expectations for women (Cadena et al., 2016). Lindiwe's assumption of this masculine role is also transgressive as she shifts from the culturally defined role of wife.

Lindiwe Dikana and Criminality

Through her violent and criminal actions, Lindiwe transgresses the social construction of femininity. As Sabine Binder asserts, 'violating traditional conceptions of femininity constructed as nurturing, complaint and vulnerable, the agency of a woman as a murderer is not only disturbing but extremely subversive' (Binder, 2021: 77). Further, Lindiwe transgresses the stereotypical Black matriarch as she is also depicted beyond motherhood. She is also the CEO of Khanyisa Diamonds, a mining firm in the township of Refiloe. Suparsad (2022) observes that the complex character who is depicted within contrasting imagery is rarely explored when it comes to women, particularly Black women (2022: 5). I argue that it is not only the transgressions of criminal behaviour that are novel but the representations of such depictions that provide novel significance. Binder (2021) resonates with this perspective, identifying Winnie Madikizela-Mandela as South Africa's most prominent female perpetrator (Binder 2021: 78). Quoting Munro, Binder speculates that Madikizela-Mandela's perceived 'failure' as an icon paragon of virtue may have created avenues for women to craft less restrictive narratives and representations of themselves (Munro, nd cited in Binder 2021: 78).

Similarly, Suparsad draws on the work of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela to demonstrate how diverse expressions of complicated womanhood can and should exist as part of dismantling the 'pressures' of patriarchy and its ongoing efforts to confine the space in which women must operate (Suparsad, 2022: 5). Suparsad also highlights the imbalance between male and female characters, wherein the former is free from essentialist views and binaries and argues that a similarly nuanced approach recognising the complexity of human experience should be extended to women (2022: 6). In this context it is relevant to consider the concept of complicated femininity when looking at Lindiwe Dikana.

According to Adelene Africa (2010), violent women are socially constructed within three prevalent discourses: 'pathological, victimized, and deviant' (African, 2010: 80). Africa notes that these conceptions of the female perpetrator lack agency (2010: 80). This is not the case for Lindiwe Dikana, who complicates these socially constructed ideas of female perpetrators. The impetus for Lindiwe's criminal activities is premised on survival and keeping her family out of poverty. For instance, in the first episode when faced with the threat of losing her company, she confides in her nephew Zolani about her traumatic childhood, she was born in a shack with an alcoholic father and a mother who engaged in sex work. This confession reveals the

formative experiences that shape Lindiwe's decisions and the motivation behind her violent actions, which stem from a desire to escape poverty and provide for her family.

The murders of Thato Mokoena and Happy are depicted as brutal. In the opening episode, Lindiwe arrives at the riverbank with Zolani and Mokoena. Lindiwe inquiries about the exact location to ensure that Mokoena reveals the information again and confirms the precise spot. Suddenly, Lindiwe picks up a large rock and strikes Mokoena on the head. As he falls, she drowns him to guarantee his death. Happy also becomes a victim of Lindiwe's violent actions. Happy witnesses Zolani frequently visit the crime scene in search of Lindiwe's missing earring. Aware of the Lindiwe's social status and the privileges it affords them, Happy devises ways to blackmail Lindiwe. Eventually, Lindiwe succumbs to the demands of her domestic worker's son. She invites him to a fine dining establishment and offers him a managerial position. Happy's greed leads to his demise as he soon demands a ten per cent share of Khanyisa Diamonds so he can retire from his new job. Lindiwe and Zolani stage an accident, and after drugging Happy, Zolani leaves his unconscious body in the shack he shares with his mother and sets it ablaze. Existing scholarship asserts that the antiheroine's transgressions shed light on diverse expressions of femininity, and her embrace of criminal behaviour challenges societal norms, leading to harsher judgment (Cadena et al, 2016). Cadena (2016) contends that, unlike their male counterparts who exhibit similar traits, male characters are excused, and their transgressions are normalised on-screen rendering them more easily accepted (Cadena et al, 2016). The notion of shame and judgement is deeply rooted in the punishment or disciplining of women who behave in ways deemed unfeminine. Noting the contrasting perceptions between Nelson Mandela and Winnie Madikizela Mandela, Msimang observes,

> Winnie was the mugger of the nation while he was a saint. She was damaged goods while he was whole and pure. He was a hero, and she was a witch (Msimang, 2018: 10).

Concerning other male activists during the liberation movement she points out,

> ANC activist Harry Gwala, who was implicated in countless assassinations and political crimes in the 1990s, was depicted as the Lion of the Midlands. He was not tarnished in the same way as Ma Winnie, even though she was operating within the conventions of her political party at the time (Msimang, 2018: 14).

I want to clarify that I do not make links between Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's political acts of violence to Lindiwe Dikana's criminal actions. However, I call attention to these critiques to demonstrate the discrepancies in the socially prescribed ideas of femininity. Msimang notes the public discourse that emerged concerning Madikizela-Mandela's turn to violence was riddled with terms such as 'insanity', 'unnatural' and 'madness' (Msimang, 2018: 12). It is this very language that seeks to pathologize Black women who respond with rage, labelling their behaviour as abnormal while disregarding the violent system that may have contributed to these expressions of anger.

Lindiwe, like Sonto Molefe *Gomora* (2020 – 2023), complicates the dichotomy of heroic and villainous characters. Suparsad observes that Molefe engages crime, while acknowledging that it is not an ideal means of livelihood (Suparsad, 2022). However, Molefe justifies her choices and attributes them to the historical context of a failed state during apartheid and the subsequent democratic transition in South Africa (Suparsad, 2022). For Lindiwe, her choices stem from her impoverished upbringing. Khanyisa Diamonds under threat of closure, poses a threat to her survival and triggers memories of her difficult childhood. Cadena (2016) notes that the anti-heroine's response to trauma and her ability to overcome its impact significantly shape her actions. In both instances, Molefe and Lindiwe's transgressions are premised on the ramifications of systematic oppression. The exclusion of and exploitation of Black women economically manifests itself as justified rage, aligning with Wendy Ashely's assertion that anger serves as a means of survival.

Considering this, Mokoena and Happy could be interpreted as 'unintended' victims of Lindiwe's desperate need for self-preservation. Yet, Lindiwe is also depicted as remorseful, with her guilt manifesting from the crimes she has committed. For instance, after killing Thapelo Mokoena, Lindiwe visits his wife and provides the family with financial support to alleviate the burden of his funeral costs. In this scene Lindiwe confronts the consequences of her actions, breaking down upon witnessing the wife's grief over her husband's death. Similarly, after learning of Happy's murder, Lindiwe offers his mother a new home as a gesture of atonement. Lindiwe's attempts to make amends reveal the deeply flawed and multifaced nature of her character. Albeit still pursuing her survival and does not hand herself over to law enforcement, her remorseful actions highlight the complex duality of her persona.

In like manner to Lindiwe, Sonto Molefe *Gomora* (2020 -2023) also demonstrates a moral ambiguity. For the character of Sonto, it is the personal pain that invokes guilt, which Suparsad opines allows for an appreciation of her character as it maintains the complicated nature of Molefe (2022: 7). It is only when Molefe loses her partner due to criminal activities that she wrestles with feelings of loss and sorrow, which later evolve into a sense of culpability (Suparsad, 2022). Whereas, in the case of Lindiwe, it is the pain inflicted on those affected by her actions that arouses her regret and guilt, which could also be appreciated as it interrogates the dichotomy of being inherently good or evil, given Lindiwe's awareness of the impact of her actions on others.

Overall, Lindiwe Dikana's maternal characteristics complicate the traditional and patriarchal stereotypes of motherhood. Her continuous pursuit of self-worth beyond motherhood transgresses the essence of the ideal mother type. These transgressions provide a complex and diverse depiction of motherhood that has not yet been depicted within the existing matriarchs in telenovelas on Mzansi Magic. It can be argued that what distinguishes Lindiwe from existing maternal characters is her attempt to determine her own course, even her children's, albeit using morally ambiguous methods. By resisting conformity to the socially and culturally accepted notions of motherhood Lindiwe refutes to simply being a 'nurturing' figure. Embracing her individuality beyond motherhood means she resists being defined by her maternal role. However, she does not fit neatly into the binary of 'good mother and bad motherhood'. She exists perpetually in the middle, oscillating between the 'ideal mother' and the 'monstrous mother' dichotomy.

Lindiwe's criminal activities challenge societal perceptions of acceptable feminine behaviour. Her actions illustrate the diverse expressions of womanhood and add nuance to existing gender binaries (Cadena et al; 2016). The depictions of characters such as Lindiwe reveal how patriarchal power structures shape and confine women's lives. Furthermore, they demonstrate the complex ways in which women negotiate, resist and transcend these structures. Suparsad reads such representations as 'pushing back', this resonates with the notion that the female body can act both as a site of oppression under patriarchal domination and as a catalyst for subversion, where women exercise agency to challenge and disrupt such domination (Paul, 2021).

Speaking on the restrictive duality that police Black womanhood Msimang notes,

> The trick perhaps, is not to debate whether Winnie was 'good' or 'bad' (whatever those terms even mean). Removing her from the binaries to which women are often consigned rescues her from the cliché and spares us a tired and unproductive discussion. Winnie does not need to be either this or that (Msimang, 2018: 21).

From Msimang's assertion, I want to extrapolate and call to attention how 'acceptable behaviour for a Black woman' has been historically predicated on Black women in relation to 'others', as mothers to their children, in wifehood and widowhood to their husbands as well as her extended in-law family. Lindiwe transgressing and transcending these boundaries offers alternative modes of existence.

CHAPTER TWO

HARRIET KHOZA *THE QUEEN* (2016 - 2023*)* NEGOTIATING WIDOWHOOD, MATERNAL AUTHORITY AND THE POLITICS OF CRIME.

The character of Harriet Khoza *The Queen* (2016 – 2023) is briefly introduced to the audience as a wife to Mzi Khoza and then immediately as his widow after he dies in the first episode of the first season. The role of widowhood becomes a focal point of analysis as it forms part of Harriet's character establishment and construction. It also drives the narrative forward. Harriet Khoza remains in this marital status for the entire first season; thus, her transgressions within widowhood merit examination. The feminist and scholarly observations on traditional Zulu mourning practice serve as a lens through which I explore the varied ways Harriet Khoza transgresses mourning rites. In many African societies, cultural practices and traditions tend to bestow the responsibility of disseminating values and traditions to women (Ogumdipe-Leslie 1984 in Dipio, 2014: 18). I examine her characterisation as a matriarch and the acts of transgression she enacts within widowhood to determine the extent to which she complicates the matriarchal figure on screen.

In addition, the nature of cultural custom and practice in heteropatriarchal societies is that they tend to privilege the rights of men at the expense of women. One of the ways this manifests itself is, through traditional mourning rites (Sossou, 2002: 202). My focus then on the widowhood theme is also due to the inscriptions it imposes on African women in the context of South African Zulu mourning practices. These inscriptions create the boundaries or limit that Black women are expected to exist in. I am interested in how Harriet, negotiates these inscriptions and by extension disrupts the matriarch role. I contend that Harriet is not simply disregarding mourning rites aimlessly. Instead, she is actively forging her way of grieving while also protesting explicit gender inequalities and striving for autonomy within the confines of Zulu cultural practice.

I begin by delineating the historical and cultural framework of traditional mourning customs, explicitly focusing on Zulu mourning practices in South Africa. This background will inform

my analysis of Harriet. This framework will serve as a basis for understanding and interpreting the significance of Harriet Khoza's actions as a widow. Within the Zulu culture, mourning is an intrinsic practice that entails varied beliefs, customs, and societal expectations for the widows' conduct. Understanding these traditions can illuminate Harriet's actions and perceived transgressions within the cultural context. In this chapter and throughout this study transgression is a deliberate violation of acceptable behaviour for Black women as prescribed within patriarchal structures; actions that can be considered as a mode of resistance, subversion and transcendence of established boundaries of heteronormative behaviour; acts that offer alternatives to existing norms

I make use of Sabine Binder's 'resistant gender performance' to engage more critically in the complex qualities of Harriet's acts of violence and criminality (Binder, 2021: 1). I conclude that Harriet's characterisation, while reflective of the established portrayal of Black matriarchal figures, ultimately deviates from and repudiates the trope of the Black matriarch commonly portrayed on South African television. Before proceeding with the historical and cultural framework of traditional mourning rites, a brief synopsis of the telenovela is necessary.

A synopsis of *The Queen* Season One

The narrative of *The Queen* (2016 – 2023) is situated within the juxtaposed worlds of the wealthy elitist and the middle class. The telenovela boldly uncovers the power hungry privileged and the ensuing subjugation of those at their mercy strips bare the insatiable lust for power amongst the rich and the victims that find themselves at their mercy. After discovering her husband's secret Harriet Khoza is compelled to take drastic measures. Through Harriet, the show illuminates the power dynamics that women confront in both professional and domestic spaces.

In the context of widowhood in African culture and societies Mamphela Ramphele and Marie-Antoinette Sossou observes;

> The widow becomes the embodiment of loss and pain occasioned by the sting of death, and her body is turned into a focus of attention, as both the subject and object of mourning rituals. The individual suffering of a widow is made social, and her body becomes a metaphor for suffering. [18](Ramphele, 1996: 99)

> Empirical evidence and anecdotal reports from many regions of the Third World indicate that widows of all ages, and from different backgrounds and cultures, are likely to be subject to multiple forms of discrimination, neglect, cultural and psychological oppression, and abuse.[19] (Sossou, 2002: 201)

Existing scholarship on cultural mourning rites and practices concerning Black women in South Africa and the African continent at large maintains that the customs of cultural grieving practices oppress, ostracise, and in some instances, dehumanize women (Sossou, 2002: 202). These rituals are far less stringent towards Black men (particularly in South Africa) who are widowers, thus exposing the inequalities of gender in patriarchal-centred beliefs (Ramphele, 1996; Sossou, 2002; Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007; Kotzé et al., 2012; Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021).

Rosenblatt (2007) and Nkosi (2007) conducted interviews with South African Zulu widows who reside in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal and the township of Soweto to gain insight into the experiences of widowhood in present-day South Africa. Similarly, (Kotzé et al., 2012) explore how Black South African women express their autonomy and [re]negotiate space through their witnessing of self and others within mourning practices (Kotzé et al, 2012: 743). The women in the Kotzé et al. study belong to varied African cultural identities, but for this discussion, the focus will be on the findings of the Zulu traditional practice. Furthermore, in their assessments, both studies centralise their investigations within the socio-economic and socio-political climate in which Black widows observe mourning practices and how poverty, due to the post-apartheid ramifications, put the financial burden of burial on these women (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007; Kotzé et al, 2012). The key findings in both studies that are relevant to the discussions here are that mourning practices are indeed gendered. Women assume the duty of

[18] Mamphela Ramphele, "Political Widowhood in South Africa: The Embodiment of Ambiguity" Daedalus, Winter 1996, Vol. 123, No.1, Social Suffering, pp.99-117. The MIT Press on behalf of American Academy of Arts & Sciences.
[19] Marie-Antoniette Sossou, "Widowhood practices in West Africa: The silent victims" Int J Soc Welfare 2002: 11:201-209 Blackwell, 2002.

mourning, and men have the freedom to continue uninterrupted with their daily engagements. In the context of poverty, Zulu widows endure financial strain due to their adherence to cultural expectations, and as such, the mourning rites make it difficult for them to make the means and provide for themselves. Both studies underscore the significance of communal life that these women forge to garner support and comfort during mourning.

In the Zulu tradition, death is believed to have defiled the remaining living members of the family. Thus, funeral-related rituals primarily concern cleansing (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007: 69). The position of the woman within these cultural practices is of more importance and relevance to the analysis of this chapter. Mamphela Ramphele, in *Political Widowhood in South Africa*, speaks of widowhood as a practice that confines a woman into a 'liminal space', and her tie to her deceased spouse is made performative for the public (Ramphele, 1996: 99). The belief is that a widow despite being separated from her husband by the finality of death is still considered married and by cultural custom is expected not only to honour her deceased spouse but his remaining family as well (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007: 69). It is both this 'liminal space' and the ambiguity of wifehood within widowhood that is at the centre of the patriarchal cultural customs. Harriet Khoza engages in acts of transgression that resist, to borrow Ramphele's phrase, the 'liminal space', she physically moves in and out of her 'assigned' place of mourning and interacts freely socially. It is worth calling attention to the parallels that exist between cultural practice and in this case, the telenovela genre in terms of the spatial location of women. Both have designated the 'intrinsic' position of women, where the 'liminal space' during mourning is often the widow's bedroom and the predominant women's space in the telenovela is the household. These similarities indicate how women's bodies are a site of various forms of control, oppression and violent ownership. Where the fictional representations are simply reinforcing the sociocultural views of a particular context.

Similarly, to her in-laws, the widow is perceived to be defiled by death and poses a 'threat' to those around her; thus, she is expected to minimise this perceived 'danger' to others by undergoing Ukuzila, which is a period of mourning, usually between six months to a year (Ramphele, 1996: 100). During this time, the widow undergoes mourning rituals and practices, such as being fully covered in black clothing 'made from an inexpensive material and covering her face with a black veil and her shoulders with a black shawl' (Ramphele, 1996: 100). She is to have her head fully shaved. In public, she must make room for other pedestrians on the road,

and in the rural areas of South Africa, she is expected to 'bow or curtsy as a sign of respect or submission' (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007; Kotzé et al., 2012).

Furthermore, she is to be avoided by those she may encounter on her journey; when travelling in any form of public transport, she must render herself invisible by sitting at the back of a taxi to not expose others to her back. It is believed that her back carries 'bad luck or bad omen' and it is the responsibility of those who travel on foot to avoid crossing her tracks, lest they too be contaminated (Kotzé et al., 2012). The restrictions on social interaction manifest themselves by ensuring widows remain inside their homes, except for necessary work commitments, for which they must be escorted, and precautions made to prevent them from contaminating the innocent. Widows cannot participate in public rituals or celebrations (Ramphele, 1996: 101).

What is common among local traditional mourning practices and relevant to the Zulu culture is the practice of 'sitting', which takes place immediately after a spouse's death and continues until the burial (Kotzé et al., 2012: 753). Here, the widow is prohibited from moving off the mat or mattress in her bedroom unless for bathroom visits; otherwise, even standing is forbidden (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007); (Kotzé et al., 2012: 754).

In essence, the widow must minimise and silence herself by conveying her 'liminal position' through the practice of Ukuzila and 'sitting' (Ramphele, 1996: 101). Moreover, it can be said that the very personal death of a spouse, within widowhood, moves the widow from grieving privately to becoming a display for public manifestations of the oppressive mourning practice. Kotzé et al. (2012) concur with this view in their study by acknowledging that some practices perceived as 'culturally authentic' could be oppressive (Kotzé et al., 2012: 755). At the heart of these customs, it can be argued that the nature of the practice is constructed to position women as victims and, in some cases, as 'witches, the killers of their husbands, as evil and dangerous and in need of cleansing' (MacFadden, 2001: 68 cited in Kotzé et al., 2012: 755).

Sossou (2002) examines the hardships and circumstances of widows, as well as some widowhood practices, in several traditional societies within three West African countries, observing that the issue of the impact of widowhood on women continues to be dismissed as a crucial discussion that correlates with the fight for gender equality and women's human rights issues (2002: 201). Sossou stresses that in traditional West African societies, mourning rituals still have cultural significance, and the conduct around mourning rites is inherently gendered

(Sossou, 2002: 201). Further, Sossou argues that while widowhood practices are not systematic, their application is subject to local and regional variations. It is worth mentioning here that if these customs are not observed, especially in the case of the woman, they lead to her being vilified (Sossou, 2002: 201). This suggests that even in mourning, the 'ideal wife' must conform and submit to the strict and sometimes oppressive mourning practices, and the one who challenges or undermines them brings shame and the danger of being ostracised by her in-laws.

Harriet Khoza's, depiction through an array of agentic positions, violates and undermines prescriptions for Black widows within the context of Zulu mourning practices. Furthermore, she resists the cultural conception of the 'ideal wife', which is informed and prescribed by 'her relationship with her husband and her children' (Lauretta Ngcobo 1986: 148 in Timlin, 2017: 23). By orchestrating the death of her husband and allowing herself to enter prematurely into the state of widowhood, one can argue that she performs a double transgression against society by committing murder and going against socially construction ideas of traditional gender expectations. Her ability to forge her way of mourning and express selfhood within the rigid confines of cultural practice is of equal importance to her contravention of the restrictions imposed by the rites and customs of the mourning practices. In so doing, her actions transcend mere defiance of cultural practice but reveal the coexistence of her humanity and womanhood that one need not be compromised over the other.

Harriet Khoza is introduced to the audience by her assigned roles: mother, wife, and widow. To begin, I draw attention to her role as a widow as it is the context for her transgressive acts against cultural norms. Rosenblatt and Nkosi's study highlight that Zulu cultural customs are applied differently depending on the demographic of the people (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007: 68). Those living in rural areas tend to preserve their language, traditions, and practices as opposed to those living in urban areas (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007: 68). One may find that women from poorer backgrounds tend to be the most oppressed in terms of cultural practice. Rosenblatt and Nkosi's comparison of the adherence to tradition by women from different demographics suggests an observation of class. The socioeconomic background of the women may influence or grant them some freedom in making decisions about what they retain or reject in terms of cultural practices. Harriet's class background does indeed provide her agency and the ability to defy mourning rites in the Zulu culture. Notwithstanding the differences in the

application of these rites, a widow is obligated to adhere to the practices of mourning practices, whatever her demographic and social status may be.

Harriet Khoza and Widowhood

After the death of her husband, Harriet, by the Zulu custom, is expected to begin the process of Ukuzila. She is expected to honour the life of her deceased husband and in-laws. The ideal wife in this context is marked by her conformity to mourning rites and loyalty to her husband and in-laws. Such ideals, as mentioned previously, are informed by cultural practice. Interestingly, what we come to witness in some instances is a deliberately defiant widow whose conformity to cultural practice is a performance to maintain her innocence and deflect attention away from herself as a potential suspect in the murder of her husband. The other reason is to perform marital faithfulness to her husband, even beyond the grave to avoid suspicion. Muller expands on the significance of this behaviour;

> A widow who manifests an interest in a member of the opposite sex is in danger of being regarded as a prostitute. She is branded as evil because by surviving her husband she is suspected of causing death. She may be persecuted and accused of witchcraft. Hence the need of many widows for male companionship and sexual relationships is barely recognised, except in negative terms. (Muller 1996 in Sossou, 2002: 203)

While Harriet does not pursue a romantic relationship following her husband's death, she is conscious of the bias and implicit judgment that comes with surviving her husband. Her 'compliance' with some of the customs for mourning can also be interpreted as a strategy for avoiding suspicion. Thus, by wilfully yielding to some of these expectations, she shifts into a position of power. Harriet appropriates the highly restrictive custom practices that limit women's autonomy to serve her interests. Through this strategic navigation, she not only assumes a position of authority but also enacts personal agency.

The first scene of the second episode demonstrates clear signs of a widow in mourning. For example, the set dressing in Harriet's bedroom includes a mattress on the floor, a dressing table mirror that is covered with a cloth, and Harriet is dressed in all black. Harriet rejects the significant part of the mourning practice, the 'sitting'. In this scene, Harriet sits at the edge of the mattress, and she is facing the bedroom door, which could suggest she has not been sitting

or grounded in that space as expected. Furthermore, she leaves the bedroom with her brother Kgosi. She transgresses custom by leaving the designated space of the widow. Rosenblatt and Nkosi explain in their study that 'a sitting' is an act that is one of the foremost practices of the mourning custom. However, it can be argued that it rids the widow of any agency as she must ask others for any task and can only leave the mattress when she relieves herself in the bathroom (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007: 78). Moreover, the 'sitting' mimics the disposition of someone bedridden, stripping her of her free will. In the scene, Harriet sits at the edge of the mattress with her legs crossed and then leaves the bedroom with her brother to participate in the funeral arrangements. Although the scene presents a widow observing Ukuzila 'symbolically, practically and spiritually,' (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007: 69). Harriet does not fully embrace this part of the cultural practice.

In addition to the above Harriet's wardrobe transgresses the prescribed clothing a widow should be wearing during this time. For instance, she dresses quite glamorously throughout her mourning period. Her wardrobe consists of; a pair of black and floral court heels, fitted suit trousers, an embellished blazer-like jacket to match, and a white collared shirt that peeks at the top of her jacket collar. Furthermore, she is always well put together. Harriet also wears bold make-up; a striking bold red lip and strong eye shadow, and curly weave, which she leaves uncovered. Ramphele (1996) notes that part of operating within the widowhood liminal space means ascribing to dehumanising and denigrating acts, such as 'shaving the head, wearing all-black clothes made from inexpensive material, wearing these inside out, and wearing one shoe' (Ramphele, 1996: 100). Harriet's make-up and wardrobe choices reflect her social standing. These choices suggest a reclaiming of selfhood within the confines of oppressive cultural practice. The transgressive act of embracing her beauty and sense of style as a widow could be read beyond the fictional occurrence contained solely within a text. These choices call to mind the scholarship about Winnie Madikizela Mandela and how her decision to embrace her beauty and sense of style became 'a site of resistance and strategic mobilization of popular support for her anti-apartheid resistance' (Musila, 2020: 604). Considering the rigidity and control exerted over the female body during the mourning period, and where it becomes a public site for loss and pain, choosing to oppose being the subject and object of ritual practice is defiant. Both in the context of political widowhood and widowhood. Thus, Harriet's embracing of beauty and femininity becomes a 'tool of resistance,' she is reclaiming control of her body, which during this time of mourning is meant to be a 'metaphor for suffering' (Ramphele, 1996: 99).

Another area of the prescribed dressing within mourning practice she rejects is the head wrap. The head wrap serves as a symbol of respect and even reverence to the deceased and the extended family. She rejects the head wrap twice; first when her domestic worker tries to cover her with it and second when her brother-in-law instructs her to "…stand up and go back to the mattress to mourn properly". Harriet's brother-in-law assumes the authoritative patriarchal role as a transmitter of the cultural custom protocol. He continues, "…and Harriet, I've already assigned you to go upstairs, wear a head wrap, and sit on the mattress". To which she responds, "Isn't Zodwa the first wife? She'll wear the head wrap". Rosenblatt & Nkosi (2007) point out that within custom, the widow should remain covered not just her head but her face (2007: 78). She is also prohibited from making direct eye contact and is expected to always lower her gaze (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007: 78). Despite the domineering patriarch's assertions, Harriet quite clearly resists his instructions. Harriet's response can be interpreted as a rejection of both the gendered and double standard nature of Ukuzila.

The above argument is plausible given that Mzi would not be expected to go through the same mourning process. The cultural expectations of a widower are less restrictive compared to those placed upon widowed women. As Ramphele reminds us,

> He is reminded that he must be strong and swallow his pain. His body is not marked in a significant way except to have his head shaved, as is the custom in most African communities. He also is required to wear a black button or armband. The period for mourning for widowers is generally six months, compared to at least one year for widows. The widower's status is the ultimate recognition that a man's identity in most patriarchal societies is perceived and presented as complete in itself, independent from the women in his life, including his wife. (Ramphele, 1996: 100)

The inherent double standard of Zulu culture Harriet rejects is tied to the emotional abuse she endured due to Mzi's extramarital affairs. It is unlikely, that she would receive vindication for attempting to expose his infidelity to her in-laws. In this regard, Rosenblatt & Nkosi (2007) posit that Zulu cultural tradition expects widows to observe the mourning process of Ukuzila and uphold the integrity of their deceased husbands, even if the husband had been abusive, neglectful or 'abandoned them' (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007: 79). Harriet's defiance implies a resentment to the patriarchal ideologies that inform to the Zulu culture.

Furthermore, Harriet's remark about Zodwa suggests an underlying meaning or implication. Zodwa is Mzi's former wife, and she plays a significant role during the period of mourning, which warrants further close attention. Unlike Harriet, Zodwa exemplifies the 'traditional woman'. Harriet's comment about Zodwa wearing the headwrap informs this interpretation. Upon her arrival Zodwa is dressed in full mourning regalia, a black head wrap and dress. She has also covered her shoulders with a blanket. In contrast to Harriet, she is dressed modestly, wears minimal to no make-up and embodies the submissive, compliant nature that is expected of a widow during this time. It can be argued that Zodwa's presence in the scene stands in to represent the 'ideal wife and mother'. Her construction aligns with Ngcobo's critique of the ideal wife in African culture. For instance, in the scene, despite being divorced from Mzi' she still claims to be his wife because he had previously paid lobola for her. It is her adherence to the 'ambiguity of wifehood within widowhood' that demonstrates her alliance with the patriarchal cultural practice (Ramphele, 1996: 100). It is noteworthy to mention, that within patriarchal cultural contexts, women who are allies to dominant power structures tend to be esteemed and favoured over those who challenge them. For example, Zodwa, despite exhibiting abusive behaviour towards Harriet, such as threatening her with violence in one scene and forcefully pushing her into a lowering coffin at a funeral, is exonerated by the male members of the family. The in-laws' tolerance and even defence of Zodwa's actions starkly contrast their treatment of Harriet, whom they subject to absolute intolerance, derision and censure. This punitive response exemplifies the perpetuation of patriarchal cultural norms.

Zodwa's presence in this scene can be interpreted as a symbol of 'virtuous widowhood' that is juxtaposed against the transgressive widow embodied by Harriet. This argument echoes the concerns of African feminists regarding the restrictive binaries within which Black women are expected to exist. Sisonke Msimang (2018) has observed similar essentialist ideas in the constructions of Winnie Madikizela's legacy, where she was deemed a 'monstrous woman' when she failed to uphold the 'mother of the nation' image (Msimang, 2018). Similarly, in African literature, the female characters are often confined to the 'Mother Africa' and 'whore' dichotomy (Dipio, 2014: 18). Dipio (2014) contends that such stereotypes do not accurately reflect the complexity of real women and, instead, they are patriarchy's way of rejecting change when women question the existing social order (2018: 18). While this study has identified Harriet Khoza as performing something different from existing matriarchs on screen, it does not advocate for the idea that the show is intentionally making artistic and ideological shifts in her representation. The portrayal of Black female characters in *The Queen* appears to maintain

the binaries of ‘good and evil’. However, I argue that, due to Harriet’s transgressions, she cannot be confined within these simplistic binaries.

Harriet's transgressions could also be interpreted as defying the script of ‘acquiescent femininity,’ which Binder describes as a cultural ideal that fosters passivity, submission, and reverence for hegemonic masculinity in numerous African societies (Binder, 2021: 123). An essential component of acquiescent femininity, according to Jewks and Morrell, is ‘excusing male behaviour,’ which entails enduring violence, extramarital affairs, and unprotected sex despite the extreme dangers involved. Driven by her resentment over Mzi's infidelity, she knowingly rejects the restrictions custom imposes on Black widows, and in doing so, her transgressions, while causing her to violate boundaries, provide her the freedom to create and define her ways of grieving.

Moreover, her transgressive behaviour continues in the following episodes. She leaves the mattress, her head and shoulder remaining uncovered, she dresses in varying degrees of her extravagant black formal attire which ranges from pantsuits to black pencil skirts, sometimes a satin red shirt, she travels alone in her car and even has meetings with her deceased husband's business partner. By undermining the mourning rite processes, she dishonours both her deceased husband and her in-laws. She simultaneously adheres to the ‘ideal wife’, and what it outlines as the protocol for widows as she resists being loyal to both her husband and culture.

Harriet's disregard and defiance of cultural authority often manifests in the presence of her children. Her transgressional acts evoke Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's assertions regarding patriarchy's power to not only constrain women within traditions but also compel them to become custodians who perpetuate these cultural norms. Hence, their resistance against ‘the oppressive grip of traditions’ engenders a self-contradictory state (Dipio, 2014a). Within cultural practices, the position of female authority only exists to maintain patriarchal ideologies. As such, rejecting these established cultural norms from within this position of authority can be perceived as contradictory. Harriet, however, refuses to become a conduit for transmitting patriarchal values. Consequently, her transgression is perceived as a threat to customary practices and an intolerable behaviour within the cultural context.

The only time Harriet allows herself to 'mourn properly' in the acceptable manner demanded by culture is when she comforts her daughter. In this scene, Harriet not only sits on the mattress, but this time, she is visibly rooted on it, as opposed to appearing to be partially sitting, and has also covered her head and shoulders in a black cloth; here, unlike earlier, we see a grieving wife and mother who holds space for her children to share memories of their father and she comforts them. Harriet's sudden temporary adherence is not at all a reflection of a woman who has succumbed to the oppressive practices of mourning. Instead, she is choosing to embrace her role as a mother by showing support for her children. Harriet's transgression is not only rooted in resistance but manifests itself in her ability to choose how and in what capacity she acknowledges cultural practices. Kotzé, Els, and Rajuili-Masilo, in their study, *African Women Storying Mourning Practices*, offer an engaging and apt conceptualisation regarding agency, which I would like to use here. For them, personal agency becomes apparent to others when an individual operates within their personal 'commitment, purposes and values' (White 2007, in Kotzé et al, 2012: 750). More importantly, it transcends the idea of individual autonomy -as in, the capacity to make decisions for oneself – and instead considers the positionality of an individual within any discourse and the ability to contest, challenge, or 'modify' "those discursive practices that impact their life'' (Els 2000: 139 in Kotzé et al, 2012: 750). In their discussion with the widows, their study found that the women held varied views and conflicting stances concerning 'preferred' traditional mourning practice (Kotzé et al, 2012: 750). This preference of adherence is the agentic position, or the means Harriet also assumes in choosing to hold space as a widow 'mourning properly' for her children in their grief. The act of choosing is in and of itself transgressive, as cultural customs often strip women of making their own choices. It is indeed these contradictions in her actions that complicate Harriet as a matriarch.

The tensions of power and gender inequality that Harriet contends within widowhood, I argue, are reflective of the broader socio-political status Black women find themselves in under traditional mourning practices. The display of resistance towards the morning practice on her part not only offers a new representation of widowhood on screen but also initiates a dialogue or critique of the discrepancies and issues concerning the rites and customs of mourning in local culture that women endure.

Harriet Khoza and Motherhood

The first scene of the first episode establishes the Khoza household. It is Kea Khoza's wedding day. Two families, along with friends and Mzi's business associates, are gathered in the opulent and finely decorated garden of the Khoza home in Midrand, Johannesburg. We are introduced to Harriet Khoza in her bedroom with her daughter, tending to her needs and adding the final touches to her bridal look. We also meet Kagiso Khoza, her son. Mzi enters the bedroom, followed by Shaka Khoza, the eldest son. The audience meets the entire family for the first time. Here, Harriet is depicted within the heteronormative construction of the matriarch as both a loving mother and a dutiful wife.

Later in the episode, Mzi Khoza is shot and killed by a hitman who manages to escape. After that, in a dimly lit car scene, we hear the voice of an unknown man who confesses to murder after being handed a bag of what we can speculate as payment for his services. "I've never done a job like this before. Actually, this type of thing…I hardly do. I'm not a killer. So...please… Don't ever contact me again! I think we are done here." (*The Queen*), as the man leaves the car, we see Harriet Khoza in the rear-view mirror; one can infer from this confession and her suspicious appointment with the unknown man that she ordered the death of her husband. This is confirmed in the latter episodes of the season. Harriet not only orchestrates the murder of her husband, but she ensures that it happens on the day of her daughter's wedding. The transgression here is two-fold: the murder itself and the killing of her children's father. As a mother, Harriet does not conform to the cultural inscriptions of the ideal mother and wife as per Lauretta Ngcobo's observation on Zulu and Nguni customary law because her motives and ethics are exclusive to herself (Ngcobo 1986 in Timlin, 2017).

The decision to kill the father of her children subverts the heteropatriarchal ideas that are entrenched in cultural practice and tradition. These ideas expect a mother to be self-sacrificing, putting the needs of her husband and children first, which is often the expectation and images of motherhood perpetrated on screen. Ngcobo's perspective on independence in fiction is relevant here, she argues that it is rarely depicted in the portrayal of Black women in African literature. She also suggests that characteristics related to empowerment, such as self-reliance and initiative, are discouraged in women within traditional communities influenced by Zulu and Nguni customary practices (Ngcobo 1986 in Timlin, 2017)

There is a moral ambiguity that features in Harriet's construction as a mother. After the murder of her husband, she wrestles with guilt, regret, and grief. The investigations of her husband's death reveal to the audience the inner conflicts she contends with. When she comes to the knowledge that she may be associated with the murder of her husband, she exclaims, "I can't leave my children alone" (*The Queen*). This statement reveals Harriet's complicated nature as a mother. Harriet's moral ambiguity reflects the attributes of the antiheroine character archetype, blurring the distinction between good and evil. Despite orchestrating the killing of her children's father and causing them significant pain, she also exhibits typical maternal nurturing qualities.

Harriet Khoza and Criminality

Binder's concept of 'violent female masculinity[20]' provides a framework for understanding Harriet's motivations in killing her husband Mzi. According to Binder (2021), when women engage in violent behaviour, defy traditional notions of femininity that construct women as 'nurturing, compliant, and vulnerable' (2021:1). Harriet's violent act of murder can be interpreted as stemming from her dire circumstances. The altercation scene between Harriet and Mzi, suggests that Mzi was both emotionally and financially abusive towards Harriet. His final words to her, in which he announced his plans to marry another woman and dismiss Harriet, indicate the level of control and domination he exercised over her. While Harriet appears to have enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle, she did not actively contribute financially to the marriage. In cases of abuse, Binder theorises that such transgressions can be viewed as 'liberating acts and acts of survival' (Binder 2021: 98). For Harriet, killing Mzi may have been a matter of self-preservation, as he had threatened to kill her. Her violent act can therefore be understood as a desperate measure taken in response to the abuse and threats she faced.

[20] Sabine Binder 's conceptualization of 'violent masculinity' builds upon the scholarly work of Judith Halberstam's 'female masculinity' and Serena Dankwa's 'situational masculinity'. For Binder (2021), this notion defies the socially normative understanding of femininity, positioning it as a form of resistant gender performance that broadens the realm female agency (Binder, 2021: 76). Additionally, Binder contends that when a woman assumes the traditional masculine space of the 'killer', she transgresses gender boundaries thereby performing a 'violent female masculinity' (Binder, 2021: 77).

Central to Binder's conception of violent female masculinity is agency and the resistance of victimhood. Studying the women in *Black Widow Society*, a novel by Angela Makholwa, Binder argues that women who assume the violent masculine strategy of the killer to free themselves of oppressive power structures also contest the kind of femininity that leads to victimhood (Binder, 2021). By rejecting 'acquiescent femininity', Jewkes and Morell assert that two types of masculinities are produced: 'that of the criminal and that of the business executive' (Jewkes and Morell 2010: 8 in Binder, 202: 114). The latter is relevant concerning Harriet, as it is descriptive of women who were 'previously exploited objects' who now 'become exploiting subjects in economic terms, thus contesting the economic dependence that has often characterised traditional African femininity' (Jewkes and Morrell 2010: 4 in Binder, 2021: 114). Thus, the violent feminine masculinity moves Harriet away from her oppressive husband and into a place of financial freedom. Similarly, to the Black Widows in Binder's study, Harriet's 'situational masculinity' transcends her agency beyond the disruption caused by the criminal to 'bring about lasting structural change for women' (Binder, 2021: 114).

Harriet's acts of violence could also be read as an attempt to seek alternative forms of justice. Considering the hegemonic masculinity that is sustained by heteropatriarchal cultural practice within Zulu culture, Harriet's resolve to kill her husband reflects the ongoing negotiating of space within an oppressive structure that renders women subordinate to men. As argued elsewhere in this chapter, cultural practices in many African societies, South African society, namely the Zulu cultural observations, tend to favour men at the expense of women's agency and relegate them to the margins (Sossou, 2002; Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021). Binder's examination of rage and alternative understanding of justice for women is pertinent in this context. According to Binder (2021) the portrayal of 'imagined female violence' and women seeking retributive justice is doubly subversive, as it undermines the South African discourse of restoration and reconciliation initiated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2021: 106). The TRC emphasised that to negotiate peace and establish democracy after apartheid, refraining from revenge was essential (Binder, 2021: 106). Harriet's actions do not directly address the leadership of the nation-state and the incompetent and unjust criminal justice system in South Africa. However, they are indicative of the gender inequalities that are embedded within cultural practices. It is important to note that Harriet is acutely aware that her actions constitute a criminal act which could result in her imprisonment. Nevertheless, she believes that she was acting in 'goodwill' to safeguard herself and her children. This is evident in her responses to the suspicions surrounding her involvement in her husband's death.

Cadena et al., (2016) assert that antiheroine's actions are primarily driven by the profound impact of a traumatic incident and their capacity to overcome its implications. The trauma might encompass more than sexual abuse and can be symbolic, such as trauma stemming from societal structures and inequalities that women frequently experience. The resonance of trauma for Harriet is two-fold: the emotional abuse she endured due to her unfaithful husband and the threat to her life had she resisted his instructions. It is both the trauma and betrayal that functions, in part, as an impetus for Harriet's transgressive behaviour.

Harriet complicates the stereotypical Black matriarch that is often produced on South African television, who, under the above examination, would (often) conform to proscriptions of culture and tradition concerning mourning rite practices or submit to the demands of motherhood that rid women of their agency and sometimes identity or succumb to acquiescent femininity. Furthermore, she transcends the dichotomy of good and evil that is often seen to be perpetuated in the constructions of the Black matriarch. Like the antiheroine, she embodies a form of aggression by challenging conventional social norms and expectations for women and their conduct (Cadena et al., 2016).

Harriet is not the only one who challenges the entrenched patriarchal structures of the Zulu culture. The relationship between Harriet and her brother Kgosi provides an alternative to traditional constructions of Black masculinity and femininity in its non-patriarchal nature. Even though Kgosi is older their relationship is not premised on the hierarchical or hegemonic notions of male authority and female subordination. However, Kgosi is a gay character and represents a non-normative sexual identity (Ncube, 2019: 7). Ncube (2019) asserts that such masculinities depicted in *The Queen* (2016 – 2023) are viewed as ‘less masculine and less desirable’ than other representations, premised on patriarchal and homophobic notions of ‘proper’ male conduct (2019: 6). Due to the tendency to feminise gay characters and portray them as physically weaker than those embodying traditional and hegemonic masculinity, they are often regarded as equal to women and thus, subordinate to other men (Ncube, 2019: 6). However, the character of Kgosi is notably significant, as he advocates for and protects Harriet against Brutus. Moreover, Kgosi is constructed as a 'gender progressive' character who not only embraces Harriet's complex transgressive nature but also encourages it to the extent of being an accomplice in the crime she commits.

The relationship between Kgosi and Harriet could be viewed as a critique of the heteropatriarchal foundations of the Zulu culture. Hegemonic ideologies are deeply rooted in the Zulu culture and often perceive liberated Black women as both threatening and emasculatory. Ncube observes that the 'alternative masculinities' depicted in *The Queen* (2016 - 2023) work against 'gender and identity stereotypes' refusing to conform or see themselves as inferior to the 'socioculturally idealised masculinity' (Ncube, 2019: 7). Consequently, Kgosi being secure in his masculinity, allows him to provide a safe space for Harriet to navigate inner turmoil, regret, and occasional relief from her actions. For instance, when she expresses remorse and guilt for having murdered her husband, she confides in him. What these intimate moments also reveal is Harriet's humanity, vulnerability, and complexity. Much like other antiheroines, she displays, as Cadena maintains, behaviours and demeanours that complicate the boundaries of what constitutes a hero and villain, thus offering alternative ways of thinking about women's behaviours (Cadena et al., 2016). She also employs immoral means for what she considers a noble cause, making it impossible to categorise her as either good or bad (Cadena et al., 2016). In doing so, Harriet eludes definitive characterisation and exists beyond the binaries of good and evil.

This character and narrative analysis of Harriet Khoza reveals that her construction as a matriarch departs from the existing portrayals of the Black matriarch. While she is established within her assigned roles as mother and wife, Harriet's' pursuit of selfhood, freedom and protesting cultural norms deviates from the inscribed protocols of Black womanhood as informed by culture. She is not defined by these assigned roles of ideal wife and mother. Furthermore, she exercises agency by choosing when and how she operates in these roles. Whether is it for self-gratifying reasons or to comfort her children as we have seen, the ability to choose when to conform to expectations of motherhood and wifehood is in and of itself transgressive.

Harriet Khoza's transgressions occur within the demarcated 'women's space' as established by the telenovela genre, such as the bedroom, where we first meet the grieving widow, the kitchen where she challenges her husband and the backyard where she interacts with a male business partner. Despite her transgression being 'privatised' to this domestic space they transcend boundaries between public and private. As argued by scholars and as second-wave feminists have argued, 'the personal is political'. The portrayal of Harriet's dominance, defiance and resistance to cultural norms for public consumption and display imbues her transgressions with

political significance and elicits public and communal responses as well. This argument is in line with the genre's social merchandising narrative approach.

In conclusion, I have demonstrated that Harriet's transgression aligns with Gqola and Foust's conceptions of transgression as she defies the boundaries of Zulu mourning rites. Her deliberate defiance challenges even the minor obligations of Ukuzila bringing the cultural practices into question. In doing so her transgressions can be interpreted as a form of resistance against the patriarchal ideologies embedded in these customs. Further, Harriet's transgressions offer alternative ways of mourning and representing widowhood on screen. She resists the submission imposed by Zulu culture; she negotiates uncharted terrains by undermining the stringent dress codes of Ukuzila; she defies the traditional and hegemonic masculinity that maintains these ideas. Even in the act of murdering her husband, she is disloyal to him and what he represents. For these reasons, Harriet can be considered a transgressive matriarch, who repudiates the stereotypical Black matriarch in South African television.

CONCLUSION

WHY A TRANSGRESSIVE BLACK MATRIACH?

This study examined the discourse of transgression related to the depiction of Black female characters in South African telenovelas, *The River* (2018 – 2024) and *The Queen* (2016 – 2023). The exploration sought to determine whether the acts of transgression displayed by these characters disrupted or perpetuated the traditional onscreen portrayal of the Black matriarch figure. The analysis sought to contextualise the characters of Lindiwe Dikana and Harriet Khoza within a broader political and historical framework by drawing on the theoretical insights of Black feminist scholars such as Lauretta Ngcobo, Pumla Gqola, and Sisonke Msimang. The study also employed close textual analysis to interpret the narrative constructions of these characters.

The current exploration in this study found that while both matriarchal figures are constructed within heteronormative and patriarchal structures, as mothers and wives, their transgressions complicate and subvert these prescribed roles. Lindiwe and Harriet transgress traditional sociocultural boundaries associated with motherhood, femininity, and in Harriet's case, widowhood, thereby challenging the conventions of how Black matriarchs are typically portrayed onscreen. As the study has argued previously, these transgressive acts offer both characters alternative ways of exercising agency and autonomy and, thus, are not solely acts of rebellion but also modes of resistance. They subvert stereotypical notions of Black womanhood by complicating how power, morality, and gendered norms intersect their lives.

Another finding is that Lindiwe Dikana displays a 'complicated femininity' as conceptualised by Viraj Suparsad. The analysis reveals that Lindiwe's moral ambiguity, a characteristic not often assigned to Black matriarchal figures onscreen, allows for depth and nuance in her depiction. The discretionary nature of Lindiwe's motivations and complicated interpersonal relationships underlines how she subverts the reductionist good-versus-evil dichotomy, instead presenting a complex form of femininity that defies easy classification.

The most compelling finding is Sabine Binder's concept of 'violent female masculinity' as it pertains to the character of Harriet Khoza. This framework was integral in the analysis of

Harriet Khoza in *The Queen*. While traditionally perceived as masculine, Harriet's acts of violence are read as expressions of agency that destabilise socially constructed gender norms. These violent acts are transformative, demonstrating how transgressions can provide Black women alternative forms for exercising power and control within spaces where they are often marginalised or oppressed. Furthermore, the study considered the antiheroine archetype to make evident the complexity of both characters and interrogate simplistic interpretations of their roles as mere perpetrators of violence or villainy. This examination was not intended to celebrate the violent transgressions depicted, but rather to expand the discourse surrounding Black women and violence beyond the reductive binaries and stereotypical tropes often imposed on such occurrences. In this regard, this study does not position these characters as 'positive role models', rather, it suggests that their representations may signal a shift in the portrayal of the Black matriarch onscreen, one that challenges and defies prevailing gender ideologies within contemporary South African society.

However, this study is limited in scope, as it examines the constructions of Black matriarchs within two specific South African telenovelas, *The River* and *The Queen*. While the selected texts offer valuable insights, the conclusions drawn may be limited by the specific narrative structures, character arcs, and cultural contexts within these shows. Thus, the findings may not apply to the portrayal of Black women in other genres.

Furthermore, the study has focused on Black matriarchs who transgress in a particular historical context and from a specific pay-tv channel in South Africa which has a unique approach to local programming. Since the findings of this study point to a lack of diverse portrayals of Black matriarchs, it may be worth exploring the spectrum of this archetype in emerging media platforms such as the streaming services Showmax and Netflix. These platforms have begun contributing to portrayals of prominent Black female protagonists on screen such as Ndoni Themba in *Imp*i (2024 – Present), and Zenzi *Unseen* (2023 – Present). It would be illuminating for future scholarship to begin considering transgressive Black women characters in new forms of media. Although this study is located within television studies, it could contribute to other fields such as Gender studies as well as discourses on the intersections of politics and media.

Further, its usefulness to the South African television industry practitioners cannot be overstated. The creative process, which includes the construction and framing of transgressive

matriarchs onscreen can be informed by the findings of this research, which is not only limited to academic discourse. Thus, the study serves as a critical resource for forging more authentic, multi-dimensional portrayals of Black womanhood in South African television, by providing a nuanced understanding of how these characters negotiate and resist sociocultural boundaries. By omitting such complex characterisations, the industry is in danger of maintaining stereotypical depictions that fall short of displaying the full range of Black female experience and autonomy.

Sisonke Msimang captures succinctly the response to the subtitle, 'Why transgressive Black matriarch?' in her reflection on Madikizela Mandela:

> In seeing Winnie fully, we remind ourselves that women too, are complex and human. Her errors and violent rages, her tears, and her tantrums remind us that women's sins are no better or worse than the sins of men (Msimang, 2018: 22).

To some degree this reflection, as does this study conveys the need for the visibility and embracing of transgressive Black female characters. It necessitates the need to revisit how we frame and interpret transgressive Black matriarchs.

This study then, concludes that the portrayals of Lindiwe Dikana and Harriet Khoza provide intricate and multifaceted depictions of Black matriarchy, transcending the reductive tropes of the strong and morally upright Black woman. It is through their transgressions that both characters subvert the historical and cultural stereotypes, offering portrayals of novel significance that welcome complexity, moral ambiguity, and possibility for transformation. It can be said the portrayals of the matriarchs in this study contribute to a broader reimagining of Black female characters onscreen, creating avenues where they can be depicted as flawed, vulnerable, and defiant. These representations mark a significant departure from traditional representations of the Black matriarch.

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