

Degrees of Transgression: The Writing of South African Black Women Writers

Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwavo, Sindiwe Magona and Zoë Wicomb.

Andrea Joy Natrass

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Abstract

This thesis examines the English autobiographical and fictional writing of four black South African women writers: Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo, Sindiwe Magona and Zoë Wicomb. The introductory chapter provides a theoretical overview of the principle strands of feminism available to the South African feminist critic - French feminism, with its theoretical emphasis and "symptomatic" interpretation of texts; the American brand of "liberal" feminism which tends to embody a more socio-historical, empirical approach; Materialist feminism which emphasises socio-economic conditions in the course of its analysis; and the notion of "womanism," an alternative to "western" feminism which finds considerable support in African and African-American feminist circles. These different theories are examined in order to formulate a mode of analysis to be applied to the writing of the four black South African women, an approach which draws on aspects of all these theories and takes cognisance of other factors unique to the South African situation in order to most productively illuminate those aspects of the writers' work chosen for discussion.

Following this opening chapter the thesis goes on to explore the writing of each of the four black South African women in turn. Each chapter contains an introductory section which provides biographical background on the writer under discussion as well as some insight into that individual's perspectives and opinions, usually drawn from their interviews, speeches and critical essays. This is followed by an analysis of their writing which deals with each book in turn: Tlali's two novels and short story collection, Kuzwayo's autobiography and collection of "oral" narratives, the two "volumes" of Magona's autobiography and her short fiction anthology and, finally, Wicomb's short fiction cycle and two individually published short stories. There are several issues with which this thesis is concerned in the course of analysing

the writing of these women. These include an exploration of the positioning of black women through the interaction of the discourses of race, class and gender; a focus on how the various writers reflect on or construct a sense of their own identities; an examination of the situations in which they complicate and/or transgress the dominant patriarchal societal attitudes, priorities and codes of behaviour which they are "expected" to adhere to; as well as a concentration on the writers' sense of the lives and needs of other black women in their communities. Such concerns are accompanied by a pervasive interest in attempting to identify and examine the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions which emerge (insidiously or deliberately) at various moments in the texts of these writers. The chapters are organised to chart what is perceived to be a progression among the various writers, in part marked by their increasingly sophisticated and more overtly feminist treatment of themes and issues concerning the "fictional" and "real" identities and/or lives of black women within South African society.

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CHAPTER ONE:

Theoretical and Other Considerations

Introduction

Throughout my university career the two areas of English studies which have consistently captured my attention and interest the most have been twentieth century women's writing and contemporary South African literature. However, it has been infrequently that these two subjects have coincided, and then almost inevitably with the writing of a widely known author such as Nadine Gordimer. The sense of a lack in my education was only consciously realised in my Honours year. In a course on "Women and Writing" only one lecture was devoted to "Black South African Women Writers," with Miriam Tlali's short story collection, Footprints in the Quag, the lone(ly) work briefly discussed.

My enquiries yielded an ostensibly simple explanation: until fairly recently the writing of black South African women has remained largely unknown. Only in the last six or seven years has this field begun to receive more than cursory attention with various conferences and workshops being organised around the topic and local critics (amongst others Dorothy Driver, Cecily Lockett, Margaret Lenta, Cherry Clayton and Margaret Daymond) addressing both the general issues of feminism and black women's writing within the South African context, as well as providing more specific commentary on the English works of certain black women. Despite this recent upsurge of interest the field is still a relatively new one and it is in this direction that I wish to turn my attention in the chapters which follow.

After much deliberation I have chosen to concentrate on the English autobiographical and

fictional writing of four black South African women: Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo, Sindiwe Magona and Zoë Wicomb. The choice of these particular women from a significantly larger "pool" of black women writers was made with various considerations in mind. Perhaps the most obvious reason is the issue of language. The choice of these women to write in English rather than their vernacular languages allows a critic like myself access to their work. Secondly, I made the decision to prioritise the genres of fiction and autobiography as they are probably the most prominent forms of literary expression currently being produced by black women, and each of the women whom I have selected has written work of a "fictional" and/or an "autobiographical" nature. Another important factor was the issue of personal choice - of the work which I have read the writing of these four women appeals to me and challenges me in ways which call for further exploration and analysis. Furthermore, I understand these women to form in some ways a representative group of writers, providing access to a wide range of pertinent themes and issues with regard to black South African women.

The writing I will be exploring spans a period of seventeen years, from Tlali's Muriel at Metropolitan published in 1975, to Magona's Forced to Grow which was published in 1992. During this period South Africa has undergone a kaleidoscopic series of changes: from the Soweto student protests of 1976, through the repressive years of successive States of Emergency, to the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1992. This momentous occasion marked the start of a process of negotiation and change which culminated in the country's first democratic elections in April 1994, resulting in a black African National Congress (ANC) majority government. While the way in which Tlali, Kuzwayo, Magona and Wicomb have depicted various historical events and issues, particularly with regard to their impact, or lack thereof, on the lives of black women, is of interest to me and will be given some consideration

in the following pages, I have chosen not to order subsequent chapters chronologically. Rather, chapters have been organised to chart what I perceive to be a progression between the works of the various writers; in part marking their increasingly sophisticated and more overtly feminist treatment of themes and issues concerning the "fictional" and "real" identities and/or lives of black women within South African society.

This perception provides some insight into the notion of transgression as I have envisaged and employed it in the title of my thesis and in the chapters which follow.¹ Race is such an integral discourse in the South African situation that no one is able to totally escape its influences and repercussions. In addition, for so many years the liberation struggle which the black people of this country have been engaged in has eclipsed all other concerns, particularly with regard to the identity and priorities of black women. However, in the black women's writing I have chosen to explore the authors can be seen to increasingly expand their focus beyond the all-consuming phenomenon of race to encompass other aspects of their experience: their positions as mothers and/or wives, their arrangement of the priorities which confront them, the oppression which they endure at the hands of their black men, increasing attention being paid to notions about the "self" and the construction of identity. In these and other ways they begin to cross or transgress those invisible boundaries which have determined what is normal or "acceptable" for black women in South Africa to write about. Obviously their efforts are characterised by degrees of attempts to explore these issues as well as degrees of success in accomplishing their vision, hence my employment of the term "degrees" in the title of my thesis when characterising the writing of these black woman as "transgression" which indicates

¹ I am grateful to Deidre Byrne whose book review entitled "Versions of Transgression: Recent Southern African Writing" provided the basis of the title of this thesis.

the uneven nature of this process. Before going on to examine the texts of, in order, Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo, Sindiwe Magona and Zoë Wicomb, I feel that it is vital to look at some of the broader issues surrounding the notion of feminism in our South African context.

The Politics of Feminism with regard to Black Women Writers

In her paper, "Feminism(s) and Writing in English in South Africa," given at the 1989 AUETSA conference Cecily Lockett attempted to formulate a discourse of feminism for South Africa by exploring the question of whether the various feminist discourses developed in America, England and France could "be imported into the South African context, or whether our special circumstances require[d] a different kind of feminist project" (2). This paper led to a great deal of discussion and debate around the concept of feminism in South Africa. Two years later, in January 1991, at a "Women and Gender in Southern Africa" Conference held in Durban it was evident from the papers presented and the discussions which ensued that no South African feminist discourse which met the requirements of all concerned had yet evolved (Lewis, "Politics of Feminism" 16). In particular, the black women participating in the conference voiced their displeasure at what they perceived as their construction solely as "subject matter." They were denied a voice and forced to listen to papers which stressed black women's passivity and the role of "enlightened" (white, middle-class) feminism in their salvation (Lewis, "Politics of Feminism" 16).

In the light of such ongoing concerns what then are some of the options available to a white feminist critic like myself who wishes to engage with the texts of black South African women writers? Firstly, let us look at the various mainstream feminist theories and practices which are currently available to the South African critic. French feminism, epitomised by such

theorists as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, with its emphasis on deconstruction and psychoanalysis is frequently dismissed in the South African situation as being too élitist and apolitical, concerned with theory rather than practice. Lockett states that French feminism "tends to enclose itself within the world of ideas, in which language and discourse may easily exclude the harsh and painful realities of suffering and oppression experienced by women" ("Feminism(s)" 3). This kind of criticism is still very much in evidence at the "Women And Gender in Southern Africa" Conference where Annemarie van Niekerk argues that "Concentrating solely on the body is a distraction from the material world in which its experiences are embedded. It overlooks social, ideological and political determinants" (qtd. in Arnott 120).

Such critique fails to acknowledge the valuable insights and tools with which French feminism is potentially capable of equipping the South African feminist. This theory conceives of a text not as a unified whole, but as a site of conflict and contradiction. Particularly its reliance on poststructuralist thought allows French feminism to focus on the covert, the hidden and repressed, those invisible signs of women's oppression and conflict which mark discourse but are not overtly articulated (P. Ryan, "Feminism" 26). Zoë Wicomb refers to the devices used in articulating these underlying meanings as tropes of concealment, the conscious discovery and exploration of which can open up new areas of meaning within a text ("Discourses" 1). Lockett's denial of a concept like *écriture féminine* with regard to the South African context and black women's writing in particular has been shown to be problematic and limiting ("Feminism(s)" 4). For example, Zoë Wicomb's discussion of Miriam Tlali's engagement with the libidinal in a short story like "Devil at a Dead End" reveals the possible existence of such concerns. Here a woman ingeniously claims to be afflicted with a venereal disease in order to

ward off the unwelcome sexual advances of a guard on an overnight train, thereby linguistically resolving a situation which could, says Wicomb, "be read in terms of jouissance" conflict with the phallic law" ("Discourses" 42-43). Rather than merely reading female sexuality essentially, as is implied by Lockett, French feminism also seeks to interpret female sexuality symptomatically. L'écriture féminine is not intended to be a solution to women's oppression per se, but rather a means whereby women can challenge the existing structures which are dominant, controlling and male-oriented (P. Ryan, "Feminism" 27). Such lines of investigation help to formulate an understanding of how sexuality is manipulated in the interests of ideology to position women in specific ways within the material world (Arnott 120-21).

Certain insights of poststructuralist thought can be immensely valuable when applied to the genre of autobiography. J.M. Coetzee has said that "in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" (Attwell, "Question of Autobiography" 117). This remark draws attention to the complexity of the writing process, where boundaries between different genres are often hard to distinguish. In interrogating such concepts as the "real" and the "truth" as well as examining the construction of the subject, poststructuralist theory allows for a radical reassessment of the notion that autobiography simply provides an accurate reflection of the lived experience of the subject (Coullie 14). Instead, within autobiographical writing one begins to acknowledge and analyse the complex web of discourses which act upon each subject to position him or her in a specific way. Autobiography emerges not as a mechanism for achieving total self-knowledge but rather as a textual intervention which is designed, perhaps unconsciously, to realise specific social and ideological effects.

This concept of the text is in marked contrast to the approach embodied by a critic like Jane Watts when she argues for autobiography as a self-making process. She claims that autobiography is "the ultimate means for writers to establish their identity, to work out, *in their entirety*, the dimensions and significance of those dimensions, of their existence" (114 emphasis added). This is an assertion which I find problematic in view of the poststructuralist concepts already discussed. Particularly troubling is Watts's assumption that complete self-knowledge is both an attainable and a desirable goal for the autobiographer. In so doing she seems to overlook the importance of recognising and examining a subject's construction and positioning within various social discourses and formations.

Watts's viewpoint is to some extent representative of the American "brand" of liberal feminism which is a further option open to South African critics. Elaine Showalter, one of the leading advocates of this approach, has coined the term "gynocritics" to describe this critical discourse which, she says, focuses on women as writers, covering such topics as "the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution of a female literary tradition" (248). This textual or empirical approach seems to meet with widespread approval amongst white feminist critics in South Africa, who are usually affiliated to academic institutions as are their American counterparts. Lockett describes it as a "prescription for action" ("Feminism(s)" 8), and "a political form of criticism" ("Feminism(s)" 9), which can be incorporated within the acceptable priorities of South African society. Furthermore, liberal feminism is hostile towards the incorporation of so-called male theory into the feminist movement; a suspicion which is presently shared by many South African feminists. Particularly when they discuss the writing of black women these white critics seem to favour a

"sympathetic" approach which accepts a somewhat reflectionist model of literary representation (De Reuck 33). For example, Lockett advocates that, "We need perhaps to view black women's writing from this perspective, to recognise that their work is primarily socio-historical and that its purpose is to record the experiences of black people in South Africa under Apartheid" ("Feminism(s)" 19). In her article "To Hear the Variety of Discourses" Zoë Wicomb is alert to the possibility that this definition of black women's writing as documentary can be prescriptive and limiting, introducing certain expectations about the text and presuming the intentions of the individual writers (42). Lockett's well-meaning suggestion has the effect of closing, rather than opening to further scrutiny the position of black women in contemporary South Africa. This implicitly undeconstructed notion of the subject is, I feel, one of the principle shortcomings of much liberal feminist criticism.

Materialist feminism, epitomised by the work of a critic like Michèle Barrett, is an approach which largely developed in Britain. This critical discourse seeks to bring an extra dimension to its analysis as it "engage explicitly with the relationship of feminism, literature, and criticism to socio-economic conditions" (De Reuck 32). More specifically, it incorporates the notion of class, and to a lesser extent, race, within its frame of reference emphasising the social construction of gender, and the unequal power relations which result from this construction, in its intersections with these other discourses. Materialist feminism is also committed to the view that the social and economic circumstances in which men and women live (the material conditions of their lives) are crucial to an understanding of the workings of culture and society, the particular inscription of subjects within the power relations of a society (Newton & Rosenfelt xi). Related to this is the idea that the reception of a particular text will be modified by the changing historical situations and material conditions of its readers. Each

reading is seen as an intervention which opens up "political" problems of its own (De Reuck 33). It is undeniably important to ground one's work in the material and historical social conditions of black women, where the work of researchers such as Belinda Bozzoli and Cheryl Walker allows some insight into the material conditions of women's oppression. However, one's analysis needs to move continually within and range beyond such considerations, taking care not to constitute "black women" as a single monolithic subject (Mohanty, Russo and Torres 51).

Fourthly, we need to consider the concept of "womanism" which was first suggested as an alternative to so-called western feminism by Alice Walker. In her writing she defines a "womanist" as:

A black feminist or feminist of color . . . A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility . . . and women's strength . . . Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. (xi)

It seems to be the philosophy expressed in the final sentence of this quotation which strongly appeals to and reassures many black South African women writers. They profess themselves to be more comfortable with the notion of womanism as opposed to feminism in relation to themselves and the concerns they express in their writing. However, if certain aspects of this philosophy are not examined more fully they can potentially obscure important contradictions and tensions, particularly with regard to the analysis of gender relations within the black community. For example, the position advocated by the Nigerian critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "The intelligent black woman writer, conscious of black impotence in the context of white patriarchal culture, empowers the black man. She believes in him; hence her texts

end in integrative images of the male and female worlds" (qtd. in Lockett, "Feminism(s)" 16), sits uneasily with the kind of resentment and tension which is often expressed, implicitly and/or explicitly, by black women writers in their texts. Miriam Tlali's short story " 'Fud-u-u-a!' " provides an example of this tension which is more fully explored in subsequent chapters. Here the three black female protagonists forcefully condemn the black men responsible for the sexual abuse - "a painful, harrowing experience" (Footprints 35) - which each of them has suffered when riding on the crowded commuter trains. The story ends with an image of the three women banding together against the black men who "treat us exactly like animals" (Footprints 42), to prevent a recurrence of the experience of sexual harassment.

Possibilities for the Future

Given these various "brands" of feminism, what could represent the way forward? In a 1991 paper, Jill Arnott describes the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as "An impressive example of 'symptomatic' reading, rooted in French deconstructive theory, which is undeniably politically engaged and firmly based on historical/materialist analysis" (119). Arnott is arguing for the relevance of certain features of French feminism to the South African situation. To illustrate these potential advantages she uses the critical approach adopted by Spivak, particularly in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", as exemplary. Arnott explains that the significance of Spivak's mode of analysis can be found:

in the extent to which it succeeds in deconstructing the opposition between Anglo/US feminism with its emphasis on social action, whether based on materialist analyses or on empirical investigations of oppression, and French theory with its concern with symbolic and linguistic modes of analysis and the representation of female sexuality.

(120)

I feel that our South African situation requires that feminist critics should seek to escape the binarism of Anglo/US versus French feminism when formulating a critical approach, particularly when considering the texts of black women writers. The "representation" of black women's writing by white feminist critics needs to be grounded in the notions of deconstruction, especially with regard to the complexities of subject constitution. In addition, attention must be directed to the impact of specific material, social and historical factors in the circumstances of writers and critics alike (Arnott 123). Given these "parameters" what are some of the considerations, pitfalls and problems which it is essential for the South African feminist critic to foreground?

Apartheid, with its social, political, economic and psychological repercussions has ensured that no easy notion of sisterhood is possible between the black and white women of this country (Clayton 2). In the past, the incorporation of white women into the power structures of South Africa has militated against common concerns with black women, who are more likely to view them as oppressors than sisters. The guilt which stems from this situation coupled with the frequent criticism that white feminist critics have constituted black women as the objects rather than the subjects of their research can easily have a paralysing and immobilising effect on the white feminist critic, acting at times to render her work cautious and well-meaning, but superficial, determined not to offend in any sphere and hesitant to apply so-called sophisticated techniques to what is uneasily perceived as unsophisticated work. As Cherryl Walker in her introduction to Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945 succinctly observes, "An over-concern with the correctness of one's theoretical position vis-à-vis the compelling debates on race and class - with theoretical pedigree - has, perhaps, been one of the more insidious constraints on the development of women's studies in southern Africa" (3). Some would even

question the validity of a white feminist critic engaging with texts written by black women, who themselves often reject the notion of feminism and the label "feminist" when it is applied to their lives and/or work in what they perceive to be a narrow Western sense.

However, the solution is not to retreat into a corner and desist from all critical endeavours. In her concluding paragraph to "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak emphatically declares, "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no value in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (308). Despite the somewhat enigmatic nature of this statement, it nevertheless reinforces one of the central tenets of her article. For Spivak the representation of a subaltern by an intellectual becomes a problematic concept when that critic ignores or attempts to conceal the process of representation and mediation which he or she is actively involved in. The danger of this lies in obscuring the crucial fact that what is eventually produced is the critic's reading or version of the "text" of a subaltern, and never the actual voice of that subaltern which is unknowable. However, provided an awareness of this process of representation is maintained, Spivak suggests that there is the potential for something of value to be gained from the "circumscribed task[s]" available to the intellectual.

Although one cannot equate the situation of a subaltern with that of a group of people (black women, for example) who are oppressed but do have some access to discourse, Spivak's cautionary yet encouraging words are relevant to a white feminist critic like myself. It is vital to endeavour consciously to maintain a constant vigilance towards the complexities surrounding the notion and construction of subjecthood, both as this applies to one's own

situation and when considering the positionality of one's subjects. The needs and wants of black women themselves must be kept in the foreground; not to speak for them or merely to theorise about them, but to take cognisance of what they have to say and how they express their priorities and needs. Spivak expresses this exact concern:

The academic feminist must learn to learn from them [Third World women], to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be *corrected* by our superior theory and *enlightened* compassion. . . . This is not the tired nationalist claim that only a native can know the scene . . . in order to learn enough about Third World women . . . the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated. . . . ("French Feminism" 135-36)

One aspect of this multi-faceted process involves listening to black women's voices as they articulate their situation and problems. On the one hand we have an example of the so-called official viewpoint. A May 1990 statement of the national executive committee of the ANC on the "Emancipation of Women in South Africa" notes:

The experience of other societies has shown that emancipation of women is not a by-product of a struggle for democracy, national liberation or socialism. It has to be addressed in its own right within our organisation, the mass democratic movement and in society as a whole. (Bazilli 28)

However, such statements have been criticised in terms which suggest that expedient rhetoric is far in advance of practice. In her article "Women and the Elephant," which appears in Bazilli's Putting Women on the Agenda and deals with the need to redress gender oppression in South African society, Frene Ginwala, the present Speaker of the House, at one point states, "Women are going to have to struggle for their emancipation. Despite the ANC's excellent policies, we do not have excellent practices. Gender relations are imbalanced and it

is a power relationship . . . Women have got to put themselves on the agenda" (68). The catalyst for this remark was the dissatisfaction being expressed by the ANC Women's League over the proposed constitutional guidelines, but Ginwala is also arguing for women's rights on a larger scale. One also needs to listen to the ways in which black women express themselves. At a 1988 Congress of South African Writers Conference on Women and Writing Nise Malange had this to say, "We are all aware that this society is male dominated, with mainly male chauvinists. We are always attacked as women, in any kind of work that we do, and we need to be brave in order to succeed" (Buang Basadi 12). Expressing similar sentiments at Current Writing's "Workshop on Black Women's Writing and Reading" in early 1990 Boitumelo Mofokeng announced that:

It's very different from what happens in our homes. Outside, we stand up on platforms, but at home, some of us go back to typical African tradition, we are submissive, passive, non-existent. I cannot relate to my husband or my brother the way I do to other men out there. (Daymond & Lenta 82)

On another occasion she said that, "I can best describe the struggle of black women against their husbands as an internal one: against male domination, male exploitation. But to stand up on a platform - it would be like hanging your dirty linen in public" (qtd. in Bazilli 90). As critics we need to pay careful attention to such remarks noting, amongst other things, how they sit uneasily within a situation in which "the orthodox position whilst celebrating the political activism of women, is that the gender issue ought to be subsumed by the national liberation struggle" (Wicomb, "Discourses" 37).² At the same time one needs to be equally aware of the alternative danger which posits these women as self-knowing, coherent subjects. Black women are not, merely by virtue of their colour, always able to give an authoritative and

² For an interesting discussion of this phenomenon see Beall, Hassim and Todes.

accurate representation of the conditions of their existence and oppression, or as Cheryl Walker remarks in her introductory chapter to Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945, "the subjective experience of a condition or situation does not guarantee the ability to reflect critically and analytically upon it" (6). Jill Arnott neatly sums up the tightrope which the white feminist critic is obliged to walk:

By remaining constantly alert to, and interrogative of, her own positionality and that of her subject, and ensuring that the mediating process of representation remains visible the feminist researcher may succeed in enabling a dialogue in which the 'testimony of the [subaltern] woman's voice-consciousness' can be heard. (125)

When discussing a possible approach to South African women's writing Zoë Wicomb suggested that one should "examine the discursive strategies by which the orthodox tendency of hierarchising the evils of our society - racism, sexism, classism - is resisted, or the ways in which the conflicting demands of representing these are textually articulated" ("Discourses" 42). I feel that this suggestion provides a useful anchoring point for my examination of the texts written by various black South African women, although in the course of my research I have come to complicate the order of the hierarchy which she proposes (racism, sexism, classism). Race as the principle signifier in the South African situation seems to be intricately linked with the workings of capitalism and the corresponding classes which it generates. Discussions of the so-called "triple oppression" of black women seem to inevitably cite gender-specific oppression as being the third and least significant form of oppression suffered by black women in South Africa. Indeed, when Dabi Nkululeko articulates the oppression of black women as four-fold: 'colonialism, racism, classism and sexism' (Qunta 98), it is even more obvious that gender issues are relegated to a back seat. Yet, within the writing of the

black women which I have examined, the discourses of race and gender are usually accorded primacy, with an awareness of class existing in the background, occasionally working to complicate their subject positions. Given this context it is important to bear the words of Dorothy Driver in mind when she argues, "That the axis of race often or generally takes experiential priority over the axis of gender should not be disputed, but what should be addressed is the way the experience of racism is used to occlude the experience of sexism" (Bazilli 91-92). I am acutely aware that merely resisting an orthodox hierarchy or even subverting it does not necessarily lead to progress being made. It can potentially engender a different kind of binarism or the creation of another hierarchy which might be equally confining and destructive, but this seems to be a necessary stage to go through in a process of giving voice to alternative and/or dissenting opinions and viewpoints. One of the things which I am looking for within the texts is the awareness of black women with regard to their position as women within society as a whole and with regard to the oppression which they might suffer at the hands of black men. This would provide evidence of what can, I feel, be termed an emerging or developing feminist consciousness even if black women writers do not necessarily define it as such themselves. An example of this consciousness might be Ellen Kuzwayo's response to the question, "What was the motive or idea behind Call Me Woman?":

The idea was to share my experiences in my practice as a social worker with as many people as possible - the experiences of black women I worked with . . . I tried to give a record of the lives of black women and the contributions they made to the development of this country, which people just close their eyes to. (Mackenzie & Clayton 59)

Another factor which the white feminist critic needs to remain aware of is that the criteria of,

broadly speaking, Western feminism are not always applicable to the South African and African situation. For example, the family is traditionally seen as a site of oppression for women, but to African women it seems to represent both a site of oppression and a site of resistance to colonialism and the structures of Apartheid (Bazilli 86-87).³ However, one still needs to scrutinise such a discourse which posits the familial, however defined, as women's fundamental and original sphere. Indeed, historically one is repeatedly able to observe the denial of feminist impulses to African women. Their mobilisation around such issues as the pass laws is almost inevitably linked to their traditional role as mothers seeking to prevent the disruption of family life. While such interpretations may be accurate, to deny any other contributing motive or possibility is to restrict the situation from the outset.⁴

Black women writers have frequently engaged with traditional concepts and attempted to open up greater spaces for them which perhaps exceed conventional boundaries. For example, of Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography Call Me Woman, Dorothy Driver has said: "Much of the value of Kuzwayo's text . . . lies in the questions it poses about women: the nature of women, the status of women, the power of women, and the voices of women" ("M'ma-Ngoana" 233). And, a few pages later, she goes even further than this:

At a more conscious level, however, Call Me Woman goes beyond defining women as the new and politically active mothers. In certain ways, it starts to open up a new space - a space where contradictions flourish, and the terms 'masculinity' and

³ For a comment on the similarly contradictory nature of the family in the African-American situation, see Collins, Black Feminist Thought 44 and Christian 214. ✓

⁴ Both Walker, Women and Resistance in South Africa, and Wells carry a comprehensive discussion of black women's protests against the pass laws.

'femininity' are tumbled about in disorder - and says of this space: THIS is woman.

(247)

In the chapters which follow I am hoping to provide some insight into the dimensions of this "new space" and the contradictions which inhabit it. As black South African women writers increasingly raise their voices over issues which they were previously denied access to or avoided confronting, the complexity of their subject positions expands. Their deepening awareness leads to a questioning and transgression of the established conventions and practices, a reworking of what it means to be a black woman in South African society. Inevitably this is not a uniform process of discovery and articulation: there are gaps, contradictions and lapses in the feminine voice which emerges. Yet it is a voice which is determined to explore the world on its own terms.

CHAPTER TWO:

The Novels and Short Stories of Miriam Tlali

Introduction

The biographical details which are available concerning Miriam Tlali are relatively well known but they reveal little, perhaps deliberately so, when trying to formulate an overall picture of her life and writing. Personal privacy is something which she holds to be very important and consequently we can gain only glimpses into the formative influences of her youth and her present circumstances.

She was born in Doornfontein in Johannesburg and grew up in the vibrant community of Sophiatown, a place she recalls with affection and nostalgia at various points in her writing. She was brought up in a female-headed household, her father having died when she was very young. Consequently, the people who she claims shaped her life were predominantly her mother and grandmother. Her mother always encouraged her to read and study, giving her the books her father had used in his career as a teacher. Tlali says that her mother "always discouraged me from having a very big family. She said I wouldn't be able to do other things. She said that you must be able to stand up on your own" (Mackenzie & Clayton 81).⁵

Tlali also had the example of her grandmother to inspire her and create confidence in the power of women to set and achieve goals which others might mock or resist. This defiant woman, at about the age of forty:

⁵ This interview with Tlali was conducted by Cecily Lockett in September 1988 and has proved particularly valuable in the introductory section of this chapter.

stopped going on with her chores and things, and went and did traditional medicine. She became what they call a 'witch-doctor' . . . There's a whole ritual of becoming a so-called 'witch-doctor', something very intricate at that time, very time consuming, and very demanding. So she went for that, and in spite of her husband's criticisms, she did it. (Mackenzie & Clayton 81)

Such determined examples must have stood Tlali in good stead as she battled to further her education. After studying towards a Bachelor of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand for two years, Tlali transferred her studies to Roma University in Lesotho. However, financial difficulties prevented her from graduating and she was forced to return to Johannesburg. Here she began working as a clerk and typist in a store selling furniture and appliances, an experience which provided the basis of the material for her first novel, Muriel at Metropolitan. With regard to her writing she has said, "I use my imagination, but it's always stemmed from my own experiences" (Mackenzie & Clayton 77). Occasionally her inspiration stems from the experiences of other black people of whom she says: "People are always coming to me and telling me about their stories. They were aware that I was writing. There are others who even said to me, 'Oh, my goodness, please tell the world that this is happening to me', and so on" (Mackenzie & Clayton 78). This blurring and complication of the line between fiction and autobiography, between imagination and "reality" is a significant feature of her writing, especially in the light of the tension it creates with those critics who insist that the writing of black women should be regarded as social documentation and commentary, rather than creative endeavour.

The swift banning of her first two novels in South Africa, only lifted in 1986, together with

their current local unavailability has ensured that Miriam Tlali's work is more widely known and critically accepted abroad than in South Africa. She has travelled extensively overseas giving lectures about her work and articulating the position of black women within the South African context. The enriching experience which travel provides has been clearly described by Tlali, particularly in the "Travelogues" of Mihloti, and is evident in the increasing sophistication of her later writing, where earlier themes and issues are complicated and revised.

One of her top priorities has been the promotion of black writing: she was one of the founders of Staffrider magazine and, in 1988, was the only woman on the board of the black publishing house, Skotaville. In addition, other black women writers mention the tremendous support and encouragement which she has given them in assisting their writing endeavours, providing them with inspiration by example and continuing moral support. Sadly, though, Tlali speaks of the fragmented nature of the writing "scene" - as a black woman writer she knows of other women in the same position, but very real time and economic constraints seem to militate against the development of any kind of comprehensive support network in which ideas and perspectives could be exchanged and discussed.

She views her role as a writer as one of "historian," "social commentator" and "teacher" as well as "a vehicle for change" (Mackenzie & Clayton 77). Her writing forms her way of fighting to bring about social change of various kinds, both within the black community and the larger South African society. In this regard it is interesting to note her ambivalent stance on the issue of feminism. She is obviously very much concerned with women's issues, clearly identifying women's lowly and exploited position in society when, for example, she quotes her

grandmother in saying "to say woman is to say pot; to say woman is to say broom" (Mihloti x). However, she takes care to qualify her stance with comments such as "We cannot isolate the problems of women from the general struggle. The two have to go together, simultaneously. You cannot speak of the one without speaking about the other" (Mackenzie & Clayton 75). Furthermore, although she would call herself a feminist writer she also qualifies this with the words, "but not in the narrow Western kind of way of speaking about a feminist. Black women are very much conscious of the fact that they are in fact the very people to make the home and very little credit is given to their efforts" (Mackenzie & Clayton 74). She professes herself much happier with a notion like Alice Walker's "womanist" brand of politics and its accompanying description of black women's writing as "woman-centred" rather than feminist (Mackenzie & Clayton 74). However, her stance does not preclude the criticism of black men, particularly with regard to their treatment of black women, which is a prevailing concern in her writing. She clearly sees the problems between the sexes, and indeed between different races, revolving around the issue of power. Who has it and who is denied it, and what are the mechanisms of this interaction? At times she speaks in favour of a supportive role of black women towards their menfolk who are active in the liberation struggle. Yet, she almost immediately undermines this concept with a statement like:

They play a supportive role *because they are not allowed to come to the forefront*. If they were allowed by the system - and by the men - they would. Many women protect their husband's egos by playing up to the fact that they are merely supportive, and they really know they are the very ones who are behind the forceful nature of the men.

(Mackenzie & Clayton 75 emphasis added)

This kind of uneasy tension in what she has to say is revealed in her writing, becoming most obvious in later years where her loyalties seem to be increasingly divided, and a new position

for women demands to be worked out.

Muriel at Metropolitan: "Looking through the Keyhole"

Muriel at Metropolitan is Miriam Tlali's first novel, completed in 1969 but only eventually published, initially in a very expurgated form, in 1975 by Ravan Press. Shortly thereafter it was banned in South Africa, an event which Tlali partly attributes to the fact that "it was the first time a black woman wrote about what was happening to black women, and it was making people uncomfortable" (Mackenzie & Clayton 84). The novel tells the story of Muriel, a black woman who is employed in a clerical capacity at an appliance and furniture store called Metropolitan Radio in central Johannesburg. This store seems to be intended as a microcosm of South African society (Clayton 277), owned and run as it is by Mr Bloch, a white Jewish man, who employs two white women (one Afrikaners and the other English) and Muriel as clerks, as well as an assortment of black, coloured and white workers who range from salesmen to repairmen.

On its publication critics did not receive Muriel at Metropolitan kindly. Comments ranged from Lionel Abrahams's description of the novel as "modest" to Marie Dyer's criticism of the "unpatterned" and "formless" quality of the writing (Clayton 278). In addition, Richard Rive in his introduction to Mihloti describes Miriam Tlali's first novel in the following rather dubious terms, "In [this] book she depicted no major calamity and the tone was subdued by comparison with the anger of earlier Protest writers. The force of her work was its honest attention to detail and its complete lack of histrionic gestures" (Tlali, Mihloti ix). The limited critical discussion that there has been of Muriel at Metropolitan seems to be in agreement that this novel, described as "autobiographical fiction" (Clayton 278), is attempting to expose and

explore the inequalities, both blatant and insidious, which are integral to the Apartheid system, and the ways in which these discrepancies work to complicate the daily existence of black South Africans. In addition, using Muriel as a representative figure, Tlali endeavours to provide her people with some strategies for coping and surviving in this world.

In her essay, "Intimate Knowledge and Wilful Ignorance: White Employers and Black Employees in South African Fiction," which is included in Clayton's Women and Writing in South Africa, Margaret Lenta draws attention to the rivalry inherent in the relationship between the white women of the novel, Mrs Stein and Mrs Kuhn, and Muriel. Lenta explains one aspect of this by suggesting that the "mistress-servant" relationship is the only relationship which many white women are comfortable with when relating to black women, a relationship they try to normalise by insisting that it is natural for them to relate to each other in this way (Clayton 239). This justification works to obscure the position of power and superiority which the white woman/employer is attempting to maintain over the black woman/employee. An illustration of this phenomenon can be found in the forms of address which are used with regard to the characters in Muriel at Metropolitan. The white women are always referred to by their titles and surnames (Mrs Stein and Mrs Kuhn) while Muriel's surname is never mentioned to the reader. By convention the former practice connotes formality, respect and status while the use of a first name only is considered to be belittling and disrespectful. On a superficial level this naming process might seem to reinforce the "mistress-servant" relationship but it could also be interpreted as a deliberate strategy adopted by Tlali to reveal the incongruity and ultimate futility of such practices which attempt to maintain an unequal power relationship.

The hostility of Mrs Kuhn and Mrs Stein towards Muriel is principally based on their fear of her as a rival in the workplace. Initially the two women try to exclude Muriel from the more complicated jobs, reserving these for themselves and allocating the more mechanical ones to her. However, this plan soon falls apart:

The white staff could not cope with all the work requiring skill and thinking. I was there and I could do it. I had proved that I could type anything as well as they could, if not better. The boss was not blind to the fact, so he called upon me to do more and more of the seemingly complicated work. (15) ⁶

As Muriel's responsibilities increase she is moved from a makeshift desk tucked away at the top of the stairs to a groundfloor location, "separated from the rest of the white staff by the cabinets and steel mesh wires" (15), and finally to a desk on the "white" side of the office area. Thus, in an almost literal sense, Muriel's skills make her able to invade the white women's territory: her spatial relocations symbolic of her increasing responsibilities (Clayton 241). Accordingly, the resentment of the white women increases and on several occasions they resort to objectifying her as just another black person, thereby hoping to dismiss the threat which she represents: "Mrs Kuhn looked up and added, smiling, 'They'll give anything for a radio. They would rather go hungry and naked. As long as they have an F.M. they are satisfied.' She added, looking at me, 'Shame!' " (32). Jacklyn Cock refers to this strategy as a "technique of depersonalisation" which is often utilised by white women to efface the individuality of a black woman whose presence is perceived as a threat to their own position in some way (137). Tlali draws attention to this phenomenon on several occasions in the course of the novel exploring the different guises which it can adopt. For example, Mrs Stein tries to

⁶ Unless otherwise specified the page references in each chapter refer to the "fictional" and/or "autobiographical" writing under discussion in that section.

exercise a "benevolent" authority over an unknown black woman by calling her "Nanny." The condescension which is inherent in this term of address is sharply revealed in the interchange which follows:

The African lady did not seem impressed by the white lady's kind manner. She replied bluntly, 'Don't call me Nanny. *Your* Nanny is looking after your kids at your house.'

'But I don't know your name.'

'You don't need to know my name to speak to me. I don't know yours either, but you wouldn't allow me to call you Nanny, would you?' (133)

Mrs Stein's reaction is one of shock, ostensibly at the perceived rudeness of the black woman but more significantly, I think, at this forceful disruption of her complacent notion of the boundaries of the "mistress-servant" relationship.

One of Tlali's purposes in writing Muriel at Metropolitan is, I feel, to challenge and complicate the conventional portrayal of the black woman in South African literature. The character of Muriel is central to this alternative vision in several important ways. For one, her class mobility brought about as a result of her status as a so-called white-collar worker enables her to confront the racism of the white women with whom she works. On two occasions in the novel the enmity between Mrs Kuhn and Muriel escalates into a heated war of words. The second incident concludes with this exchange:

Mrs Kuhn turned to Mrs Stein and said, 'She thinks she is like us, you know.'

I answered, 'That's an insult, Mrs Kuhn. I don't think I'm like you. I don't *want* to be like you. I'm very proud of what I am. You're too small, too full of hatred. You're always preoccupied with issues that don't matter!' (70)

On one level Muriel's forceful response gives voice to the anger which Tlali feels towards

white women who treat their black counterparts as inferior persons. Looking further, one is also able to discern that Tlali has been influenced by the Black Consciousness movement whose ideas were prevalent in South African society as she wrote this novel. Muriel unequivocally rejects the suggestion that she is trying to emulate the white women. Rather, she is strongly convinced of her own worth as an individual and proud of her own abilities and achievements.

The difficulties involved in establishing any kind of sisterhood between women across the colour bar are clearly illustrated by the ongoing conflict in Muriel at Metropolitan. Tlali seems to suggest that while each "side" maintains their hostility and suspicion there is little desire for or hope of meaningful contact being made. Even as, over time, the relationship between the white women and Muriel develops to the point where they regard her "not as a danger but as a co-worker" (173), there is little sense of any genuine friendship between them. Indeed, Muriel speaks of the white women as tolerating rather than liking her. The casual interaction which they do have is principally reliant on the common ground of motherhood and their children. Tlali could be suggesting this as a potential starting-point for a future relationship, but given the historical juncture at which she was writing Muriel at Metropolitan it is hardly surprising that she is unable to develop any significant cross-cultural alliance between white and black women.

However, relations are not at a complete deadlock. On Muriel's part it is possible to witness a transformation in attitude as she observes the white women from close quarters and comes to acknowledge that, "These people were not inhuman nor were they downright cruel, as I used to brand them all. I had learned that they could be kind and gentle. If only this fear of us

could be removed somehow" (174). Unfortunately, though, the white women in the novel do not yet seem capable of a similar metamorphosis, which is essential in order to effect a change in the status quo.

In her essay entitled "The Fabric of Experience: A Critical Perspective on the Writing of Miriam Tlali," which is included in Cherry Clayton's volume, Cecily Lockett implicitly expresses disappointment in Tlali's lack of so-called feminist awareness when she says:

In Muriel at Metropolitan she [Tlali] tends to adopt the traditional black attitude of women towards their men. When a fellow employee offers to run an errand for her, she declines: 'How could I? He was a man and I was a woman. According to our custom a woman does not send a man. We reserve a place, an elevated place, for our men.' (Clayton 282)

Lockett would seem to be accurate in this observation, yet I feel that Tlali's treatment of the relationship between black men and women deserves closer scrutiny. Muriel is able to withstand much of the taunting and criticism which the white women direct at her because of the support of her fellow black (male) workers. I find this an interesting phenomenon, because it subtly reverses the motif of black women who are usually required to act out a supportive role with regard to their menfolk. The "tea episode" provides a more specific example of this phenomenon. Muriel, although employed in a clerical capacity is asked as a matter of course to make tea for the white staff when their usual "tea-boy" does not come to work. Her husband immediately understands that this is not a simple, straight-forward request, but one which is harmful to her status and self-respect. "Another man might have shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Oh well, you know what they are like. To avoid unpleasantness and keep your job, you'd better just make it for them' " (117-18), but he does

not hesitate to suggest that Muriel should resign rather than be subject to such treatment. Although it is perhaps their relative economic security which allows him the luxury of this response, his support of Muriel is nevertheless without question.

In Muriel at Metropolitan Tlali does not offer any overt criticism of black men, yet there are instances in which she complicates the traditional boundaries of male/female interaction. For example, Muriel holds and expresses opinions on matters which might traditionally be considered a male preserve. She and Lambert,⁷ a minor character in the novel, debate at some length the value of traditional customs as opposed to western civilisation, a question raised by Black Consciousness thinking of the time (Clayton 279). Far from endorsing a return to bygone days of a traditional way of life Tlali implicitly condemns this kind of retrospective longing when Muriel remarks that cultural differences of the past, " 'may be put on record and preserved, stored away in the museums and archives so that coming generations may read about them and know them, but they now belong to an age we shall never go back to, an age we *cannot* go back to whether we like it or not' " (44). Instead, she is advocating the formulation of new ways of relating to one another which presumably also extend to a reworking of gender relations. The debate over the value of western medicine versus traditional African healing is also considered in the novel. Here it is significant that Muriel, although she does not outrightly reject Adam's advice to go to their traditional healers, remains very sceptical, somewhat qualifying the unquestioning "respect" which Lockett feels she displays towards him and to what he advises (Clayton 279).

⁷ In her essay Lockett mistakenly ascribes this conversation to "two minor characters, Agrippa and Lambert" (Clayton 279), which is not the case in the Longman edition.

Through the focus of her writing in Muriel at Metropolitan Tlali can be seen to endorse other roles for black women apart from the traditional ones of wife and mother. The details of Muriel's personal and family life are deliberately kept vague; never significantly intruding on the "world" of Metropolitan Radio which provides the principal setting for the events of the novel. As Muriel at Metropolitan is based on Tlali's own experiences while working at a furniture and appliance store in Johannesburg, it is possible to relate this shielding of Muriel's privacy to Tlali's personal convictions regarding the sanctity of family life. Another way of interpreting this feature of the novel could be that Tlali wishes to concentrate attention on the black working woman who is forced to juggle the responsibilities of a husband and children with the priorities and demands of her career. For example, when Muriel's baby is ill with chicken pox she takes a few days leave to look after the child, but soon becomes impatient to resume work again. Her growing boredom at being trapped at home combines with the knowledge that her expertise is required at the office as month-end approaches. Ultimately she solves her conflicting responsibilities by ensuring that someone else will look after her child so that she can return to work earlier than originally planned.

That issues of race are of top priority for Miriam Tlali can be easily discerned when reading Muriel at Metropolitan. This awareness can be partly ascribed to her interpellation by Black Consciousness, as discussed earlier in this chapter, as well as to her personal experiences as a black woman living under an Apartheid regime. However, occasionally in the course of this novel Tlali/Muriel can be seen to complicate her stance by addressing the problems of South African society from perspectives that are not exclusively or simply racial. For example, on one occasion she draws a parallel between the plight of the black and white workers at Metropolitan Radio:

[W]e had the same problems. We were all under the thumb of a demanding boss, who was unyielding in many ways, giving little consideration to the fact that we had private lives of our own, homes and dependants to look after.

Office workers, mechanics, technicians, we were all more or less engaged in the same tasks at the same time. The colour of our skins did not come into it. . . . (163)

Here Tlali/Muriel poses the problems facing her fellow workers, black and white, in terms of class as well as race. She identifies a common predicament which has the potential for drawing workers together despite racial differences. Unfortunately, this class consciousness is not given any sustained treatment in the novel. Tlali seems to be especially blind to her own class positioning and certain contradictions can be observed as a result of this lack of awareness. At times in Muriel at Metropolitan Tlali seems to objectify the black people whom she elsewhere writes of with such empathy. This ambivalence seems to risk endorsing a stereotypical, western view of the black people of Africa and is an interesting phenomenon. Examples of this "slippage" deserve further scrutiny:

Often one would hear a black customer say, 'Of course these Boers are always envious when we buy better furniture than they do. They realise that even if they try to keep us down by not paying us anything when we work for them, we still try our best to buy good things. They feel that we are competing with them and they do not like it.'

And when *they* did reason like that, no amount of persuasion could make *them* see it differently! (38-39 emphasis added)

Here the third person references which I have highlighted imply a sense of superiority on the part of the speaker, something which is again emphasised by the kind of language used and the assumptions implicit when Muriel remarks that, "The *girl* had got herself a job and it looked as

if Mrs Stein had got herself a *clean-looking* girl, although it was *not for long, as usual*" (123 emphasis added). Or, "I dreaded to think what would happen to me and my family in Soweto (where taking life means nothing), if it were to be known that I was responsible for the letters" (134). I think that such instances are a reflection of Tlali's complicated subjectivity, embedded as she is in the differing discourses of the white and black worlds of South Africa. Such attitudes could perhaps have been assimilated from the "western" education system of which she is a product. Or, they could stem from her time spent on the fringes of white society as a skilled clerical worker: a member of the middle class whose status and privileges occasionally cause an unconscious looking down on rather than identification with other Africans.

Yet, ultimately Muriel and Tlali's loyalties in Muriel at Metropolitan can be seen to lie with her fellow black South Africans. Muriel is driven to leave Metropolitan Radio by her inability to continue being part of a system that oppresses and exploits her own people. She ponders at one stage:

To go on working at Metropolitan Radio would be torture. Every time I was forced to be 'loyal to the firm' I would get these cramps deep down in my entrails. Every time I asked for a customer's pass book, I would feel like a policeman, who, in this country, is the symbol of oppression. I would continue to feel like a traitor, part of a conspiracy, a machinery deliberately designed to crush the soul of a people. (140)

Even in this extract which ostensibly explores her unease at being part of "the system," the reader can detect some evidence of her unconscious identification "down" with those blacks who are less privileged than herself; an identification which occurs primarily at an instinctive (literally, gut) level. The use of a phrase like "the soul of a people" also suggests an ambivalence in her attitude by its distant and rhetorical tone. However, it is clear that Tlali/

Muriel's intentions are to reaffirm her commitment to her people's cause. In order to regain her self-respect and self-esteem she has to escape from her situation, eventually resigning from Metropolitan Radio even though she has no other job waiting for her.

Although Cecily Lockett is incorrect in applauding Miriam Tlali as "the first black woman in South Africa to publish a novel" (Clayton 276),⁸ her achievement in producing Muriel at Metropolitan nevertheless represents a positive step for black women writers. In this novel Tlali has foregrounded the previously seldom heard perspective of a black woman with great force, often expressing opinions on issues which could be considered the traditional domain of men. However, her position is by no means an uncomplicated one. As the discussion which follows will show, her subsequent writing reveals an uneasy tension between the demands of expressing a "feminist" point of view and relegating such concerns to their "rightful" place, behind issues of race and class.

Amandla: "Politics and Community"

One of the observations made by an anonymous but discernibly white reviewer after the publication of Amandla in 1980 is that the novel "has no particularly profound message other than the kind of fortification of the spirit of resistance which is standard fare in any social struggle" (15). Rather than viewing this comment as demoralising criticism, I think that Tlali might have been somewhat gratified by its content for, in an interview in 1981, she speaks of the purpose of her writing in similar terms when she comments, "I regard the raising of the

⁸ In her review of Footprints in the Quag, Driver offers the correction that the South African "exile" writer Bessie Head precedes Tlali as a novelist, and the autobiographies of Noni Jabavu precede them both (52).

level of consciousness of blacks as my prime responsibility, I am personally committed to doing this. . . . ' " (Clayton 277). In the opinion of the reviewer of Amandla this is the dubious accomplishment which she has achieved in the writing of this novel. Yet, should one dismiss Amandla as summarily as this?

Tlali continues her "mission" statement with the words, " 'I must go deeper into them, their feelings, try to make them understand their hopes, desires and aspirations as a people' " (Clayton 277). It is interesting to note the didactic tone which underlies her intentions and goals. Unfortunately, at times in the course of Amandla the narrative which Tlali is weaving seems to give way to a similar didacticism as she focuses her attention on instructing or educating the reader by imparting political information in an unassimilated form. The most extended example of this phenomenon can be found in Chapter Twenty-Four where for almost fifty pages two characters, Killer and T, engage in a political discussion. Killer has supposedly memorised reams of information including statistics, political manifestos and the speeches of various politicians, the exact content of which he imparts to his enthralled audience. In his "Turkish Tales" essay in Rediscovery of the Ordinary Njabulo Ndebele has discussed this "conflict between the aim of storytelling and that of imparting social information" (24), which at its most pronounced almost becomes a competition between creative writing and journalism, what Lewis Nkosi, in 1967, described in similar terms as "journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature . . . without any attempt to transcend or transmute . . . given 'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction" ("Fiction by Black South Africans" 212). Elsewhere in his essay Ndebele praises Amandla for "the quality of its art" (32), referring in particular to the "love story" of two of the principal characters which is a focus of the novel. However, I feel that Tlali does occasionally lapse into a mode of reportage

or journalism which detracts from the quality and impact of the story she is telling.

It is vital to appreciate that Amandla is one of the so-called "Soweto" novels which were written by various black authors in response to the political events and circumstances surrounding the Soweto riots of 16 June 1976 and as a consequence, argues Kehlwyn Sole, were all "desirous to give an authentic, socially realistic, depiction of events" (69).⁹ In addition, these novels sought to mobilise and unify the black community, acting as a conscientising force to their black readership (Sole 85). Immediately prior to June 1976 the frustrations of the children of Soweto were brought to a climax by the continuing compulsory use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in their schools. The children took the struggle for liberation into their own hands resulting in a series of protest actions ranging from school and consumer boycotts to the burning of municipal buildings and attacks on suspected black informers. Government reaction to these events was swift and brutal. Tlali says of this terrible time:

We were very much involved in the rioting, in the Amandla riots. We were some of the victims of it. I've had many relatives who had to go and look in the mortuaries, in the hospitals, and so on. And the funerals and all that. I was reliving and reflecting also the society as a whole. (Mackenzie & Clayton 78)

During this period of confusion and anarchy all conventional relationships, like those between parents and children, were disrupted and new forms of authority emerged for the youth demonstrated an independence and organising ability which commanded the respect, and often

⁹ The novels which Sole discusses in his essay are Tlali's Amandla, Mzamane's The Children of Soweto, Sepamla's A Ride on the Whirlwind and Serote's To Every Birth Its Blood.

fear, of their elders. In the narrative of Amandla in recognition of this changed status quo Mmane Maria remarks to the elderly Gramsy, " 'We're in the hands of the children now. They are as good as our parents. We must try to help them' " (35).

Given the novel's agenda it is possible to assume from the outset that gender issues are relegated to a relatively minor position within the text. Nevertheless, it is interesting to take note of the views which do emerge in the course of the narrative, principally in the discourse of the chief male protagonist, Pholoso. His most extended speech in this regard is worth examining more closely:

As you know we have very active women who are indispensable to the cause. In many instances, they are our 'feelers'. They do a lot of conscientising by engaging in the many women's organisations which attract large numbers, in the church, for instance. It is our duty to penetrate all spheres, cultural, religious, sports and so on. Like us, our women exert their influence everywhere. . . . I have seen many of our girls at work in the gardens and plots around their homes. We can all produce our own fresh vegetables and fruit. In that way we can become less reliant on the meagre pay packet we receive every week or month. . . . Our girls and women can accomplish a lot if we let them. Let us avoid the pitfalls of the past when women were confined to the kitchen, and were never allowed to read. Literature is for everybody, not for men only. (88-89)

This extract makes it clear that women are necessary to the success of the liberation struggle, but principally in a supportive role to their men. Their sphere still seems to be very much restricted to the domestic and private (out of the kitchen and into the vegetable patch!). The repetition of the description of black women as "our girls" can be seen to reflect a sense of

possession and ownership which underlies his words; striking a tone which is rather belittling and patronising. Tlali largely fails to interrogate Pholoso's assertions and assumptions. For example, when he advises the men meeting with him "I know it is difficult, but encourage them. The women were brainwashed into believing that the only thing they could do was to wait on us, and be at our disposal" (89), the question of who was responsible for this brainwashing is never raised and black men are allowed to gloss over their own culpability. Only on one occasion in the novel does Tlali point a reproving finger at the way in which the men assume the role of activists while the women are forced to remain on the sidelines. An unknown woman interrupts a crowd of men involved in a heated political debate with the words, " 'If you cannot come to an agreement, why waste time - why not leave it to us, the women? I am sure we would do a quicker job if only you would let us' " (254). Initially her words are greeted with laughter and scepticism but the attention of the men becomes more focused and respectful as she outlines her ideas and the other women present also come forward to share the details of their efforts in the struggle for liberation.

Although Pholoso's rhetoric ostensibly argues for a more active role for black women these sentiments are not borne out in the relationship he has with Felling. Tlali seems to struggle to express a real intimacy between these two. Descriptions of their interaction see-saw between, on the one extreme, a melodramatic "Mills and Boon" quality as emphasised in an extract such as, "[Felling's] knees sagged as she turned round and looked up into the eyes of Pholoso. She abandoned herself into his outstretched strong arms where for a moment she nestled while trying to regain her breath and composure" (68). This contrasts quite strikingly with the distant, more impersonal tone which is used more frequently, relegating their love to a secondary role in the context of the struggle. This is a perspective which both Pholoso and

Felleng seem to share. Early on in the novel he says, " 'There are certain things which are greater than our individual fancies, Felleng. . . . We must never let our selfish personal feelings drown the greater aspirations in life' " (72). She echoes this sentiment towards the end of the novel as she prepares to sacrifice their love to the political cause when it is her turn to remind him, " 'But we are talking about ourselves, Pholoso. Talking about this land is talking about ourselves' " (287-88). Their relationship reflects an orthodox set of gender relations: Felleng waits patiently for her man busying herself with community projects while he assumes a front-line role as a leader of the struggle. Pholoso speaks of her as a prize worth fighting and suffering for and at one point in the narrative approvingly gives her the title of "Mother Africa." This metaphor of the black woman as an earth mother is frequently used in black writing with her suffering being paralleled by the sufferings of the land; an image which draws on the traditional notions of black women as mothers and wives, the companions and supporters of men (Clayton 283).

Although Miriam Tlali cannot be seen to interrogate traditional gender roles in the disciplined relationship of Pholoso and Felleng there are other instances in the novel which present a slightly more complex perspective. Sergeant Mamabolo's proprietary attitude towards his young wife is condemned by Tlali in the course of the novel. Teresa is essentially forced into an unhappy marriage with the older man by her parents when her sister dies leaving Mamabolo a widower. His self-centred perspective is summed up in the words, "As far as he knew, the girl was his. He had chosen her and had paid 'lobola' for her and that was that" (262). Tlali makes it clear that this sense of ownership is severely problematic and stifling. Mamabolo cannot hope to sustain a successful relationship with Teresa who ultimately resorts to an affair with a younger policeman, Nicodemus, who restores her self-esteem and provides her with the

love that she lacks in her marriage. However, striking a somewhat ambivalent note, the narrative also makes it clear that this adulterous liason is not a viable alternative to the institution of the family which Tlali portrays as exemplary in her novel, for Nicodemus is ultimately killed in a three-way shoot-out (Sole 75-76).

Even as she raises various issues Tlali seems unable to fully confront or examine their implications. For example, the relationship between Agnes and her husband Joe is portrayed as a traumatic one. For many years she has endured his constant drinking and sporadic physical abuse yet she hesitates, for the sake of her children, to seek a divorce. On the one hand Tlali successfully articulates the frequent predicament of the battered wife with an observation like, " 'Anybody who sees him in church every Sunday would never believe he can behave like he does when he gets home and starts drinking and assaulting you and the kids. They would think you are very bad, speaking like that about him' " (180). Tlali also condemns this kind of behaviour through the words of Joe's paternal uncle who reprimands his nephew for his actions. Yet, her ultimate "solution" to the problem seems to be rather an evasive and unlikely one: Joe becomes filled with remorse, reforming his ways and he and Agnes live happily ever after.

In the course of his essay Keltwyn Sole remarks that Tlali, in comparison to the other (male) writers whose work he discusses, "is certain in her depiction of the importance of women to communal life and the difficulties they face. She also shows them as capable of decisive action" (79). However, he later modifies this assertion with the comment that "women's major role" in her novel "is still with reference to men and the family" (79), which accords with my interpretation of the presentation of gender issues in the novel. I think that Tlali was so

acutely aware of the political pressures which were operating in the wake of the Soweto riots that to provide an extended look at personal relationships and gender roles was too daunting a task. Instead, in writing Amandla she chose to focus on the political events of the time primarily exploring their repercussions in the lives of the people of Soweto, not only concerned with providing insight into the social history of that era but also hoping to conscientize and prompt into action those who read her novel (Sole 69).

Footprints in the Quag: "No Tears in My Eyes"

In 1989 Miriam Tlali published a collection of short stories entitled Footprints in the Quag: Stories and Dialogues from Soweto. This has become the most widely known of her works and consequently has received a fair amount of critical attention in South African circles with several essays and conference papers being written on the collection. In her article " 'A Mother is Nothing but a Backbone': Women, Tradition and Change in Miriam Tlali's Footprints in the Quag," Eva Hunter comments that in these stories Tlali

continues, as in her earlier writing, to attack the effects of apartheid upon black society, but her prime focus has become relationships and situations within the urban black community itself. This shift marks a stage of maturation in her rendering of the politics of identity: her characters are now more than helpless victims of apartheid.

(60)

This description hints at some of the changes which have become apparent in Tlali's writing. In an interview conducted in 1988 Cecily Lockett asked of Miriam Tlali: "Do you see yourself concentrating more on issues in the lives of black women from now on?" to which she replied: "No, I wouldn't say concentrating on women's issues. I wouldn't make it an explicit decision. Our liberation is bound absolutely with the liberation of the nation, so I'll always combine the

two" (Mackenzie & Clayton 84-85). However, even a cursory reading of *Footprints in the Quag* would seem to belie this somewhat cautious attitude. The stories clearly provide access to Tlali's evolving ideas on the position of black women within society; ranging from "The Point of No Return," first published in *Staffrider* magazine in 1977, in which she is indulgent towards black men, to " 'Masechaba's Erring 'Child' " the final story of the collection which perhaps displays Tlali's most developed feminist consciousness. Remarking on this development Dorothy Driver says of Tlali's later stories that they begin to perceive and present a different kind of reality in which black women are victimised by their men as well as by "the system." Tlali seems to be shifting away from the orthodox somewhat "masculinist" perspective which views black women's place in the community in terms of their contribution as a communal and national stabilising and uniting force. Rather, she expresses an increasingly "feminist" point of view in the thoughts and actions of her characters (Rev. of *Footprints* 52). In order to determine the validity of a comment like this it is necessary to take a closer look at the stories in *Footprints in the Quag*.

"The Point of No Return"

Twelve years have elapsed between the first publication of this story and its inclusion in this collection. Consequently, it provides a useful point of reference when trying to assess to what extent Miriam Tlali has adjusted her attitudes concerning the role and position of black women within South African society. Almost from the opening paragraph the female protagonist, S'Bongile, appears to be implicitly endorsing the viewpoint which sees black men in the role of activists, whose duty it is to wage the struggle against the exploitative and oppressive Apartheid regime:

All the way from home. . . . her thoughts had dwelt on Mojalefa, the father of her

baby. Despite all efforts to forget, her mind had continually reverted to the awesome results of what might lie ahead for them, if they (Mojalefa and the other men) carried out their plans to challenge the government of the Republic of South Africa. (119)

From Tlali's parenthesis in this extract there can be no doubt that the "they" referred to above excludes women from any kind of "front-line" role in the liberation struggle. This observation is given further weight by the comments of Mojalefa who at various points in the narrative emphasises the role of women as supporters rather than fighters:

'In any case,' he went on, 'it will be up to *you*, the ones who remain behind, the women and the mothers, to motivate those who are still dragging their feet; you'll remain only to show them why they must follow in our footsteps. That the future and dignity of the blacks as a nation and as human beings is worth sacrificing for.' (123)

This extract seems to suggest that the presence of black women also acts as a continual reminder and motivating factor to their menfolk. The suffering which women can be seen to endure, for example with regard to the issuing of passes - described as "the ultimate desecration and an insult to her very existence" (Footprints 122) - will encourage others (men) to take up the struggle. The overall commitment and resolve of the story seems to have been accurately summed up by Dorothy Driver who comments on Tlali's failure to interrogate the traditional gender roles which are assigned within the context of an oppressed and revolutionary society: the man as activist and the woman as patient and supportive wife and mother (Rev. of Footprints 52).

However, I would like to suggest that the conclusion of the story is not entirely free of ambivalence. Although on a cursory reading it appears that Bongji is resigned to accept the outcome of her husband's actions as well as the unselfish and supportive role which is

expected of her, the italicised sections in the extract below could be interpreted as indicative of the narrator's own uncertainty regarding an endorsement of these conventional gender roles, in which the discourse of race is implicitly prioritised over that of gender:

Bongi stood up slowly. She did not utter a word. There *seemed to be* nothing to say. She *seemed to be* drained of all feeling. She felt blank. He *thought* he detected an air of resignation, a look of calmness in her manner as she moved slowly in the direction of the opening into the street. They stopped and looked at each other. She sighed, and there were no tears in her eyes now . . . He lifted her chin slightly with his forefinger and looked into her eyes. They *seemed to* smile at him. They parted. (137 emphasis added)

Although no words are exchanged this scene of their parting is charged with the undercurrents of feelings and emotions which have not been expressed. I feel that Mojalefa is misguided in his interpretation of Bongi's silence as acquiescence, signifying a permanent resolution to their quarrel. Rather, her lack of response could signal only a temporary respite in their conflict, as Tlali, perhaps unconsciously, hints at her own lingering resistance to this unequal concept of gender relations. At this historical juncture, revealing the impact of the philosophy of Black Consciousness on her priorities, Tlali does ensure that her female protagonist acquiesces to these gender roles, but there is nevertheless a suggestion of resistance and a sense of uncertainty which can be picked up in the voice of the narrator at the conclusion of the story. The ambivalence which Tlali hints at in "The Point of No Return" is more consciously articulated over a decade later when, in an interview, she comments rather forcefully on the role of black women in the liberation struggle: "They play a supportive role *because they are not allowed to come to the forefront*. If they were allowed by the system - and by the men - they would" (Mackenzie & Clayton 75 emphasis added). Perhaps it is Tlali's awareness of the

lack of conviction in Bongi's "acceptance" of the subject position available to her in a revolutionary context that leads her to include this early story in the Footprints in the Quag collection.

In many of the later stories Tlali chooses to focus attention on the activities of the black women of Soweto, giving priority to their voices and perspectives. For example, a story like "Metamorphosis" offers a changed set of relations between husband and wife. Mavis, in contrast to her husband, Velani, is portrayed as politically motivated and committed to the liberation struggle. She despairs over his lack of awareness: "Heyi wena; are you crazy, what's wrong with you anyway? Why do you think you can run away from the struggle?" (87), and constantly tries to enlighten and motivate him. On several occasions Tlali criticises the injustices of the Apartheid system which can place a heavy burden on the lives of black women. The everyday struggle for survival is strongly felt in a story like "Dimomona" where the heavily pregnant Dimomona is forced to cope on her own for several months when her husband is arrested for not having his pass with him on an early morning visit to the toilet. In "Gone Are Those Days" the former shebeen queen, Aunt Liz, is under arrest for not having the correct documentation to attend a funeral in a different township. Yet, her spirit is shown to be undaunted as she recounts with glee the occasions on which she and her customers were able to outwit the police who were conducting liquor raids, by pretending that a funeral was being conducted in her house. Apart from such similar examples there are four stories in particular which can be seen to provide insight into Miriam Tlali's evolving attitudes on the position of black women in South Africa.

"Devil at a Dead End"

In this story Tlali deals with the intersection of racist and sexist abuse: a black girl being forced to fend off the unwanted sexual attentions of a white railway guard while travelling on an overnight train. A recurring motif in the story is the effect which the eyes of the white booking clerk at Ficksburg, her initial point of departure, have on the girl: "The clerk gazed at her, his fierce-looking, cat-like, bespectacled grey eyes looking like an abyss, with the pupils dilating and contracting. She flinched and dropped her eyes" (103). She recalls the horror of his gaze a total of nine times in the course of the story, where the memory of their encounter seems to paralyse her will and render her unable to offer resistance to his white colleague on board the train.

In this story black men are seen to play a supportive role to their "sisters," particularly with regard to protecting them from the unscrupulous sexual appetite of white men. An old black woman who is the girl's travelling companion for some of the journey is wise in the ways of the world. It is she who first suggests the white guard's interest in the girl and to counter her sceptical reaction recounts an example of the sexual predatoriness of white men: " 'They have a big camp just outside Bethlehem . . . When you pass there, you'll always see them drilling, playing all sorts of games. No black woman moves in that area without men to protect her. They chase them into the dongas and grab them by force' " (111). In the light of the sexual abuse which black women suffer at the hands of black men in other stories in this collection I would question whether the "protection" which black men offer to their women arises from a respect for their integrity, or a desire to protect what they consider to be their "property" from the attentions of white men.

Once the old woman gets off the train in the early hours of the morning the guard enters the girl's cubicle. His attentions have a curious impact on the girl who finds herself strangely reluctant and unable to resist his sexual advances, or raise the alarm when he momentarily leaves her alone: "She reprimanded herself, I should be screaming for help or something. She sat waiting. She was surprised at herself. She had been like a bewildered beholder, powerless" (116). At no stage does Tlali offer an easily accessible explanation for the puzzling reaction of the girl. I feel that her "paralysis" could be induced by the fact that the guard as a white male is representative of a long-standing tradition of authority and power over her, which she struggles to escape. All her life she has been conditioned to defer to the rules and regulations of an unjust system, the power of which is embodied in the figure of the white guard who is attempting to take advantage of her. This explanation seems to connect with the effect that the Ficksburg ticket clerk's eyes have had on her, forcing her to internalise some of the forbidden sexual desire which is mixed with the anger and disdain contained in his gaze.

As she stands in the darkness submitting to the guard's caresses the girl frantically tries to think of a way out of her predicament. At this point Tlali's voice interjects into the narrative with the comment, "In times of threat, some invisible omnipotent power seems always to be waiting to come to the aid of the helpless, the weak, the defenceless" (117-18). The power which Tlali refers to comes to the girl in the guise of a biblical story which she suddenly recalls: "a maiden had hidden a potion in her bosom, and she did not want to be searched" (118). The girl remembers and uses the words of the scripture as a weapon against the white man, breaking the spell which he seems to hold over her:

The words entered her mind and she uttered them mechanically: 'Ntate se nkame hobane ke silafetse. . . .' Her lips mumbled the entreaty, softly and uncertainly. . . .

'Father do not touch me because I am unclean. . . .'

Then repeating loudly, drawing back and pushing the kneeling man, she gasped, 'se nkame hobane ke silafetse . . . ke metse *mokoala*!' (Do not touch me because I am inflicted with a venereal sickness.) (118)

Her statement gains its power and richness from the biblical origins of her protest which give her the strength (spiritual as opposed to physical) to resist the guard. The significance of her words is emphasised by the full translation of the vernacular which Tlali provides. This represents a powerful moment in the narrative: a subversive seizing of a traditionally disgraceful condition in order to effect her escape as she ingeniously employs the very body which the guard desires as a weapon against him. In speaking these words the girl is able to revoke the "authority" of the white man, the "Father," and retain her self-respect. If the situation were not so dramatic, the effect that her words have on the guard would be almost comical as he recoils in horror and retreats immediately.

In three other stories Miriam Tlali chooses to focus her attention even closer to home and explore various aspects of sexism within black society itself. Not only does she thereby draw attention to a little-acknowledged phenomenon, but in addition black sexual behaviour is not given its psycho-social motivation through the context of the racial domination of black men by whites. In two stories this way of comprehending black sexism is ignored and in the third it seems to be subverted (Driver, Rev. of Footprints 52).

"Mm'a-Lithoto"

Paballo sat on the hard bench in Park Station, Johannesburg railway concourse and thought regretfully of her marriage. She did not know whether to stay out of Musi's

life for ever. At that moment, she wished she could bid him and his people goodbye and face her future alone. . . . That she had finally managed to tear herself away from the unhappy circumstances which made up her married life was an accomplishment she would never regret. (Footprints 12)

These heartfelt sentiments are expressed by the female protagonist at the start of the short story "Mm'a-Lithoto," in which Tlali articulates many of the problems which the institution of marriage can hold for black women, particularly when traditional customs and practices, inappropriate to modern society, continue to be used to support unequal power relations between a husband and wife.

Firstly, the reader is asked to acknowledge the injustice of the tradition which holds that the home is the property of the male and his family, forcing the wife to pack her things and leave her own home: "They had had to grab clothes, wrap them up into 'lithoto' (bundles) and leave [Paballo's] home unceremoniously" (13). Tlali's implicit suggestion is that this fact alone is often enough to dissuade a woman from reacting against the unhappy circumstances of her marriage. However, the protagonist in this story, Paballo, does take this step and we find her stranded at the station with her bundles, her young son and niece. Her options are seen to be very limited for she has no one that she can really turn to because they all have their own problems:

'Are you aware just how much aunt Mm'a-Letia struggles in that house of hers, Mahali? Ever since her daughter Letia died, she has had to raise her two granddaughters and grandson besides caring for Thabo her own son. The two granddaughters are the only ones who sometimes help her with some money; but those two men - Thabo and Keletso - just do not bother.' (13-14)

Tlali is drawing attention to the fact that traditionally male responsibilities, such as caring for the older members of the extended family have fallen to women, with the men no longer being equal to administering the traditional systems. At times Paballo's implicit criticism becomes a lot more frank, as she describes the inadequacies of black men in very negative terms:

They are like carnivorous animals which move at night. They hunt for places where they can find something to drink. Then they stumble home to Mm'a-Letia's. . . . when they wake up hungry, they open empty pots and beg, or even demand food from Mm'a-Letia. Big men expect their elderly grandmother and mother to feed them - it's wrong! (15-16)

Far from being the providers for a family, Tlali condemns irresponsible black men like these for placing an unjustified burden on their women with their destructive behaviour.

Motherhood is another issue which is portrayed with a good deal of ambivalence in this story. It is not welcomed as something unconditionally positive and satisfying by Paballo who speaks of the "devastating confirmation" of her pregnancy which "left her confused and uncertain whether to rejoice or to cry" (17). It is shown that the repercussions of having another baby will be limiting for her. She will be forced to leave her work which is not just important financially, but also provides her with a refuge from other unpleasant aspects of her life like the sharing of her small house with unfriendly in-laws. Sacrifice is what is traditionally required of black women with regard to their marriages, and it is against this notion that Tlali uses the character of Paballo to rebel:

Is that why the old women sit and tell you to 'giny'ilitye,' swallow the stone, when you get married? That you as a woman should overlook whatever unpleasant and painful things happen to you in marriage and bear it all out like a soldier, she wondered. 'Well

I just could not go on taking it any more,' Paballo mumbled to herself. (21)

She expresses her desire to put an end to this exploitation but Tlali is quick to show that circumstances conspire against an easy solution being found. Ultimately Paballo is forced to go to her brother for assistance in solving her predicament because it is getting dark and they have nowhere else to go. He takes them back home with the intention of confronting Musi over the situation, but he is not home and so Paballo is left there, empty promises her only hope of solving the situation: "Somehow Paballo knew that the planned meetings would never take place. All her uncles were now too ill or too old to deal effectively with Musi's people. She was back to square one" (25).

In her introduction to Footprints in the Quag Laurretta Ngcobo says of Miniam Tlali:

With her feet deeply planted in the city, her eyes look back on the last warp of tradition, hankering after a lost way of life. She indicates that city problems are due to the loss of traditions and people's rootlessness.

In her story "Mm'a Lithoto" this longing is at its strongest. (Tlali, Footprints xviii)

This is a comment which I feel does not do sufficient justice to Tlali's awareness, expressed in the course of this story, that a retreat to the ways of the past does not offer any kind of solution to the problems confronting urban blacks. In fact, she is clearly pointing to the fact that traditional structures are no longer adequate for regulating disputes within the extended family, with women suffering the most because of this. Confirmation of this perspective is provided by the conclusion of the story when Paballo gives birth four and a half months later to another of her "bundles of joy" (Footprints 26). The irony in this remark is clearly evident, and carries strong echoes of Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood, where the protagonist, Nnu Ego, finds motherhood to be a totally draining and ultimately unfulfilling,

unrewarding experience (Driver, Rev of Footprints 52).

" 'Fud-u-u-a!' "

The title of this short story refers to a chant sung by commuters trying to force their way on to the crowded trains. "Fud-u-u-a!" translates as "stir the pot," and it is certainly what Tlali is doing with this story: taking traditional attitudes and stirring them up to reveal the prejudices which they often work to obscure. Johannesburg station forms the backdrop to the discussion which three black women have, articulating and condemning the sexual abuse which they suffer at the hands of black men when riding on the crowded commuter trains.

One of the recurring features of the text is the emphasis placed on the value, indeed the necessity of the support of black women for one another if they are to survive in a world which discriminates against them. There are various examples of this kind of interaction ranging from the co-operation required for commercial survival among the food and fruit vendors - "The women were smiling, watching and giving each other all the moral support women in need of help *ought* to give each other" (Footprints 30) - to the reassuring support of friends, "Nkele smiled. Ntombi must be waiting, she pondered. There is nothing like the knowledge that the help of another woman is available to you whenever you need it, when the going gets tough. . . ." (30-31). In addition, this bond between women is seen to extend to complete strangers: "There were no formal introductions necessary. Women in distress just accept each other without much hesitation because they know that they *need* each other" (33).

Tlali seems to feel that the basis for this connection between women is their common status as "mothers," a term which she deliberately and strategically encloses within inverted commas

and explains as follows:

Women, irrespective of whether they have children of their own or not, are always 'mothers.' At a crucial moment, when they find themselves plunged into an awkward precarious situation, they become immediately inventive and they rally around one another. (Footprints 40)

This extract is at the start of a section which seems to be an instance of authorial intervention in which Tlali interrupts the flow of the narrative to make a few points regarding the position of black women in South African society. Here it is very obvious that Tlali feels "motherhood" to be a position of power and strength; something which goes beyond the conventional domestic and childbearing connotations of the term signifying women's initiative and resourcefulness in all spheres of life. Tlali's assertion illustrates one aspect of the "debate" concerning motherhood and the family which was discussed in my introductory chapter. So-called "western" feminism tends to perceive the maternal and familial role as "the seat of male primacy and of patriarchal oppression" (Bernstein 117), which ensures that women are confined to the domestic sphere thereby denying them access to the power and opportunities inherent in men's positioning in the "public" sphere. However, particularly in African and African-American circles there has been a different perception which argues that motherhood accords respect to women and that the family should be seen as a site which also allows black women to develop cultures of resistance to the various discourses which oppress them (Collins, Black Feminist Thought 44). This point is particularly relevant in the South African situation where the right of black women to live as a family unit is continually under attack from the Apartheid system, particularly the migrant labour laws (Bernstein 117). Despite agreeing with these assertions, I would reiterate the reservation expressed in my introduction, that it is always necessary to scrutinise any discourse which posits the familial and maternal,

however defined, as women's fundamental and original sphere.

Tlali herself seems to suggest that black women need to find new ways of dealing with the various forms of oppression which confront them. It has long been argued that their involvement in church structures has provided black women with a network of peer support as well as an "outlet for organisational talents and energies that were otherwise frustrated by racial, patriarchal and class mechanisms of suppression and control" (Walker, Women and Gender 16). However, it would appear that Tlali does not perceive religion as a viable solution to the many problems facing black women for she says at the close of her authorial interjection, "We forgive our black mothers in their sad predicament for resorting to the ecumenical spear. It is perhaps the only 'weapon' they are familiar with. It is certainly the only one they are ever so readily offered to arm themselves with . . ." (41). Thus she seems to argue that black women's involvement in religion actually works to circumscribe their resistance to the structures which oppress them by diverting (and ultimately exhausting) their attention and energies into activities which are sanctioned by black men and the state alike.

It is interesting to note the way in which Tlali tackles the issue of the sexual abuse which black women are forced to endure at the hands of their black male counterparts. In the difficulties which the one character experiences in telling her story, "Shadi looked around, stammering reluctantly. . . . Shadi tried hesitantly to proceed. The words just would not come out. She gurgled . . ." (34-35), Tlali clearly demonstrates how hard it is for black women to talk about the issue of sexual abuse even amongst themselves. This awkwardness is seen as a direct consequence of the way in which black women have been denied a voice with which to articulate the discourse of sexual harassment. Lindiwe explains, " 'Who could we speak to?

Who could we accuse? Who would listen to us even if we tried to complain? Everyone would tell us that "it is all too shameful to say anything about this." I used to hear women *whisper* about this and never believed it' " (41). In expressing these thoughts Tlali is challenging the patriarchal controls which work to obscure the widespread phenomenon of the sexual abuse of black women, by labelling such concerns as taboo for public discussion, or even by denying their very existence, forcing women to internalise their experiences or resort to oblique forms of reference to express them. However, the anger of these women is starting to emerge as they gain confidence in themselves, and with this their criticism of black men becomes more vociferous: " 'What is even more annoying is that no one wants to even *talk* about this whole 'nonsense,' as they regard it. It is *not* nonsense because who suffers? We suffer. They just don't care. They treat us exactly like animals' " (41-42). Here the conduct of black men is being condemned in the strongest possible terms as they are being aligned with whites who were earlier in the story damned for treating black people "*just like dogs*" (37), a phrase also used by Bessie Head in The Collector of Treasures to refer to the way women were treated by their lovers and husbands (Driver, Rev. of Footprints 52).

Ultimately the three women succeed in battling their way on to the train, forming a protective and supportive circle that creates a space for themselves in which they are able to give voice to their plight (Wicomb, "Discourses" 40-41). However, their struggle is by no means over as the concluding paragraph implies: "They had at last found space to stand next to each other. It was an achievement and a victory which deserved to be celebrated. Alert and watchful as ever, they stood smiling into each other's faces. They sighed. They had 'won'. . . ." (42). Their victory can be seen to only provide a temporary respite. The ellipsis which concludes the story signifies that they will have to fight the "battle" again on the next occasion that they

catch the train. Tlali is suggesting that the continued organisation and co-operation of black women is vital if they are to succeed in overcoming the sexual abuse which black men attempt to inflict on them.

" 'Masechaba's Erring 'Child' "

This story has been hailed as the most progressive on women's issues of all Miriam Tlali's fiction, so it is perhaps fitting that it is the concluding story in Footprints in the Quag.

Commenting on its "feminist" message Dorothy Driver says:

The narrator measures her distance from the figure of the loving and forgiving wife, and specifically from the kind of indulgence expected of the black woman as 'mother', who treats her thoughtless, selfish and opinionated husband as if he were simply an 'erring' child. (Rev. of Footprints 52)

Two young women, Tholoana and Lindiwe, travel to the house of their friend 'Masechaba to pay her their respects following the death of her husband, Senatla. Going back to this house forces Tholoana to vividly recall her last visit there, and to recount the horrifying experience to Lindiwe. Senatla had lured her there under false pretences, and then tried to proposition her. In rejecting his advances Tholoana had chastised him forcefully about the way in which he treated his wife, 'Masechaba:

'She told me sadly one day that she had always wanted to own a dress-making business one day. She said that when you got married to her you promised her that you would even assist her. But after the marriage you told her that her place was in the home and not outside. All you were satisfied about, was to take her to work by car, drop her at the entrance of the factory, and collect her from there yourself every afternoon. You

are cruel to your wife.' (148)

Her outspoken rejection of him and her criticism of his lack of appreciation for his wife and his deliberate inhibition of her hopes and desires is seen to take Senatla by surprise and their confrontation becomes physically violent. In voicing this criticism Tlali can be seen to break the silence which traditionally surrounds domestic relationships, openly expressing dissatisfaction at the treatment of his wife by a husband. In an effort to protect 'Masechaba, Tholoana has never told her this story, but the two young women are amazed to learn that 'Masechaba is fully aware of the circumstances and actually sympathises with Senatla's anguish at Tholoana's refusal of him. 'Masechaba's "confession" really stuns the women and Lindiwe immediately begins to question her about this puzzling attitude. She cannot believe that 'Masechaba is prepared to condone this kind of behaviour, asking sceptically, " 'You really don't mean that you would have been happy to have the two . . . well . . . get along together when you were fully aware of it and you would not care, do you?' " (151).

'Masechaba's reply embodies an incredibly old-fashioned concept of marriage which, the text makes plain, is no longer tenable, " 'in marriage, it is the husband's wishes which are important, not the woman's. If it makes him happy to 'befriend' another woman, and that association is not going to disturb the marriage, then let him go ahead' " (152). She is prepared to condone a version of polygamy in order to ensure that her position in the household is not threatened in any way. Her priorities are seen to have been primarily materialistic; clothing that he would pay for and a "refrigerator full of meat and other things" (153), being her measure of the success of their marriage. Lindiwe wastes very little time in condemning this unequal situation: " 'Then you are just as good as his grandmother. Come back to you to do what, smile and ask you to wash his shirts and iron his trousers so that he is spic and span when he

goes to the other woman?' " (153-54). It is emphatically clear that the younger generation will not tolerate this kind of behaviour. Instead they argue for a relationship based on mutual respect, full knowledge of matters like money and property, and the equal sharing of responsibilities:

'If he prefers to rather clean the house than cook, then good. It would only be fair. Let him do the garden, plant flowers, tend the lawn, grow vegetables, mend broken cupboards, do the painting and so on. If I have to do everything, then he, too, must do everything. He must cook, wash, iron, bake, all that.' (159)

South African society is notoriously chauvinistic and Tlali's vision requires a reworking of the traditional boundaries between the public (male) and private (female) spheres of society. At present I would see this description of the division of responsibilities as, unfortunately, more desired state than actual practice amongst any culture group in South Africa.

The criticism of 'Masechaba is given an extra dimension by Tholoana when she finally enters into the conversation with the comment:

'you really surprise me 'Masechaba. I never really knew that you could be so selfish. You only think of yourself . . . in this eagerness of yours to assist your husband, it would seem that you totally ignored the fact that I am a human being with feelings. All you wanted to do was to do everything in your power to get him what *he* wanted . . . You never stopped to think about *my* feelings. . . .' (155-56)

She sees 'Masechaba as having betrayed the friendship which the two women shared in presuming that Tholoana should have given in to Senatla's demands. This perspective has the effect of setting loyalty to a woman in the scale against loyalty to a man, even if that person was 'Masechaba's husband; suggesting that the ties between women are just as strong and

important as those within a heterosexual relationship.

By the end of the story, having seen that 'Masechaba was betrayed by Senatla in various ways there can be no doubt that the values and ideas of the younger women are more successful and morally preferable to the traditional custom of deference to men which 'Masechaba had clung to (Hunter 67). Interestingly, by ensuring that 'Masechaba comes to this realisation after the death of her husband, Tlali avoids fully confronting the responsibility of black men for their behaviour, for Senatla cannot be forced to admit his culpability or change his ways. However, what is perhaps noteworthy by its omission on the part of Tholoana and Lindiwe is that in all the advice which they give to 'Masechaba "on how to be taken seriously as a person and a heterosexual partner," there is no mention made "of both the concept 'mother' and the fact of biological motherhood" (Hunter 71). Dorothy Driver has said that "it is only by passing through this assertion [the strength of motherhood], it seems, that the possibilities for an African feminism begin to emerge" ("M'ma-Ngoana" 237). When placed alongside the complication of the concept of motherhood which was discussed in two other stories, could this omission of any mention of the maternal role in the final story of the Footprints in the Quag collection perhaps offer an indication that Miriam Tlali is occasionally starting to conceive of a space beyond motherhood for black women to inhabit?

CHAPTER THREE:

The Autobiography and Short Stories of Ellen Kuzwayo

Introduction

"Mother of Soweto" is the unofficial title which her community has bestowed on Ellen Kuzwayo: initially because she was the only woman on the Committee of Ten which was elected to represent the Soweto community in the wake of the student riots of 1976, and more recently because of her involvement as a social worker in the experiences and projects of the community (Lipman 18). I think that Kuzwayo might view this accolade with some ambivalence, for while it acknowledges her contribution to society it also has the effect of positioning her in the specific role of "mother" which could be potentially limiting and restricting particularly given that, for herself, fulfilment has not been measured solely in terms of marriage and motherhood (Driver, "Ma-Ngoana" 241).

Kuzwayo has received acclaim in other spheres in this country. In 1979 she was named "Woman of the Year" by the Johannesburg newspaper The Star and nominated again in 1984. In her sixties she returned to the University of the Witwatersrand to study for a higher qualification in social work, and in 1987 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in law by the same institution. Today she is still very active in community life and leadership, serving as President of the Black Consumer Union of South Africa and Chairperson of the Maggie Magaba Trust along with many other responsibilities. In addition to her writing Kuzwayo has been involved in the medium of film. She acted as a "shebeen queen" in Cry the Beloved Country, released in 1952, and has subsequently been instrumental in the making of two films directed by Betty Wolpert. Awake From Mourning was produced in 1980 and presents the

work of several self-help groups for women in Soweto, and Tsiamele: A Place of Goodness was released in 1983, telling the story of Kuzwayo's family and their tragic dispossession of land as well as the history of the men and women who preceded them (Daymond, "The Representative" 8). Both of these films have had international distribution, facilitating contact with many different groups for those involved in their making.

The writing career of Ellen Kuzwayo spans two books: the first is her autobiography, Call Me Woman, which was published in 1985 and won the prestigious CNA prize for literature the same year, the first time this prize was awarded to a black writer. The second is a collection of short stories, Sit Down and Listen, which appeared in 1990. The imperative mode of address of these two titles provides a glimpse of the commanding personality of this woman whose life story, from its beginnings in 1914 on her grandparents' farm in the Thaba 'Nchu district of the Orange Free State, has provided inspiration to people of all races in South Africa and abroad. Indeed, one of the comments that has been made about black women's autobiographical writing is that it is often viewed by the black women who read it as a source of confirmation of their own potential and abilities (Daymond, "On Retaining and Recognising Changes" 32). If this is even partly true then aspects of Kuzwayo's personal story should indeed provide inspiration and an example of the triumph of courage and determination.

When asked why she took so long to begin writing, Kuzwayo speaks at length of the difficulties which she has experienced. These range from financial and economic constraints: "we are paid so little in the jobs that we do that for the greater part of our lives we are struggling to survive. For a long time I wanted to write this book, but I had to decide whether to abandon my job and starve and write" (Clayton 65), to the lack of confidence in her own

ability which initially sabotaged her efforts. Kuzwayo gratefully acknowledges the opportunities which she has been able to enjoy. When writing Call Me Woman she received sponsorship and an office of her own at the University of the Witwatersrand which made it viable for her to give up her job as a social worker. She stresses the necessity of taking a complete break from other employment and daily activities in order to provide the "space," both mental and physical, in which to write. The factors which Kuzwayo emphasises carry echoes of Virginia Woolf's famous essay, "A Room of One's Own," reminding one that even today such opportunities are a luxury to black South African women writers who are inevitably forced to juggle other responsibilities with their desire to write (Driver, "Reconstructing the Self" 162-63).

It is interesting to note that when asked about the purpose of her writing with regard to Call Me Woman, Kuzwayo offers two different though not mutually exclusive reasons. Firstly, she describes authorship as a way of giving people a voice, particularly black women who are the underdogs of society, denied opportunities in almost every sphere (Clayton 60). She seeks to share the experiences of the women she worked with as a social worker from 1963 to 1976, emphasising in an interview, "I regard my book as a celebration of the women whose achievement is exposed at the international level for people to know about" (James 53). I think that the audience Kuzwayo is referring to with the word "people" is intended to be both white and black. Not only does she wish to give whites some insight into how a black woman thinks and lives, but she also seeks to provide an example to her own community, creating a space for the voices of black women to be heard (Clayton 68). Elsewhere Kuzwayo emphasises the personal fulfilment which she gained from writing Call Me Woman. This three and a half year project proved to be a cathartic experience which she feels allowed her to

escape all the emotional tensions that had built up inside her: "when I was writing the tension floated onto the pen and it has released me. Today I can discuss every aspect of my life with no question and no shame" (James 55). This dual agenda of the personal and the communal is something which is very prevalent in her autobiography and will be discussed in greater detail at a later stage.

Although the term "feminist" does not come from Kuzwayo's pen it is obvious that she is interested in women's issues and frequently acts as a spokesperson for women's concerns. Her awareness is shown in her response to the question which Adeola James asks in an interview: "To be black and to be a woman is a double ill fate. What is your response to this?", to which Kuzwayo rather sharply replies, "I don't know why you want me to answer this because I have every reason to believe that every woman, every black woman, particularly in Africa, is fully aware of this" (55). At a conference a few years later Kuzwayo re-emphasises her viewpoint with the comment, "[The] denial of opportunities has been my heritage with the women of my community in particular, because of the pigmentation of our skin, perhaps also much more because of our sex" ("Neighbours" 131).

On other occasions Kuzwayo has ostensibly been more outspoken in her criticism of the role played by black men in the oppression of black women. In an interview with Beata Lipman she remarks:

I'm disturbed by the fact that black women are making a tremendous contribution in their communities and in this country - and there seems to be a vendetta to stifle this, to blot it out: the men, somewhere, are not playing a fair game. They don't give black women an opportunity to honestly realise their potential and to recognise that potential

when it does come forth. They're doing everything to thwart it, and the government has gone further: it has capitalised, in the legislation of this country, on the traditions and customs which all communities have had. (18-19)

This quotation illustrates the conflicting loyalties which Kuzwayo is attempting to reconcile. In particular, notice how she struggles to maintain a focus on the culpability of black men and ultimately resorts to shifting the "blame" for the oppression of black women to the white patriarchal government's Apartheid policies and practices (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 242). I think that a plausible explanation for Kuzwayo's crisis of conscience can be found in her adherence to the philosophy of Black Consciousness which by the 1970s was a coherent ideological, political and cultural force in South Africa.

A quote from Steve Biko, one of the leading exponents of Black Consciousness, helps to illuminate certain aspects of this philosophy. He says:

Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression - the blackness of their skin - and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the "normal" which is white. . . . It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life. (Stubbs 49)

From this statement it is clear that Black Consciousness involves a positive redefinition of the self in terms offered by the black rather than the white community, a process which went a long way to restore black confidence in the face of the destruction wrought by Apartheid (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 233). However, from the pronouns used by Biko in this speech and in

the wording of other Black Consciousness documents it can be deduced that this philosophy is essentially defined in masculine terms, allowing very little space in which black women can effectively position themselves, apart from the "Mother Africa" figure often invoked by black male authors. This stereotype attributes qualities of courage, strength, pride and maternal love to a black woman and is based on a comparison between the oppressed land, Africa itself and the characteristics of the black woman who is variously idealized as prolific, steadfast and giving (Lockett, "The Black Woman" 32). Although it generally offers a positive image of black womanhood, this stereotype is nevertheless infused with a concept of property, the black woman being defined in relation to her man. It also tends to glamorize black women's real suffering and oppression whilst simultaneously minimizing their status as victims of both racist legislation and mistreatment by black men (Lockett, "The Black Woman" 35). Driver draws attention to the way in which Black Consciousness denies black women a voice when she says, "At a rhetorical level, then, the emphasis on black experience and black perspective continually eclipses the female. And if women as a group are specifically referred to, it is in a way which reproduces them as voiceless" ("M'a-Ngoana" 235). The development of those aspects of the self which cannot be justified in terms of the family is continually stifled by this philosophy. Kuzwayo's adherence to Black Consciousness and her awareness of the multi-faceted oppression suffered by black women are two contradictory forces which she is unable to fully reconcile leading to significant moments of tension in her writing which deserve closer scrutiny.

Call Me Woman: "A Space where Contradictions Flourish"

In moving from a biographical description to an analysis of Kuzwayo's writing, I need to stress that, in keeping with the priorities expressed in my introductory chapter with regard to the

genre of autobiography, I shall be identifying and examining the principle strands in the web of discourses which are responsible for the construction and specific positioning of Kuzwayo's sense of self in Call Me Woman, with a particular emphasis on any tensions which may result from the intersection of these various discourses. In her preface to Call Me Woman Nadine Gordimer praises Kuzwayo as "one of those who [has] Africanised the Western concept of woman and in herself achieved a synthesis" (xi), and as one who has succeeded in becoming "a whole and independent being as a woman" (xii). The danger of such accolades, Driver argues, lies in limiting the discussion of the topic of women in contemporary South Africa by affording Kuzwayo's voice a stability and coherence which it does not, and cannot, have ("M'a-Ngoana" 233). Rather, it is more valuable for a critic to probe the tensions and inconsistencies which her text reveals.

Several of the critics who have written on Call Me Woman have commented on the way in which Kuzwayo presents and promotes herself as a representative figure. She deliberately chooses to focus far less on her individual self than is usually the case in an autobiography. She makes this intention explicit in an interview with Adeola James when she says:

when the publishing process of the book was coming to an end, I noticed that the publishers had edited so many women out. I had to tell them to push me out of my hook and put the women in because those were the people who inspired me to write the book. Those were the women who gave me support right through the writing.

(53)

Early on in the text of Call Me Woman she informs the reader, "I shall tell my own story in detail in Part Two of this book. Now I should like to turn and look at how other black women have managed to survive the horrible conditions thrust on them" (21). Yet, even when she is

telling her story Kuzwayo appears determined not to be seen as an individual figure. For example, when recounting the experience of her son's banning she says:

Let it be known that the trauma I went through in the three years my son was banned to Mafikeng is nothing unique. It is the torture and suffering of hundreds of black parents. Mothers in particular have endured such torments from the time the black population of this country raised its voice against the callous, discriminatory and oppressive laws of South Africa. (Woman 193)

Kuzwayo's dual agenda is even implicit in the title of her autobiography which contains both a personal claim embodied in the word "Me," and a representative claim signified by the use of "Woman" (Daymond, "Going Into Print" 13). I also think that the choice of the word "woman" as opposed to "mother" is a significant one, hinting at the space which Kuzwayo is trying to claim for black women beyond the careful definitions of the mother which are inherent in Black Consciousness (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 238-39). There is a further significance to the title, chosen as it is, Driver suggests, to respond to Mtutuzeli Matshoba's 1979 collection of short stories entitled Call Me Not a Man ("M'a-Ngoana" 230). Matshoba's story of the same title opens with the italicised words: *"For neither am I a man in the eyes of the law, nor am I a man in the eyes of my fellow man"* (18), which hint at the humiliation suffered by the black male protagonist. This contrasts with Kuzwayo's constant reminder that black women have succeeded in withstanding similar debasement (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 230). At one point in Call Me Woman she tells the reader, "Women somehow seem to cope with the pressures more successfully than men" (51). While Matshoba's stories focus on the degradation and desolation of township life Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman contains a determined communal will to survive and, further, to triumph against all odds (Daymond, "The Representative" 9).

Kuzwayo's desire to define herself in relation to other members of her community whilst simultaneously celebrating the achievements of other black women essentially represents two different discourses: the first being the philosophy of Black Consciousness, particularly the notion of *ubuntu*, and the second representative of a feminist desire to empower black women by drawing attention to and praising their achievements in a variety of spheres. The notion of *ubuntu* or the communal nature of black society is a key part of the Black Consciousness philosophy. Its origins can be found in a well known African proverb that exists in most major black languages (Setswana, Zulu, Xhosa and Southern Sotho). This proverb can be roughly translated as, "A person is a person because of another person," or as Kuzwayo herself expresses it, "In other words I cannot be fully who I wish to be in isolation of other people" ("Neighbours" 132). It is clear that Kuzwayo's reaction to the notion of *ubuntu* is a complex one. At a conference in 1988 she spelt out her perspective as follows:

I have no intention of creating an impression that black people are in any way special; in terms of their attitudes of interaction with other groups; of their regard for sharing with others, be it knowledge, land or wealth; of their concern for their neighbours in times of common need and serious crisis. However, I am convinced that the impact of the philosophy of "ubuntu" has played a major role in helping individuals, groups and communities of the black people of South Africa to still emerge with dignity, integrity, self-respect and determination in their relationships with others. ("Neighbours" 133)

Here we have two important and somewhat contradictory concepts being expressed by Kuzwayo. In her first sentence she acknowledges the fact that the philosophy of *ubuntu* is more of a cultural ideal rather than a realistic phenomenon which can be observed in the daily operation of African social life (Driver, "Mama-Ngoana" 234). However, in her second sentence she expresses the conviction, in accordance with the tenets of Black Consciousness,

that the notion of *ubuntu* does still have an important role to play in the workings of the black community.

As a result of her belief in its positive impact Kuzwayo does attempt to promote the philosophy of *ubuntu* in Call Me Woman, particularly with regard to the value of the extended family. At one point she makes the general claim, "Other racial groups may deride the extended family as being backward and outdated, but it is a pillar of strength to black people" (99). On other occasions she tries to create this impression within her own family where the "differences of kinship" do not prevent the various children from calling "both our mothers and aunts 'Mma' meaning 'Mother' . . . to that extent, therefore, my cousins on the farm in those years were as good as sisters and brothers to me" (65).

However, the cautionary note sounded by "to that extent" in the extract above is continually amplified by various incidents in the text until Kuzwayo's own experience of the extended family stands in denial of her comments about its value and stability, so that they become representative of her own intense desire for a home and family rather than examples of an historical truth (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 241). Two moments in particular serve to illustrate this tension which refutes the harmonious picture of the extended family which Black Consciousness continually promotes. Kuzwayo recounts that on several occasions when at play her cousins would count up their relations and she, as the one with a different surname, would be labelled as the odd one out: "When it came to me, however, I was alone. I was 'One Merafe'. They would laugh, leaving me alone staring into empty space, with no defence or explanation" (65). This experience would leave her "puzzled, perplexed and confused by their behaviour and perhaps hurt more than words could tell" (65), unsure of her place within

the extended family. This insecurity reaches a climax when Kuzwayo is told to leave the family home by her step-mother, Blanche, who entered the family on the death of Kuzwayo's mother and now unexpectedly tells her, " 'I don't want to see the sight of you any more here' " (105). Kuzwayo goes to see her step-father hoping for his support and instead gets told, " 'I am sorry about this. Your "Mother" wants it this way and I cannot do anything about it' " (105). Here the use of quotation marks around the word "mother" is a deliberate insertion by Kuzwayo to signal an irreparable break in the relation between the ideal of the extended family and the reality of her experience (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 243).

In an interview with Cherry Clayton Kuzwayo comments on the dramatically unsettling impact which this incident had on her life, primarily because it came from within the unit of the family which she had always relied on and was not something imposed by the system of Apartheid, which was a predictable source of injustice (62-63). Her sense of alienation comes across very strongly in the text of her autobiography:

My whole childhood had tumbled away. The place which had been my dear home for all my life was now alien and empty. The people I had looked upon as my parents became strangers and remote. . . . It dawned on me for the first time that I was a stranger, an intruder, that I was imposing myself where I was unwanted and perhaps did not belong. (107)

Even when Kuzwayo goes to her father's home in Johannesburg she finds herself unable to become fully integrated in this family either, despite a concerted effort, eventually deciding of her own accord to move on, an experience which does not cohere with the notions of embrace and harmony which Black Consciousness attributes to the extended family.

Kuzwayo's own story can essentially be interpreted as one of homelessness and rejection which motivated her to embark on a search for a home of her own. This desire, a "yearning for a stable home" (122), is intermittently expressed in Call Me Woman as a top priority for Kuzwayo. When contemplating a second marriage one of her strongest reasons for accepting G.R.'s proposal is her knowledge that, "My childhood longing for a home I could see and refer to as mine, even if I shared it with someone, was still unfulfilled, and remained a burning issue with me" (144). Kuzwayo had anticipated that her first marriage, to Ernest Moloto, would put an end to her feelings of insecurity. She says wryly, "To me, a young inexperienced woman, marriage was an end in itself. I told myself that I had arrived" (123). The tone of this remark carries the strong suggestion that experience proved her wrong. Indeed, Kuzwayo's descriptions of her first marriage mark another separation from the ideals expressed by the philosophy of Black Consciousness. Despite a reticence which has frustrated several critics, Kuzwayo succeeds in conveying her grim situation in the course of her autobiography:

My image of married life was far removed from the torture I was exposed to. I went through both physical and mental sufferings. Day by day I realised I was being humiliated and degraded, an experience I have in recent years come to realise is suffered by many wives the world over, within different races, cultures and religions.

(124)

To some extent Kuzwayo does break the silence of the dutiful wife who is expected to be supportive of her husband at all costs in order to counteract the humiliation he experiences under Apartheid. She does not, however, provide the reader with the intimate details of her experience. At one point, having resolved to settle her divorce case out of court she admits that "in spite of all the hurt and humiliation I had suffered at his hands I was determined never to wash my dirty linen in public. This I am glad I succeeded in avoiding" (140). This

comment can be seen to obliquely refer to Kuzwayo's reasons, partly stemming from a cultural taboo on discussing domestic problems with outsiders, to maintain a relative silence about her own hurt and suffering, a sentiment echoed by several of the participants at a workshop held by Current Writing on black women's writing with comments such as, "There are things you write at home . . . but you wouldn't publish them. Some things we regard as too personal - sometimes they are things to do with our struggle in the home" (Daymond & Lenta 75), or, "Being able to write about and publish our internal struggles is rare for black women" (Daymond & Lenta 78). Her reserved silence on domestic matters can be contrasted with the detail Kuzwayo provides regarding the five and a half months which she spent in detention: sharing the daily routine as well as her thoughts and experiences with the reader. Under the philosophy of Black Consciousness this is a far more legitimate and acceptable topic for discussion, and Kuzwayo appears more adept and relaxed when recounting the events of this time period.

Kuzwayo's decision to leave her two young sons behind when she left her first husband marks another sharp divergence from the conventions embodied in Black Consciousness, particularly regarding the concerns and scope of motherhood. On two occasions she voices a new set of priorities in her determination "to save myself for myself as well as for my two sons" (127). It is obvious that her decision was an agonising one which caused her plenty of guilt but she ultimately justifies her actions with the sentiment, "Was it not better for them to live with the hope that their mother was alive somewhere and some day they would be with her" (132). In her desperate "choice" to prioritise her own welfare above that of her two sons Kuzwayo is expressing a commitment to the development of her self which provides a point of entry to discuss the other main focus in her autobiography which is essentially a feminist project. The

highly qualified nature of her "choice" to leave her sons behind is analogous to the ambivalence contained in many of the feminist impulses expressed in Call Me Woman.

In all the interviews Ellen Kuzwayo has given she has stressed what I shall call the feminist agenda of her autobiography with comments like, "I tried to give a record of the lives of black women and the contributions they made to the development of this country, which people just close their eyes to" (Clayton 59). Throughout Call Me Woman she draws attention to the strength and achievements of black women as a group, but also frequently focuses on the stories of individuals. From the outset her opinion on the position of black women in society is made clear by such statements as, "I shall stress time and time again in this book, the majority of black women for too long have been discriminated against as women and as blacks" (32).

Her praise of black women as a group is frequent and generous, but she is not only concerned with paying her "full tribute to the many, many black women, old and young, who emerged uncorrupted regardless of the obstacles which blocked their way" (38). She also focuses some attention on how "circumstances conspired to drive women in the townships to illegal and underground activities" (38), like liquor brewing and prostitution. Part of her agenda is to shed some light on the activities of black women. This ranges from the two proud lists of black women medical doctors and lawyers at the end of the autobiography, to her comments about the unheralded women she worked with during her time with the YWCA, "women of integrity and with a high sense of duty in whatever they did. Most of these women will never be heard of or seen on any record. But their achievements . . . should be more widely known" (176). At various points in Call Me Woman Kuzwayo emphasises the strength and courage of

black women who "have faced oppressive social, cultural, economic, political and educational barriers. But they have never surrendered without challenging them" (241). She speaks of their "outstanding tenacity against great odds" (262), and praises their formidable "spirit with which so many of the challenges have been overcome" (259). It is interesting to note that Kuzwayo's praise of black women as a group is not directly concerned with their role as mothers or with a domestic setting. Rather, she chooses to comment on their personal qualities of determination and commitment and is emphatic about the positive outlook for their future, saying, "There is no end to the development and growth of black women of this country" (239).

When scrutinising her praise of various individuals, however, the signals that Kuzwayo sends to the reader become a lot more ambivalent than this. In the many anecdotes which Kuzwayo relates she seeks to extol those individuals whom she admires or whom she feels have had a formative influence on her life. However, the attention which she draws to these numerous women tends to be formulated in very conventional, and inevitably domestic, terms perhaps indicating the extent to which Kuzwayo has been interpolated by Black Consciousness and other discourses which posit domesticity as the ideal female realm. When sharing the story of a "Skokian Queen" named Motena, Kuzwayo hastens to defuse any negative connotations which her profession might imply by characterising Motena on different occasions as "a lovely person, warm and very orderly in her life as a mother and housewife" (27), and further as "a lovely respectable mother who sold liquor for survival" (28).

At times Kuzwayo seems to regard marriage as an achievement in itself which endorses a stereotypical view of women's potential and destiny. Of the teachers she worked with at St

Paul's School she says, "Except for Keneiloe Mojanaga, who never married but continued to teach, all these girlfriends later found their life-partners and settled into family life in different places" (99). This justification of family life as some sort of prize could well stem from Kuzwayo's own fragmented and disillusioning experiences. There is almost a note of envy when she speaks about one of her teachers at Adams College who made a deep and positive impact on her, saying, "Frieda provided a model of married life and motherhood for all of us. Hers was a family which embodied a life of deep love, respect, peaceful living and sincere love of children" (87). Perhaps Kuzwayo makes a mental comparison with this "yardstick" and finds many of her own experiences sadly lacking. Unfortunately, in many situations her comments work to subtly diminish the personal qualities and achievements of the various women whom she is seeking to praise. Of a teacher, Ellen Ngozwane, who impressed all the girls at Adams College Kuzwayo says:

she had no match among the male staff - in our estimation, she was high above all the bachelor teachers. Our convictions were confirmed later when we learnt that she was married to an eminent Ugandan named Kisosonkola (the father of the Kabaka, King of Buganda). (89)

In this situation the potential observed and commented on in their teacher is justified in terms of the prestigiousness of her marriage, a conclusion which Kuzwayo expresses no discomfort with nor provides any qualifying comment for. On another occasion in Call Me Woman Kuzwayo sketches a portrait of Mrs Magdeline Sesedi, a remarkable woman who was a teacher, founder member of the National Council of African Women (NCAW) and its vice-president for twelve years, active in church affairs and for many years the director of a general dealer's business. Just as the reader is marvelling at the accomplishments of this woman Kuzwayo closes off her discussion with the comment, "She was a perfect model of

womanhood, full of charm, beauty and dignity" (103). The highly conventional terms of this praise do not seem to do adequate justice to Sesedi's life story which can be seen to break the stereotypes of domestic femininity yet is praised by Kuzwayo in accordance with these very parameters (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 239).

Dorothy Driver to some extent sees Kuzwayo's orthodox appreciation of the value of black women as something of a "cover story," a familiar strategy used in women's writing to divert attention and criticism from the articulation of a new space for women ("M'ma-Ngoana" 240). This is an idea which is endorsed in other critical readings. For example, in her essay in Gayle Green and Coppélia Khan's Changing Subjects Molly Hite remarks, "Women's autobiography is thus - at least potentially - a canny, duplicitous exercise, less of an act of unveiling than the calculated assumption of a costume" (122). There are various descriptions in Call Me Woman which provide insight into a dimension of black women's lives that is not domestic. Of a fellow teacher, Violet Sibusisiwe, Kuzwayo says, "She was one of the first women to demonstrate that black women were capable of looking after themselves away from their parents and free from dependency on a man, either a male relative or husband" (Woman 90). This positive endorsement of independence can also be seen on another occasion when Kuzwayo discusses a friend's commitment to the needs of her community, which involves going against the authority of her husband. Kuzwayo's admiration is evident in the words: "She stood her ground steadfastly to the point of sacrificing the security and peace of her own home" (100). It is in the praise which Kuzwayo gives to Minah Tembeka Soga, President of the NCAW for fifteen years, that I find a particularly significant moment in the text. At one point Kuzwayo calls her a "great daughter of Africa" (101), but in the telling of Soga's story this develops into the final accolade of, "A great leader, a great woman of Africa. She gave

her full life for the service of her people and her immediate community as well as for the advancement of the black women in South Africa" (101). Here I think it is significant that Kuzwayo does not extend the description of "daughter" to the conclusion of "mother," but instead creates a different space, that of "woman" and "leader," in which the achievements of Soga are articulated.

Kuzwayo does succeed to some extent in redefining the western feminist concept of motherhood as a site of oppression and personal powerlessness. She creates the image of the strong and politically active mother who speaks from this position with authority and power. This attitude is very prevalent in the story of her own detention for five and a half months from 19 October 1977 under Section 10 of the Terrorism Act. On this occasion Kuzwayo's strength and commitment is strongly in evidence with her comment, "All black men, young and old, in that passage-like hall were moved with compassion and angry hurt to see me enter. But they were helpless. I supported them and cheered them up by being cheerful myself and strong" (199). It is particularly the positioning of this episode following on as it does straight after the story of her son's banning to Mafikeng, that signals Kuzwayo's claim for political legitimacy (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 229), establishing her connection with the black youth who suffered in the wake of Soweto 1976. The bridging paragraph at the start of Chapter 14 serves to situate Kuzwayo even more firmly within the context of the political struggle. As she writes of her own experience of imprisonment she sits in view of Robben Island where black political leaders are incarcerated. Rather than accepting a supportive and backseat role for black women in the struggle for liberation, Kuzwayo insists on an active and front-line contribution.

In other instances the boundaries between "masculine" and "feminine" domains are actively disrupted by Kuzwayo. In the opening pages of Call Me Woman a woman in detention, Debs, jokes in a letter to Kuzwayo, "I think I must write to T.J. [the Minister of Justice] and ask for 'conception leave', then I can come back and have the baby here" (4). This joke about the migrant labour system represents a woman's appropriation of a conventionally masculine sphere of experience: the few weeks leave a year granted to black males to return home to their wives in the rural areas (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 246). Another incident near the end of the text also serves to highlight this emergence in Kuzwayo's autobiography of what Driver calls "a 'masculinized' woman" (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 246). In her capacity as a social worker Kuzwayo is called upon as a so-called expert witness to plead in mitigation on behalf of eleven children who are standing trial. Her efforts are lauded by one of the fathers in the following terms:

'You are not an ordinary woman, you pleaded like a man, only a man could speak the way you did.' Before I could respond or ask a question, he was ~~kissing~~ hugging me and thanking me. . . . I was just overwhelmed both by the mill I had been through in the witness box and the unexpected response of this parent. I sat huddled in my seat as if nailed to it. (Woman 227)

In her article "Myths of Motherhood and Power" Desiree Lewis interprets Kuzwayo's reaction to this incident as a feeling of "satisfaction" which Kuzwayo "derives from male-centred approval of her actions" (39). However, my interpretation is more inclined to follow that of Dorothy Driver who argues that the praise which Kuzwayo is given does not liberate her in any significant way but rather fills her with uncertainty. If she accepts the terms of praise offered by the father Kuzwayo will be compelled to remain trapped within the patriarchal discourses which immobilise even as they grant her the status of an "honorary male" (Driver,

"M'a-Ngoana" 247). The image of her "huddled in [her] seat" is an uncomfortable one not picked up by Lewis, which could be seen to emphasise Kuzwayo's discomfort and unwillingness to relate to herself on these terms.

There are other instances in the text where Kuzwayo briefly succeeds in getting away from the specific categories of "masculine" and "feminine" to reveal a variety of self-divisions (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 247). The first of these moments emerges in her attitudes towards the women who participate in the *famo* dances. Although she hastens to assure the reader that, as befits a woman of her class, she has never witnessed this phenomenon, Kuzwayo proceeds to describe the occasion in some detail:

It is said to be a most ungodly, wild type of dance, where women dress in such a way that, as they dance and spin, their dresses fly up, leaving them exposed from the waist downwards. The behaviour between males and females, from hearsay, leaves much to be desired during such sessions. My own experience involved spending sleepless nights from the noise of the *timiti* sessions during my stay in Pimville with my father and his family.

It was a common occurrence to hear a woman's shriek in the middle of the night, pleading for help, whilst the sound of either a stick or *sjambok* (a rhinoceros-hide whip) rhythmically landed on her body. Then a male voice would hurl insults at the punished woman. . . . All the time the poor woman would be weeping and wailing in an effort to explain her absence and to convince the man of her innocence. This punishment would be administered by a husband or lover.

This was one of the most disturbing and frustrating features of township life in the 1940s and 1950s: the *timiti*, an event which was both an entertainment and a living for

many women of the community, compelled to participate for their survival. (30-31)

Several things should be noted from this passage. Most obvious is the way in which a word like "sjambok" is glossed for an outside audience, while the words "*timiti*" and elsewhere "*famo*" are retained in the vernacular with no mediating translations provided. The significance of this is two-fold: firstly it reveals the multiple positions Kuzwayo inhabits as a black South African woman speaking to and from other worlds (Nuttall 9), yet it also goes a step further to give "voice to an otherness that the narrator comfortably inhabits and does not open to the outside" (Driver, "Ma-Ngoana" 248). Kuzwayo pays attention to the sexual bondage which the sjambok implies, employed by men as a means for disciplining those women who have indulged in the sexual freedom of the *famo* dance, which transgresses the norms of patriarchy (Driver, "Ma-Ngoana" 245). Yet, in her recognition of the dance as both "an entertainment and a living" Kuzwayo also points to the necessity for economic survival which (partly) prompts the women to indulge in this behaviour. The emotions which emerge from this passage are rather varied and confused, with Kuzwayo seemingly unable, and perhaps unwilling, to formulate a coherent judgement of the *timiti* sessions - her disapproval thereof tempered by the fascination which these occasions hold for her.

On another occasion in the text Kuzwayo as a young girl breaks free from the constraints of her Christian parents and goes to watch the village girls during their initiation ceremony. She was forbidden to associate with these girls but says:

This restriction from my family did not dampen my burning desire and curiosity about what transpired at the school. I secretly and carefully planned a visit to see for myself the beautiful performance by *bale* so often described to us by *Lebollo* graduates or villagers who had watched them dance. I managed to watch them dance for about 15

to 20 minutes. It could have been more, because I stood there spell-bound. . . . I have never had any guilty feelings about pretending to my elders that, from the time I left home, I went straight to the shop and back, with the delay of lunchhour at the shop in-between . . . I valued that opportunity which I stole for myself in my youth, and have never once regretted it. (72-73)

Kuzwayo finds herself transfixed by this glimpse into the other world which these girls inhabit, a fascination which remains with her into adulthood. It is interesting to note that the word "desire" enters into this passage as it did in the description of the *famo* dance. Yet, here, Kuzwayo's curiosity to see "what transpired" is fulfilled as opposed to the frustration of the "sleepless nights" which she experienced in Pimville. In looking at these two passages it is possible to glimpse a few of the positions which Kuzwayo inhabits that lie beyond the ideas of femininity and family which Black Consciousness espouses. Although these differing aspects of her self are obliquely articulated they suggest a new space from which she is able "to speak and write without suppressing a substantial part of her experience of the world" (Driver, "M'a-Ngoana" 250).

This is an interpretation which Desiree Lewis would undoubtedly disagree with for she argues in her conclusion to the section on Ellen Kuzwayo, "A predominant attention to gender roles is likely to result in misleading conclusions about the contradictory tendencies of texts or to a precipitate identification of moments of feminist assertion" (40). A comment such as this has the effect of questioning the legitimacy of any discussion of gender issues and of closing the topic to further debate. In contrast, I would argue that the tension and ambivalence which is occasionally apparent in Kuzwayo's writing should not be used to dismiss the significance of her feminist impulses but rather should be interpreted as positive, the tentative articulation of a

new realm of experience in the life of this black woman. Various moments in the writing of Ellen Kuzwayo have shown her to be sensitive to the disparity in gender relations and to be broadly supportive of feminist principles. However, her complicated subjectivity has ensured that her position is constantly fluctuating - attempting to reconcile the various priorities of her life and community with her awareness of the multi-faceted oppression suffered by black women in South Africa.

Sit Down and Listen: Telling Stories

In an interview in 1986 Ellen Kuzwayo was asked by Cherry Clayton if she would consider writing a novel at some point in the future, to which she replied, "I don't think I would do well in fiction. I would want to write about aspects of my community" (68). Four years later, in 1990, Kuzwayo published Sit Down and Listen which interweaves her desire to write about her community with the mode of fiction in a series of short stories which she draws from her personal experience as a community leader, social worker, teacher and black woman in South Africa. These stories could be described as "oral literature," a term devised by Gay Wilentz to refer to "written creative works which retain elements of the orature that informed them. In particular [they] reflect the authors' aims to encapsulate the orality of the spoken word and the active presentation of the oral tradition within the confines of fiction" (xvii). In her introduction to this collection Kuzwayo explains just how greatly oral tales and stories are valued in the black communities where "for so many years now, we have owned our stories while owning so little else" (ix). However, she fears that with the passing of time these stories will become lost to her people and she consequently seeks to "trap some of them on paper before they vanish forever" (ix).

In expressing her project in these terms Kuzwayo seems to fall prey to the misguided assumption, which Eileen Julien asserts is occasionally made by African writers, that a transparent or equivalent relationship exists between the narratives of the oral tradition and the written versions thereof (26). Abiola Irele speaks of a related problem in more fundamental terms as the failure of the African writer employing a European language to adequately deal with the disparity between his/her African subject matter and his/her medium of expression (50). Indeed, the very limited critical attention which Sit Down and Listen has received has principally focused on Kuzwayo's inability to effectively adapt the oral tradition from which her stories emanate to a modern literary context (Murray 188). Nuttall makes a similar point when she asserts that Kuzwayo's "failure to engage a process of reading and the difference between an oral and a written medium is problematic. The text, ironically, does not speak to, or engage, the reader: rather, its epic form holds him or her at a distance" (9).

It is undeniably true that reading Sit Down and Listen requires a concerted effort for the style is at times rambling and in other places quite didactic. Kuzwayo is attempting to recreate the atmosphere of the evening storytelling sessions which took place on her grandparents' farm (Sit Down ix), yet the audience which she now addresses in the role of storyteller is so diverse that the attempted projection of this oral tradition appears somewhat contrived and unsuccessful. One indication of the varied nature of Kuzwayo's audience can be found in the constant glossing of Afrikaans and Xhosa words and phrases, thereby providing access to an audience that lies outside Kuzwayo's immediate community. In addition, when first published by The Women's Press the collection was subtitled "Stories from South Africa" implying what Nuttall calls "a cross-border address" (9). This, she suggests, has the effect of interpellating the foreign reader and makes problematic the notion that Kuzwayo is attempting to re-inhabit

the oral tradition of the black community (9). In addition, Lewis Nkosi argues in "A Country of Borders," that because stories such as these are also written for an audience outside of South Africa, the danger is that their character and identity could be "determined somewhere else, by people outside the community in whose name the writer claims to be speaking" (20).

These comments provide a useful opening to a discussion of the choice made by Kuzwayo to assume a "storytelling" mode in Sit Down and Listen. The critical essays by Njabulo Ndebele, published in Rediscovery of the Ordinary, surely represent the most prominent critical intervention in black South African fiction of the last decade. It is quite possible, then, that Kuzwayo could have been prompted to attempt a "storytelling" mode after reading Ndebele on the subject - in particular his essay entitled, "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction." In this essay Ndebele praises the Turkish writer Kemal for the way in which he "emerges as a writer who is rooted firmly in the timeless tradition of storytelling" (14). Ndebele describes Kemal's stories approvingly as a "compelling and imaginative recreation of rural life" (11), which are "rooted in the history of storytelling in Anatolia" (15), by which he alludes to the way in which Kemal draws on the oral storytelling traditions of Turkey in his own written stories.

By contrast, Ndebele perceives many black South African writers to be obsessed with the city and urban life, their work often exhibiting a lack of internal coherence and/or awareness of the demands of their chosen artistic medium in its urgent quest for a "high level of explicit political pre-occupation" (23). He alleges that this political agenda invariably leads to a "fiction that is built around the interaction of surface symbols of the South African reality" (23), "an art of anticipated surfaces rather than one of processes . . . an art that is grounded in the negation of

social debasement" (27). Such stories, Ndebele argues, cannot lead to a "transformation in consciousness . . . since the only reader faculty engaged is the faculty of recognition. Recognition does not necessarily lead to transformation: it simply confirms" (27). In contrast to this criticism levelled at the majority of black South African writers, Ndebele speaks with affection and admiration of the countless storytellers, ordinary people, who weave "masterpieces of entertainment and instruction" on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work every day (32). He approves of their ability to separate discussions of politics from their practice of telling stories and remarks, "If any political concept crept into the stories, it was domesticated by a fundamental interest in the evocation of the general quality of African life in the township" (32). In addition, there are a few writers who Ndebele singles out for their literary contributions to the African community. He praises them in the following terms:

What is common to these writers is that they are storytellers, not just case makers. They give African readers the opportunity to experience themselves as makers of culture. They make it possible for people to realise that in the making of culture, even those elements of life that are seen not to be *explicitly* oriented to resistance, are valid.

(33)

It would certainly appear that Kuzwayo has sought to embrace Ndebele's prescriptions when writing Sit Down and Listen, attempting a "storytelling" mode of writing, which from the outset proclaims itself to have an "organic" relationship with South African oral culture and oral narrative traditions. However, as I have outlined earlier, there appears to be an awkwardness in Kuzwayo's writing and in her relation to the text. In his article, "Storytelling and Politics in Fiction," Michael Vaughan points to some of the contradictions and ambiguities in Ndebele's prescriptions both in his "Turkish Tales" essay and in Ndebele's own collection of

short stories, Fools and Other Stories. Several of the points which Vaughan makes could also be applied to Kuzwayo's attempt at "storytelling" and to some extent account for the problematic nature of various aspects of her narrative.

Vaughan analyses the ambivalences in Ndebele's employment of the concept of "storytelling" in "Turkish Tales," concluding that it seems to have two functions in Ndebele's argument. "One function is to refer to the skill required of the fiction-writer in the composition of stories" (191). "Another function of the 'storytelling' concept, however, is to refer to oral traditions of narrative, and to the writing of stories which maintain a close affinity with these oral traditions" (192). Although these functions are quite distinct, Vaughan argues that in Ndebele's use of them, "they overlap and become confused. The net result of this blurring of the concept is that one function is enabled to stand in the place of the other" (192). While it is quite possible for a writer to achieve a level of skill in the composition of his or her stories - as Kuzwayo and Ndebele have succeeded in doing - Vaughan suggests that it is almost impossible for that writer to achieve an organic relationship with oral culture and oral narrative. This is because issues such as culture and class greatly complicate the positioning of the "storyteller" in relation to oral culture:

These issues concern the cultural relationship between literacy and orality, with the added complication that literacy involves, at some stage, transition to education in a non-vernacular language; and also the contribution of the distinction between literacy and orality to the class differentiation of the African population. (Vaughan 192)

Rather than being incorporated into the principles of narrative composition, oral culture tends to enter into the subject matter of the stories. Indeed, Vaughan characterises Ndebele's stories in terms of "a Western, realist narrative tradition" which has been adapted to South African

subject matter (192). The characteristics of this narrative tradition which Ndebele's, and to an extent Kuzwayo's, work displays includes a "concentration upon the inner life [of a protagonist], the problematic identity of the inner life [and] the scepticism of the narrative voice" (Vaughan 194). The most important feature of this mode of writing is that it has no organic connection with oral culture and oral narrative. Rather, argues Vaughan, what it depends upon is the intervention of "a rather specific, English-language literary education" (192), which has no relationship with the wider African population. As a result it is possible to assume that the stories are not written for just anyone to read and enjoy, but have an agenda to them - "the agenda of intellectual leadership" (194). While Ndebele, and a writer like Kuzwayo, might profess to be concerned with forging a *relationship with* the wider African community through the medium of their writing, what tends to emerge is rather an *attitude towards* that population. In Vaughan's words:

the writer cannot, through the actual practice of writing, enter into a relationship with the non-reading population. What the writer can do is more one-sided than this: it involves the composition of a conceptualization of the non-reading population. . . . the writer cannot, in a really organic sense, write *for* the non-reading population, but only *about* it. (196-97)

From my reading of Sit Down and Listen I would suggest that Kuzwayo has not carefully considered the ambivalences inherent in the notion of herself as a "storyteller." The unproblematic way in which she presents herself as a storyteller who has a close relationship with the traditions of oral culture and tradition, is belied by the tensions outlined earlier which emerge in the course of the narrative.

The choice of English as the language in which Ndebele and Kuzwayo have decided to

compose their stories is another issue which complicates the notion of an analogous relationship between the oral storyteller and the "storytelling" writer (Vaughan 199). Vaughan presents two aspects inherent in the writers' use of the English language: on the one hand, "the capacity of the English-language medium to encompass the 'reality' of township life is actually reinforced by the freedom allowed to characters to speak in their 'own' voices" (199). However, on the other hand, "the stretching of [the] narrative to acknowledge the idioms and inflections of the vernacular, albeit in a translated form, indicates the necessity for the English-language medium to 'renew' itself, to become Africanized" (199-200). Kuzwayo's writing, in particular, seems to be hampered by the cultural differences between the English language and the vernacular expressions which she tries to convey, a precarious balancing act which, at times, has led to a somewhat contrived and awkward mode of narration in the text.

My concern is not, however, so much with the problems of literary transfer as with the issues of feminism and gender which are raised at various points in the pages of Sit Down and Listen. In the introduction Kuzwayo is quick to establish the storyteller as a female figure which was often the case in African communities. She spends some time talking about the power which the storyteller consciously wields:

Having coaxed her listeners into attention, the narrator would fall silent for a moment and adjust her position slightly, moving her stool forward or back . . . All eyes would be glued on the storyteller, willing her to carry on with her tale, desperate to know what happened next. . . . Meanwhile the storyteller reached for her shawl, moved her stool, enjoying the full knowledge that her audience was in the palm of her hand. (x)

It is within a similar context that Kuzwayo situates herself, commanding her invisible audience to "sit down and listen" to a black woman recounting a variety of stories on her own terms

(Murray 188). Kuzwayo seems determined to utilise the power and authority inherent in her position as the storyteller, and even perhaps to expand beyond its traditional boundaries. Here I am referring to the contents of the titled "prefaces" which precede each of the five sections into which the text is divided. These interludes not only serve to thematically link the stories which follow but also provide a platform for Kuzwayo to voice her own opinions and convictions on the different topics around which the stories are organised. "Didactic authorial comment" is how Sally-Ann Murray classifies Kuzwayo's remarks (189), but I perceive Kuzwayo's narrative voice to be slightly more tentative than this. In places she begins to problematize and explore the various issues as opposed to simply lecturing her audience.

The stories which Kuzwayo relates are all set from the beginning of the twentieth century to, at the latest, the 1960s. At one point in the text of Sit Down and Listen Kuzwayo says, "Looking back, we can all find a new land in the past" (15). A comment such as this is indicative of her belief in the importance of tradition and the value of the cultural heritage of the black community. This concept emerges strongly at several points in the text starting with the dedication of the book which is addressed to Kuzwayo's grandchildren and "to all the children of my nation, with the hope that they will grow to appreciate and value their heritage." Several of the stories in Sit Down and Listen illustrate the repercussions of ignoring one's traditional values and customs. "Education - no substitute for culture" shows the break-up of a family unit as a result of the fact that the "children were never introduced to their own black culture or taught to value it" (62). Thus the daughter in the family "ended up lost to herself and to her family. She became a true example of a child brought up with foreign, unfounded concepts of culture and tradition" (61). This contrasts with the picture of a united family brought up with traditional values who rally together and help one another in times of

distress, which is presented in "One of many." Elsewhere, in "The strongest link in a chain is its weakest point," the marriage of two people from different cultural backgrounds collapses without warning because, "The cultural differences between the two had made it impossible for them to communicate on anything other than a superficial level" (91).

However, even while Kuzwayo is attempting to illustrate the benefits of traditional ways of life and thereby argue for their relevance in the present she is aware of the redundancy of certain aspects of the past, particularly with regard to the position of black women. In the first "preface" entitled "The Meaning of Cowardice" she comments, "The women in both these stories have much to suffer. They are caught between the traditional ways and the new, clinging to the old expectations that their man will protect them but fated to realise that, in the end, such protection can bring no lasting safety" (2). It is the conduct of a black man in his role of husband/father and protector of the family which is indicted in each of these stories. In "Ask the ostriches" the man who rescues Mookho and her baby from danger comments, "I still cannot understand how a father can leave his family to the vultures of the air. How could he leave a woman carrying his baby in such a plight?" (7), a sentiment later echoed by the rest of his community. A similar feeling is expressed in the story "In retrospect" in which a black youth tells Kuzwayo of a police raid on their house: "My mother was in terrible distress; and my father looked on without raising his voice or a finger to protect her from humiliation in front of these insulting black jacks" (20). The boy is quick to condemn his father's conduct as cowardly, but Kuzwayo is far more reluctant to do so. For her the issue of cowardice is complicated by an awareness of the role played by racial domination in the actions of the men in the two stories.

In the second section called "Waiting at the Altar" Kuzwayo makes an interesting observation about the significance of marriage: "those for whom the stakes are highest are the women to be married - the brides. For them, the wedding day marks the start of a new vulnerability" (23). This perception perhaps stems from Kuzwayo's own first marriage which was a damaging and disillusioning experience. The two stories which she has chosen to tell here illustrate how much is at stake for the bride - occasionally the fairytale ending of "happily ever after" is possible for a couple, but in the second story the exposure of the duplicity of the bridegroom, already a married man, is a shock to the bride from which she never fully recovers.

Polygamy is a practice which Kuzwayo is careful to contextualise as something of the past in her preface to the third section of stories entitled "What is a Family?" She attributes polygamy's decline on the one hand to increasing economic hardship which made the payment of lobola impossible as well as to an increasing resistance to polygamy brought about by "women's growing desire, particularly in the cities, to make their own mark in economic and educational terms" (44). However, Kuzwayo does not condemn the institution of polygamy out of hand, discussing some of the perceived advantages, from economic security to the spacing of births, put forward by proponents of this way of living. The story in this section which deals with polygamy, "The reward of waiting," makes it clear that this practice is fraught with complications. A young wife comes into an established household in an attempt to give them a son. Relationships are warm until the older wife succeeds in bearing an heir before the young woman becomes pregnant. Despite the older couple's efforts the young wife becomes unhappy and returns to her own family, claiming that she had "suffered emotional torture and humiliation in her new home" (81), not the picture of an harmonious polygamous

household. Far from finding support from her family she is in disgrace for not having conceived a child and her only option is to travel to the city to find work, forced to move away from a traditional lifestyle in order to establish her own identity.

In the fourth section of Sit Down and Listen Kuzwayo voices some strong criticism on the complicity of the Apartheid system and black men in denying to black women for many years a basic right: the security of a roof over their heads. "How Much Does a Roof Cost?", her introduction to these stories, deals not only with the material difficulties of owning a home as a black South African but also goes further to explore the injustices of the home-owning policies which, until the late 1970s, barred black women from owning their own houses or from being the tenants of rented houses:

Only married men were allowed to own or rent houses. This meant that, when widowed or divorced, black women would automatically lose their homes. Even when a marriage ended because of a husband's cruelty or neglect and even when a wife was given custody of the children, the common home ended up as the legal property of the husband. (93)

One consequence of this policy was that many women found themselves rushing into another marriage just to ensure their continued occupation of a property. The ludicrous practice of "Choosing a hat for a husband" was occasionally forced on widows by municipal offices acting in concert with black men desperate to own a home. Kuzwayo bitterly remarks, "By interfering in people's lives in this way, the authorities exposed many women and children - daughters, in particular - to traumatic abuse" (94). This policy has changed and black women can now own a house in their own right which, says Kuzwayo, "has contributed to the status of black women and to the overall uplifting of the community, as well as to the security of

individual families" (95). The two stories in this section seem to have been chosen to reflect this positive development for although they describe hardship and suffering, events ultimately work themselves out according to the wishes of the principal characters.

The communalism of black society is evoked in the fifth and final section of stories in Sit Down and Listen entitled "A Person is a Person Because of Another Person." The tone of the first story, "Lasting impressions," is at times quite disillusioned and downcast. Neo's story in some respects parallels that of Kuzwayo: Neo grows up on her family farm in the Orange Free State where she recalls listening to the stories told in the evenings by various adults. She goes on to qualify as a teacher, and then as a social worker in which capacity she gets the opportunity to travel to the United States. Neo's impressions of this country are coloured by her "encounter" with a "ghost" in the residence centre in which she initially stays, bringing back memories of the ghost-stories heard in her youth, as well as by her observation of the situation of black people in America which to her dismay brings about the painful "conclusion that the plight of blacks was almost the same the world over" (117). This impression is reinforced more than once: "The only conclusion she could reach was that all, or most, western countries treated black people like third-class human beings" (121). This experience leads her to celebrate the resilience which black South Africans have displayed in the face of decades of harsh oppression and to have hope in their potential to triumph in the future. "Life for the black youngsters of that era" is the final story of this collection. It takes a sentimental retrospective look at the conditions of living in South Africa at the turn of the century:

Working, studying, singing, dancing and playing games - that was how the people lived in those days. And all the time the country life enriched the young people with its healthy fresh air and beautiful scenery. This all laid a firm foundation for formal

education and personal growth. How different it was from life in the so-called 'homelands' of today - raped as they are of beauty, vitality and cultural heritage. (131)

This concluding paragraph contains a somewhat stilted idealisation of life in an earlier, pre-Apartheid era which perhaps reflects something of the original oral medium of this story (Murray 189). The verb "rape" which Kuzwayo has used intrigues me for I find its connotations reverberating beyond a violation of black integrity by white power to hint at the unequal gender relations which can be observed in all communities throughout history, and in contemporary South Africa. On the whole, though, Sit Down and Listen does not provide as much access to the issues of feminism and gender relations as did Kuzwayo's autobiography, Call Me Woman. I think that this arises from the nature of Kuzwayo's intended project in these short stories which is primarily to employ what she construes as a "storytelling" mode of narration, ostensibly closely related to oral culture and traditions, in order to explore contemporary themes in the lives of the black community.

CHAPTER FOUR:

The Two "Volume" Autobiography and Short Stories of Sindiwe Magona

Introduction

To date Sindiwe Magona's writing has attracted little critical attention, which is somewhat surprising since by South African standards she has been a prolific writer, producing three interesting works - the two parts of her autobiography and a short fiction anthology - over a period of three years, from 1990 to 1992. Perhaps it is her relatively recent emergence in the literary world that is to blame for her obscurity in academic circles, for her writing is certainly worthy of closer exploration and investigation.

The first and third books published by Magona, in 1990 and 1992, form two "volumes" of her autobiography, although they are separated by the publication of her collection of short stories in 1991. To My Children's Children is the first "volume" of Magona's autobiography which deals with the first twenty-three eventful years of her life, and Forced to Grow is its "sequel" which picks up her life-story at the age of twenty-three. Although the two parts of her autobiography could stand as separate entities, there are various factors which explicitly link the two narratives together: for example, the title of the second "volume," Forced to Grow, is drawn from the final section of To My Children's Children. In addition, there are productive points of comparison which can and should be made between the two. These are effective in illuminating the development of various concepts and ideas, for example, with regard to Magona's feminism and racial perspectives, the growth of the individual, her attitudes with regard to parenthood and so on, factors which will be discussed at greater length further on in this chapter.

Her second book has the intriguing title of Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night and contains a series of stories and episodes which to a large extent explore different aspects of the lives and circumstances of black women in South Africa. The first part is called "Women at Work" and deals with the interactions of maids and their "medems" - the ironic and somewhat derogatory term used by Magona to describe those white women who employ domestic servants in their homes - as told in a series of monologues by the various maids to the listening presence of Atini, whose own story provides the framing narrative for Part One. The second section, "... and other stories," recounts a number of incidents and stories which relate to black women. Although not explicitly autobiographical this book could draw to some extent on Magona's own experiences (she worked for four years as a domestic servant) and the lives of those around her.

It would be useful to the reader for me to provide a brief synopsis of Magona's biographical details drawn from her autobiography, for the day to day occurrences of her life history are interesting although they do not constitute my chief focus in analysing the two parts of her autobiography. Rather, what are of interest to me are the attitudes which she expresses and conveys in her writing with regard to various issues (gender, race and class amongst others) and the ways in which these interacting discourses tend to situate her within a specific context.

Sindiwe Magona was born in 1943 and spent her first four years living in the rural village of Gungululu, about eighteen kilometres from Umtata. She remembers her childhood as a happy and carefree time during which she was oblivious to the poverty and hardship which surrounded her family. She does not recall her father as a formative influence in those early years for he was away working in Cape Town, where the family as a whole moves just before Magona's fifth birthday. They live in a number of townships and are ultimately forced to settle

in Guguletu by the government. Magona attends various schools and after obtaining her Junior Certificate trains as a teacher. It is during her last few weeks of training that she meets and falls in love with Luthando, a migrant worker. After only six months of teaching Magona falls pregnant with her first child. As she is unmarried this is greeted as a disaster by her family and in disgrace she is forced to leave the teaching profession.

The next few years are times of great hardship. Magona ultimately resorts to working as a domestic servant, a position which she holds for four years in total. This is a period in which she recalls merely keeping body and soul together, learning at an exponential rate about white people who until then were peripheral to her existence. During this time she falls pregnant with her second child and, against the will of her parents, is married to Luthando in a civil ceremony, a move which she in retrospect deeply regrets as her visions of married life are greatly removed from the reality which she experiences. When she is pregnant with their third child, Luthando leaves on what is ostensibly a three week visit to his parents but she would next see him a staggering seventeen years later. His influence continues to affect her strongly though, for as a parting "present" he informs Magona's employer that she is pregnant and that he does not want her to work anymore. Thus Magona, at twenty-three years of age, is left with no job, nearly three children to support and dire poverty staring her in the face. At this stage in her life the only thing she is equipped with is a powerful sense of her own worth and a fighting spirit which is determined to succeed.

The second "volume" of Magona's autobiography picks up at this point in her life. After a while she divorces Luthando in her heart and mind, taking up her maiden name again and making a fresh start. At first she is forced to undertake all kinds of informal sector activities in

order to ensure her family's economic survival, mainly buying and preparing sheep's heads for resale. Quite unexpectedly she succeeds in getting a teaching job at a primary school after four years of trying and from this point on her life seems to be getting back on track. She studies for her matric through correspondence though once this is achieved she is still not content and after a few years goes on to study through UNISA. Her role as a single parent is very demanding and stressful. Magona is acutely conscious of society's predictions that as a single mother she will not succeed in raising her children properly. First and foremost she tries to be a "father" to them by maintaining strict discipline at the expense, she subsequently feels, of paying adequate attention to developing their feelings and emotions.

Her other interests continue to expand as she leaves the teaching profession to join Bantu Administration as a welfare worker. However, she quits this job fairly swiftly, feeling the pressure of being a part of the unfair mechanisms of government. Magona joins the National Council of African Women (NCAW) in 1969, and becomes involved in a group called Church Women Concerned (CWC) - a group of women of different races who attempt to get to know one another and share the insights which they gain from the difficulties and joys of friendships across the colour bar with other groups. The 1976 student revolt in Soweto impacted directly on Magona's role as a tutor and as a parent. She feared for the safety of her children and experienced growing anxiety over the wisdom and desirability of the ongoing unrest. She is outspoken over these reservations which led to her increasingly being perceived by her community as an outsider and, erroneously, even a government informer. In June 1978 Magona travels to the United States for six weeks as part of an International Visitors Programme and shortly after her return she is offered a scholarship by the International Institute of Education to attend Columbia University to study for a Masters Degree in Social

Work. This opportunity primarily stemmed from her involvement in CWC and was an experience that irrevocably transformed Magona's life and perspectives, catapulting her into an intellectual environment which greatly broadened her horizons. She makes the difficult decision to leave her children behind and spends two years over there as a full-time student. On her return to South Africa a promised job fails to materialise but she is offered a two year contract at the United Nations in New York. Magona decides to take this opportunity and this time her children accompany her overseas where they are still living. However, it seems as though this is not a permanent move as the concluding paragraph of Forced to Grow emphasises, "the ancestors have seen fit that as of now I dwell among strangers. Perhaps, for now, that is the only way I can fulfil my duty to you, my (great-grand)child" (231-32).

A strong sense of irony pervades Magona's writing. She frequently makes use of her wit and humour as a weapon - laughter invades silences and "sacred" places or topics of discussion. This ability to laugh at herself and her situation quite openly is perhaps one of the things that sets Magona apart from most other black South African women writers who are, generally speaking, very earnest in their writing, seldom allowing for the entry of humour into their narratives. Magona deliberately plays with several of the myths surrounding "black culture" in a way which occasionally succeeds in overturning the preconceptions of her readers, particularly those drawn from the white sector of the population. What also serves to differentiate her in my opinion is the self-reflexivity which her writing displays at various junctures: a questioning and tentativeness which occurs both with regard to her own identity and the circumstances and actions of her people. Magona's admission of vulnerability both as a black person and as a woman is seldom expressed in a similar way in the writing of other black South African women.

To My Children's Children: "Drama of Self-Definition"

One of the things which is immediately noticeable when reading this first "volume" of Sindiwe Magona's autobiography is the personal nature of the narrative. This might seem like an obvious observation to make, for the genre of autobiography is "traditionally" concerned with an individual's story. However, in the other autobiography examined thus far, Ellen Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman, a portion of the discussion centred on Kuzwayo's deliberate foregrounding of the activities and achievements of others to the exclusion of her own, as well as her desire to be seen as a representative figure whose experiences reflect those of her people. In contrast, Magona narrates what is essentially a personal story, although she does make observations and offer opinions which resonate far beyond the individual. One of the motivations of Kuzwayo's project is a desire for political correctness and acceptance which acts as a determining factor in the story she tells. Magona does not appear to be similarly constrained and her autobiography is consequently a more introspective exploration of her life-story in which the personal seems to impact on the political as much as the reverse is true, a style of autobiography which is often exhibited by those writing from a position of exile.

In Greene and Kahn's Changing Subjects Molly Hite comments that:

The 'I' of autobiography is inevitably a constructed subjectivity, constructed not only by the immediate culture and society at a given historical moment, but also by the writing 'I', who is working with a socio-culturally limited menu of narrative conventions, theoretical positions, and ideological implications. (121-22)

This notion of identity as an amalgamation of various (often competing) discourses and circumstances which interact to bring about a certain sense of oneself and one's people has become an established concept in cultural and literary studies. Consequently, I am interested

in examining how Magona constructs a sense of her own identity (and that of her people) in the text of her autobiography through an exploration of the various factors which she portrays as contributing to her sense of self

From the outset it is apparent that Magona is concerned with the waning of traditions within black culture and the repercussions which this has for the identity of her people. She frames her autobiography as a "letter" written to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren telling them the story of their past which is her past. In her preface she comments, "How will you know who you are if I do not or cannot tell you the story of your past?" This remark seeks to establish a sense of continuity between generations and to reinforce the value and importance of heritage or history in the construction of her people's present identity. Early on in To My Children's Children she remarks, "As far back as I can remember, there has always been a place to which I belonged with a certainty that nothing has been able to take from me. When I say place, that means less a geographical locality and more a group of people with whom I am connected and to whom I belong" (1-2). This sense of connection or belonging is something which Magona cautions is in danger of becoming lost in modern society. However, her belief in its ability to survive and its potential to comfort is a pervasive theme in the narrative with the final paragraph of the first "volume" of her autobiography affirming this notion: "By now I understood also that I was a part of the stream of life - a continuous flow of those who are still alive, and the spirits, our ancestors. I knew I would never be alone. Know this too, child of the child of my child . . . you are not alone" (183).

Although there are occasional moments when Magona verges on sentimentality in her descriptions of the past she does for the most part display an awareness of the tensions or

oppositions which can exist between the two worlds she inhabits: the so-called "traditional" ways of life contrasting with more "modern" or "civilised" modes of behaviour. In describing these spheres of her life Magona does not make use of humour as she does elsewhere in the autobiography to ease the tensions and contradictions which she experiences. She explains that "tradition" formed an intimate part of her family's routine, "To ward off misfortune - evil spirits, bewitching by another, job loss, cops and arrest - our parents lived by charms, herbs, and witchdoctor forecasts" (29). However, it was an aspect of their lives that frequently caused tension between the parents and older children. After an experience of traditional medicine and the painful ritual of incisions she comments that, "This straddling of two worlds, the world of school and 'civilisation' and the world of ancestor worship, witchdoctors, and traditional rites often created disagreements in our home" (59). Magona does not ultimately appear to be able to reconcile these two ways of life. Although she remarks at one point: "I had come to accept the existence of two far from compatible worlds, the one my world of traditions, rites, and ancestor worship and the other, the world of 'civilisation' that included school" (71), she immediately goes on to reveal her discomfort with the "traditional" world by her confession that: "No word about what had happened to me would I whisper even to my most trusted friend once I was at school" (71). The sense of unease apparent in Magona's hesitation suggests an ambivalence in her attitude towards certain features of traditional ways of life which is only discernible at certain points in her autobiography, perhaps serving to advocate the retention of selective aspects of her people's past in their formation of an identity in the present.

In the text of the autobiography itself the development and growth which Magona has undergone as a result of the passage of time is foregrounded by the contrasting perspectives of

the child or young woman and the adult narrator. This interaction of viewpoints serves to provide insight into the process through which she has arrived at a sense of her own identity, an emergence into self-awareness. Magona portrays her childhood as an immensely rich and profoundly innocent time during which she was blissfully unaware of such concepts as poverty or racism. She says, "The adults in my world, no doubt, had their cares and their sorrows. But childhood, by its very nature, is a magic-filled world, egocentric, wonderfully carefree, and innocent" (4), and of her own children's lack of social perception she remarks, "I had been as blind when I was a child. Our parents had faced a grim reality we knew nothing about" (28). It is interesting that she seems to argue for this as the natural and correct state of existence which contrasts sharply with the childhood experienced by the youth of today. Of the children whom she taught she sadly comments, "On the whole, the children were heart-rending in their innocence and yet experience. They had seen too much, too soon. It was there in their shifty eyes and in their lies" (99), a consequence of the impact of Apartheid on their lives.

That the perspectives of the young Magona have undergone a marked transformation is evident in the contrasts or tensions which emerge between Magona the protagonist and Magona the narrator. The adult narrator is now often able to comment more extensively and knowingly on incidents: inserting explanations and expressing reservations and qualifications all the time. This phenomenon occurs throughout the text of the autobiography and relates to different aspects of her life. Occasionally she uses a wry humour to comment on the limitations of her childhood perspective. During their games of skipping the slogan which she and her friends chant is, " 'Be stunted, that I grow' " (8), of which the adult narrator remarks, "The utter selfishness, bordering on malice, contained in such a wish, was lost on each child,

happy in the group activity" (8). Yet, she qualifies her criticism with the humorous comment, "my playmates must have had louder voices, for whoever we were addressing with our unconscious prayers must have heard only their voices and not mine. I am under five foot, in high heels" (8).

At times Magona's purpose seems to be explanatory, as when she recalls her experience of funerals: "As children, we were sheltered from the pain that death brought. Yes, there was sorrow in the air, so to speak, but the gloom I was to smell at these events as an adult, totally escaped us as children" (55). Elsewhere, however, she reveals her youthful ignorance to the reader, with the implication that the narrator of events has gained an understanding and insight which her younger self was lacking, "At that point, the meaning of a plate of food, brought to me from a restaurant I could enter only as a maid who scrubbed and scoured somewhere in the bowels of the establishment far from the exclusive clientele who frequented it was completely lost to me" (131-32). The awareness which the adult narrator has succeeded in attaining is particularly developed with regard to the impact of Apartheid on black experience and consciousness, an issue which emerges at several points in Magona's narrative. For example, she describes how it is almost inevitable that a black child will grow up with an inferiority complex, a sense of being "other" as a consequence of living in a world where "The whole environment screamed: 'WHITE IS BEST!' " (40). On another occasion she vehemently condemns the experience of living under Apartheid as being forced to endure "the systematic extinguishing of the breath of a people by rank bigotry and evil incarnate" (87). In this instance she recounts how three separate incidents - her application for a pass, an accident in which two girls died, and South Africa's birth as a Republic - combine in her mind to articulate the voicelessness of her people, a condition which has been "meticulously designed by the

powers that be" (87). Her insight is not restricted to political or racial phenomena but also extends to personal growth and development: "The ability to take one look, sum up and categorise, was mine then. I had learnt black and white. And was far from knowledge of the very existence of grey, never mind shades thereof. Then, I was totally unaware of the complexity that human behaviour is" (134-35). The implication is that the narrator has now progressed beyond this naiveté to a new and knowing perspective. The details of Magona's revised opinions are not necessarily made explicit, but the reader is usually able to infer the substance of her beliefs from the comments which she makes. As a result of her experiences Magona has gained increased insight into the multi-faceted nature of the racial and sexual discourses of society which interact in various ways to bring about the oppression of her people - and black women in particular, who find themselves situated at the nexus of these discriminatory discourses.

Magona's awareness of the complexities of identity ensure that she is careful not to simplify her narrative by portraying her development as a linear process in which growing older is necessarily synonymous with growing wiser. At times the reader observes how the innocence of childhood can be empowering: "The logic of a child facilitated what now, as an adult, I find excruciatingly difficult; communication" (12). In other cases Magona's childhood impressions seem to have been echoed and strengthened by the experiences of the adult. One example of this is her attitude towards religion. The irksome restrictions placed on her as a child are what she recalls most vividly, "The Day of the Lord was a careful day; correct and thoroughly ill at ease" (14). " 'Do not talk. Do not look around. Do not cough. Do not go out. Do not . . . do not . . . do not.' Oh, there were so many prohibitions attending Sunday, it is a day on which, even now, I find I cannot relax" (15). Her adult impressions add an extra dimension to

her criticisms. The lack of sex education for black youths in modern society is partly blamed on the advent of the missionaries, an omission which was to have disastrous consequences in Magona's personal life. She remarks:

Previously, sex education for adolescents had been a fact of life. Both boys and girls were taught sex play that satisfied their urges with no risk of their being plunged into roles of parenthood prematurely. Then came the missionaries; and sex disappeared from the agenda of educating the young. (106)

Furthermore, her untimely pregnancy elicited such a negative reaction from those around her that she feels compelled to comment: "Christians find it very difficult to forgive the frailty of others. Judgemental comes to mind. Judgemental and condemnatory" (116).

One of the most interesting features of Magona's text is, in my opinion, the tentativeness which she occasionally expresses with regard to her own identity. This contrasts with the determination with which a writer like Ellen Kuzwayo attempts to construct and convey her identity as a coherent, self-determining being. Magona admits to and tries to explore vulnerabilities and contradictions which Kuzwayo overlooks, but which emerge in the occasional tensions of her writing. One possible explanation for this difference in their autobiographies could be found in their different circumstances. Kuzwayo, rooted in the community and conscious of the respect with which she is regarded, feels the need to project an image of herself as firmly in control, thereby providing encouragement and inspiration to her people through her own example. By contrast, Magona's position as a South African in voluntary exile in the United States is that of an outsider, leading to a more introspective perspective which probes the uncertainties in her life - which (if either) society she feels more connected with and at home in. One of the most profound moments of Magona's

self-questioning can be found early on in her autobiography. In 1947, just before the National Party came to power Magona and her siblings go to live with their parents in Cape Town, a move that would have been illegal if done a year later. Of this narrow escape she remarks, "This positive outcome, like so many of the factors that have determined my life, did not ensue from any meticulous planning. I am the result of a series of losses, lacks, and lapses" (16). The significance of referring to herself in these terms requires further scrutiny. Can one look beyond the personal reference here to interpret this statement as symbolic or symptomatic of Magona's marginalised position as a black woman within South African society? Is she expressing some of the alienation experienced as a result of her constitution as the "other" in a society where white male is held up as the universal standard? I would answer in the affirmative to both these questions, for I believe Magona's uncertainty to partly result from her awareness of herself as the victim of discrimination from the dual sources of racism (operating against all black people) and sexism (within the black community itself), which prevent her from formulating an identity which is inclusive, taking cognisance of all aspects of her experience, as opposed to partial or exclusive, attempting to deny the legitimacy of certain spheres of her life.

There are other occasions in this autobiography where Magona refers to herself and her life in similar terms. She implies that she is neither totally in control of nor attuned to the factors which are influencing her life, "There had been no scarcity of pointers to my destiny. But, is anyone as blind as she who will not see? Or as deaf as she who will not hear?" (90), and speaks of the "sense of disjointedness, the all-embracing unreality I found myself immersed in" (92). This hesitancy and uncertainty differs very strongly from the impression that Ellen Kuzwayo attempts to convey of herself. I think that Magona, in acknowledging the

complexities, ambiguities and difficulties involved in her life, is endeavouring to gain a fuller understanding of how her identity is constituted. Rather than ignoring these factors in the hope that they will disappear, she confronts and grapples with them in order to know herself more fully. It would appear that by the end of this first "volume" of her autobiography in Magona's mind she has succeeded in constructing and achieving a "wholeness" of identity when she proclaims, "I was free. Free of him. Free to be" (182). The implication that she has attained self-determination is somewhat problematic for it seems to assert a completeness which, as I have indicated, is not wholly justified in the course of the narrative itself. Rather than accepting Magona's suggestion that she has succeeded in becoming self-contained and self-determining, I would advocate that the critic maintain an awareness of the tensions within the text. Its unresolved nature calls attention to and explores the vulnerabilities of the self, a phenomenon which I find suggestive of an exciting new dimension in black women's autobiography.

Apart from the self-reflexivity which Magona's writing displays she also succeeds in opening up different areas of experience with the use of humour and irony in her writing. It is interesting that at one point she actually posits laughter as a personal failing that often got her into trouble, "One of my greatest weaknesses was laughter. Uncontrollable laughter coupled with a mind too slow to erase a picture and render itself blank" (76). However, I feel that her use of humour in different scenarios is something of a survival mechanism which enables her to present an alternative perspective on aspects of her life which could potentially engender despair and depression. In this way humour and irony become a means of transgression, a way of going beyond a simple confirmation of hardship to the articulation of other possibilities. Magona makes extensive use of irony as a vehicle for social commentary. In

these situations she occasionally manipulates established myths and stereotypes to illuminate a different perspective. For example, of a particular period in her life she remarks, "I worked as a domestic servant for four years, during which I was a 'part of four households'" (118). The quotation marks employed here are deliberately inserted by Magona, signalling a decisive break with the view often expressed by whites that a servant is taken into their household and becomes just like "one of the family." On another occasion Magona takes the stereotypical white view that all black people look the same and turns it back on itself when she comments, "Why didn't I just tell her that to my unschooled eye, all white folks looked very very white to me. That I did not have the skills to distinguish between a blonde and a brunette" (122). Elsewhere she remarks rather dryly, "The very young do not always understand that poverty is supposed to be ennobling . . ." (89), the ellipsis which she inserts after this comment indicating her own lack of agreement with this notion. Finally, her insight that "Even at that age I must have known one did not saddle men with such mundane things as children" (17), is humorous given that the age in question is four years old and the "children" at issue are her dolls, yet it represents a telling observation in the light of her subsequent experiences.

There are times in her autobiography when Magona is able to perceive the humour in a potentially grim situation and shares her insight with the reader. For example, when a liquor raid is just about upon her mother she grabs the family's aluminium tub and starts bathing, giving the officers the fright of their lives: "The first policeman who barged in let out a howl: '*Here God, die vroumens is kaal!*' (Good God, this woman is naked!), as he beat a hasty retreat, the others doing a right about turn without bothering to enter" (29). In this instance the fear which such a raid inspires is not forgotten even as the narrative celebrates the resourcefulness of her mother. One of the most interesting uses of humour as a means of

coping with the harsh realities of life can be found in aspects of Magona's commentary on her husband's desertion of the family:

How I have regretted not making quite certain we were talking, or rather thinking, of the same year. For all I knew, my husband could casually have strolled back any year on the sixteenth day of July. And who could blame him for the little misunderstanding?

'How silly of you, darling, not to have realized I hadn't meant 16th July 1966, the same year I was leaving, but 16th July 1986!' (168)

In a situation such as this humour obviously provides a refuge from the pain which Magona experiences and which emerges forcefully at other points in her narrative.

The position of black women within South African society is an issue which Magona addresses to some extent in this first "volume" of her autobiography, a discussion which she continues in the course of the second "volume," Forced to Grow. She approaches various aspects of this issue by way of her personal experiences and their relevance to the wider relations of power which operate in society. In the course of her four years as a domestic servant Magona had acquired painful knowledge of "the cruel power white women can, if they allow themselves, wield over their darker sisters" (Children 138). At one point she describes her employers of the time, a newly immigrated Greek family, as, "my exploiters, my oppressors; the rapists of my pride and violators of my humanhood" (137). This definition does not necessarily apply to all those people whom Magona worked for since the family in question was particularly harsh to her. Nevertheless, I feel that the strength of feeling which emerges here cannot simply be dismissed. Employment as a domestic servant undoubtedly has the potential to be a humiliating and alienating experience which works to undermine that

person's sense of self

I think that Magona particularly suffers in this role because of her education and her personal aspirations which she fears have been ruined. It is interesting to note that she views herself as different from the majority of domestic servants. To her first employer she describes her greatest weakness as a love for books, " 'M'em, sometimes M'em might find something not done because I was reading' " (120). This contrasts with some of the "threats" which Magona identifies other employers might face: ". . . I had a lot going for me, as far as domestic servants go! I did not drink: her liquor was safe. I did not smoke: her supply of cigars and cigarettes was safe. I had no record of pilfering . . ." (120). The sense of her own superiority is emphasised here but it also emerges elsewhere in the narrative where Magona alludes to the class distinctions which operate in black society. For example, she remarks of her interaction with the kitchen staff as a student at teacher training college, "students also exchanged pleasantries with the kitchen staff but were well aware of the yawning cleavage between what kitchen staff was doing and what they would soon be doing" (82). This class perspective has less to do with economic realities, for the salary of a teacher was low, than with the prestige and personal satisfaction of being a "professional" as opposed to a blue collar worker. The discourse of class can consequently be seen to complicate Magona's identification with the majority of her fellow blacks for she implicitly perceives herself to be superior as a result of her education, and destined for better circumstances in the future.

Powerlessness is the state which seems to most aptly characterise the experience of the domestic servant in the narrative of To My Children's Children. This type of employment is seldom entered into out of choice but is rather the result of economic necessity. Magona

explains the dilemma which so many women share, "I could choose between being a working mother or having no children left" (146). The dual role of domestic servant as worker and mother ensures that her responsibilities are two-fold, attending to the needs of a white family as well as her own: "Evenings, after a full day's work and much more, she returns home to hem her family's day, for without her loving hand's toil, it would come undone" (139). In Bozzoli's Class, Community and Conflict Jacklyn Cock and Erica Emdon comment on the way in which these two roles of black women - domestic worker and mother - can actually be manipulated to reinforce their subordinate position in society: "Women are viewed as less effective and competent mothers because their work role interferes with their mothering role, and as less effective and competent workers because their responsibilities as mothers interfere with their work" (457). Thus these women find themselves the victims of a controlling image which positions them in between the arenas of domesticity and the workplace, denying them access to the power of either sphere. Magona describes the tragic impact which she observes domestic service to have on those women who surround her: "From the alert, vivacious, knowledgeable, interesting people they were on these buses, they would change to mute, zombie-like figures who did not dare have an idea, opinion, or independent thought about anything, anything at all" (145). This serves to emphasise their lack of control over their work situation as does the description of her continually being forced to suppress her emotions:

all the women I have worked for as a domestic servant, never once heard how I sounded when annoyed. That doesn't mean I never was annoyed. To the contrary, I was so much and so often annoyed that had I opened my mouth, I doubt I'd have lasted a week in any of these jobs. (135-36)

However, from another perspective Magona's self-imposed silence could also be interpreted as one example of various "muted rituals of rebellion" adopted by domestic servants, techniques

which are representative of "a line of resistance that enables the servant to maintain her personality and integrity intact" (Cock 103).

The vulnerability of the servant who is entirely dependant on her employer's goodwill to keep her job is perhaps most graphically illustrated in Magona's account of the sexual harassment which some women are forced to endure. Of this experience she says:

Somehow . . . a servant is left with the bad after-taste of having, even unknowingly, invited the unwanted attention. The feeling of shame at having made a spectacle of oneself - for how could a black woman, a servant, begin to think of herself as an object of desire when she was hard put to it going on believing that she was more than a beast of burden? (125)

The sense of guilt which is implicit in the notion of "shame" in this passage could be likened to that experienced by the rape victim who is powerless to resist her rapist yet often is unable to escape the suggestion that she has provoked the attack in some way. I also find the contrast which Magona draws between two conceptions of black woman's identity: "beast of hurden" or "object of desire," a significant one. She implies that the institution of domestic service resonates beyond the workplace to affect the way in which these black women relate to themselves and others. Their life of service can potentially erode or manipulate their identity as sexual beings until this becomes a realm of experience denied to them. As will be seen in subsequent discussion, Magona also touches on this painful issue in Part One of her second book, Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night, which seeks to explore the various strategies of self-empowerment employed by those involved in domestic service.

In To My Children's Children Magona describes in some detail the censure that was directed at

her by family and community following her unplanned pregnancy, an event which can be seen to have had a formative influence on Magona's sense of self as she struggled to come to terms with the fact of her pregnancy and its implications for her life. "The sun took flight, forsaking the sky. My personal tragedy was a family disaster. Father had suffered scorn and ridicule for educating a girl child. I had done exactly what his tormentors had predicted" (106). This quotation clearly expresses the magnitude of the disaster in the eyes of Magona's family who, she adds, "were as loud in their criticism as they had been in their praise when I had passed the final year teachers'-training course" (116). Their opinions regarding the worthlessness of educating a female child are representative of an old-fashioned, highly conservative ethos which attempts to deny women equal educational opportunities and confine them to a domestic sphere.

Initially Magona seems to position herself within the terms of their criticism and speaks of her personal disappointment and sense of failure, "In my clear eyes, I had fallen. Fallen far short of what I had dreamt of becoming" (110). However, in the course of describing her misfortune and its consequences she can be seen to increasingly articulate a viewpoint which is at odds with the traditional view upheld by the majority of her community. Magona is grateful for the fact that because of her "prominent" position as a teacher in the community she succeeds in escaping the public humiliation which is usually the fate of "the fallen maiden" (107), who is accompanied in broad daylight by male members of her family to the house of the "offender" where they seek redress for her "downfall." She questions the legitimacy of such humiliating practices which most women are forced to endure, and problematizes the negative terms in which the "misfortune" of an unplanned pregnancy tends to be characterised. Following the birth of her baby Magona still feels constrained by public opinion, "I was still

cautious not to display too glad a mien. People might interpret that to mean I was proud of what I had done. Are we allowed to rejoice in the results of our errors?" (117). The community's answer to this question would seem to be an unequivocal "No," but I would suggest that Magona is arguing in favour of a different response which breaks with these traditional attitudes: despite the temporary setback of her personal aspirations, the result of her "error," her daughter, is something which she feels justified in taking pride in, an emotion which the community attempts to deny her.

Magona's experience of marriage, both with regard to the actual ceremony and to subsequent events, is described in profoundly disillusioned terms which do not cohere with conventional images of marriage as a joyous state of fulfilment and contentment. She remarks, "Never had I imagined my wedding so lonely! The weddings of my childhood were community celebrations" (148), and after a few months, "The glamour of marriage and the heat of desire were thinning faster than a dog with mange loses his hair" (150). It is interesting to note that her civil marriage was entered into without parental consent. Community opinion might well judge her disillusioning experience as an inevitable and deserved repercussion of her transgression of acceptable standards of behaviour? The pivotal moment in her relationship with Luthando comes when he denies her permission to go and train as a nurse in Durban, Magona's one hope at this juncture of turning her life around. It is worth considering her reaction to his prohibition in some detail:

The legal status of African women in South Africa gave husbands such authority that defying my husband would have been more stupid than his injunction. I have never hated anyone more than I hated Luthando at that time. But I hated myself even more. I could not believe I had, with no coercion from anybody, while of sane mind,

voluntarily, nay, eagerly, placed myself in the custody of such a man. I had chosen him: and with both my eyes wide open!

Where I had seen a friend and a lover, stood an adversary and a rapist. The man on whom I had planned to lean became the cruel current sweeping away the seeds of hope, a nightmare squashing and crushing my dreams. (152-53)

Her initial response is to focus her resentment on the Apartheid system as a whole in which, at that point in time, the position of black women as minors in South African society leaves her with no viable option other than to obey Luthando's commands. This is the response which would be expected of her in terms of the discourse of racial oppression and discrimination which articulates the injustices the black community is forced to endure at the hands of "the system." However, the restrictions of these laws are not sufficient justification for her husband's actions and Magona's gaze becomes introspective. She focuses on the unequal balance of power, derived from both legal and customary sources, which characterizes the relationship of men and women within the black community. Luthando is posited in exceptionally negative and even violent terms which reveal how far short of Magona's ideals the reality of her marriage has fallen. More than anything, however, she blames herself for the failure of her powers of perception which led to these circumstances. This feeling of personal inadequacy and guilt appears to repeatedly undermine Magona's confidence. At a later point she comments, "I blamed myself for the failure of our relationship" (178), which represents a misleading simplification of the process by which their marriage has disintegrated. I would suggest that Magona's sense of guilt has been induced by her perceived failure to measure up to society's yardstick of the ideal wife, a debilitating stereotype which works to obscure Luthando's role in the failure of their relationship.

It is represented as something of a relief when Luthando ultimately deserts Magona and her children. Although she is forced to shoulder the responsibilities of both parents she draws comfort from the fact that her situation is paralleled by that of many others, "the invisible league of women, world-wide - the bearers and nurturers of the human race whom no government or institution recognizes or rewards, and no statistician captures and classifies" (175). Indeed, she portrays herself to be at an advantage because she now has her freedom and the opportunity to grow as an individual, something which many women are denied:

So many women's lives are hindered, hampered, and ruined by husbands who will not leave long after they have ceased to be husbands or fathers to their families. Dead wearing a hat, these men actively and energetically visit untold woe on those they once had loved. I was not thus afflicted, I saw. (182)

I am intrigued by the description "dead wearing a hat," which combines two seemingly incompatible concepts. Magona expands on this notion elsewhere in the text, explaining it to mean that though the husband may be "wearing a hat" and thus physically alive, he is considered to be "dead" in that he no longer fulfils the functions of the family head, "such as those of provider, protector, lover, and father" (167). Magona's perception of her situation at the end of this first "volume" of her autobiography as the start of a new life rather than the end of an old is what grants her the courage to face the multiple challenges which her future presents. Forced to Grow picks up on her life story at this point in time, allowing the reader continued insight into Magona's situation and her developing perceptions and attitudes.

Forced to Grow: Constructing the Self

Elsewhere I have examined the books written by an individual author according to the chronological order of their publication. However, in this instance, because Sindiwe Magona's

autobiography has been "divided" into two separate "volumes" I feel it would be more appropriate to examine these consecutively, leaving my discussion of her second book, Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night, until the end of this chapter. I have deliberately introduced a note of caution in using the word "divided," for Magona's life story has not simply been split up into two books. Although there are points of comparison to be made between them, I feel that in the interim Magona's ideas and perceptions have undergone a development and complication which emerges in Forced to Grow.

This "volume" of Magona's autobiography opens at the start of 1967, a year which in her memory "wears a yellow . . . A soft and shy yellow, tentative as the hope I could not hut nurse. Too bright a yellow, too strong a hope, I could not afford" (1). An event which is described in the first chapter of the narrative can be seen as a turning-point which has a formative influence on Magona's concept of her identity. On New Year's Day in 1967 she travels to the beach with friends and during a swim her wedding ring begins to slip from her finger. Initially she prevents the ring from escaping but then reflects:

'What', I thought to myself, 'is the meaning of this ring? A symbol of love between husband and wife. Why am I wearing it, that love long fled?'

Then slowly, ever so slowly, fully did I open my hand. With my fingers relaxed, at ease, the ring swam away. And I, ringless, continued with my swim, now of more sombre mood without knowing exactly why.

Looking back, I now know that I had begun to 'let go'. I had embarked on the long journey that was to be the rest of my life, travelling light, sans husband. (12-13)

Magona's deliberate gesture in allowing the ring to slip away is particularly significant considering the dire poverty which confronted her and her children at that point in time. She

describes this episode as an experience of being "born anew" (13), and I would also interpret it as a symbolic casting aside of her identity as a wife, which she perceives as having stifled her aspirations and potential in the past. This idea is supported by her later comment, "now I know it was exactly when I let that ring swim away, free, that I took the first healing step towards my own, me [sic] very own *free* state of being" (16). Magona's conviction that her escape from Luthando's power and authority has brought about her personal liberation initially appears to be in keeping with the tenets of a liberal feminism in which emphasis is placed on female separatism - the necessity of escape from patriarchal domination in order for autonomous development to occur and thereby enable women to realise their full potential. This "brand" of feminism is occasionally criticised for its failure to pay adequate attention to the interwoven nature of discourses such as race, sex and class which all impact on the position of women in society. In contrast, in addition to her focus on the importance of female empowerment in the text of her autobiography, Magona can be seen to engage with the repercussions of other discourses on the formation of her identity. This suggests that her feminist perspective is more complicated than first impressions might reveal, encompassing several dimensions which I wish to explore.

Throughout her autobiography it is evident that society does not permit Magona to forget her situation as a single mother and her awareness of people's censure does exert certain pressures on her. She is never "free," although comparatively speaking she does manage to achieve a state of independence and self-determination which was not possible in her role as Luthando's wife. Magona spends some time examining the injustice of the disapproval which her society directs at a woman in her position:

Umabuy'ekwendeni - a returnee from wifhood - was my new designation; and I was

doomed thereafter to *idikazi* which, according to the Reverend Robert Godfrey's *A Kaffir-English Dictionary* (printed in 1918), refers to 'an unmarried female'. And, the dictionary further enlightens us, this is 'a term of reproach to all women who are husbandless'. (1)

In quoting the definition provided by this ethnographic source - which would have been accepted as an authoritative voice - Magona provides some insight into the degree to which such outmoded attitudes have become entrenched in society. A limited number of "respectable" subject positions such as "wife," "mother" and "homemaker" are made available to black women and anyone who transgresses these categories is portrayed in negative terms. Magona goes further in her criticism of society's condemnation of women in her position by pointing out the irony of her situation, "It seemed a little unfair, if not downright unjust, that it was I, left to fend for myself and three young children, who had somehow lost society's esteem" (2). This injustice is linked to the double standards which operate in society to ensure that she can find "no equivalent term for a man. More than twenty years later, not only have I not discovered it in Xhosa, it has eluded me in the three other languages I speak" (2). This is because no equivalent term exists, patriarchal society having constructed a different set of criteria for judging the behaviour and status of men.

Magona's perception of these discriminatory standards has developed since the writing of To My Children's Children. Another possibility is that in the interim she has gained the confidence to articulate her views more overtly. She is particularly censorious of the traditional African attitude towards motherhood which ensures that women "are at one and the same time praised for bringing forth babies and devalued for that very act. A woman is an old hag as soon as she has had a child. Anxious parents of young men warn their sons against dating such women"

(20). This observation stems from Magona's personal experiences and is mentioned more than once in the course of the narrative. On another occasion she remarks:

No greater sin can a woman commit than having children. That is the lesson I was learning. 'She has children' quickly quenched any fiery ardour, put paid to protestations of undying love; no fool would dream of marrying a woman who had children. It was common practice for women to hide the fact of their motherhood. They were stamped as damaged goods in the pure minds of men whose reputations remained untarnished despite their fathering offspring. Indeed, rather than detracting from it, a man's stature grew in direct proportion to the number of women he had impregnated. (70)

The unfairness of these dual standards is emphasised by the heavy irony in Magona's words. She condemns the way in which society attempts to contain the position of women by using motherhood as a means of simultaneously granting value to a woman in her capacity as the bearer of the next generation, whilst taking away her right to any aspirations other than those inherent in the role of nurturer. What is most alarming to Magona is that a large proportion of women as much as men seem to uphold these tenets of society in their behaviour and attitudes towards mothers, having accepted the prevailing ideology without question.

The predicament of a woman is only seen to worsen when her husband no longer provides support for her and their children. On the one hand Magona describes the role played by the government's restrictive laws and regulations in preventing a woman obtaining compensation for her situation. However, there is an additional dimension to this discrimination to be found in the attitude of African men who, she says, "on the whole, regard giving money to wife or lover as payment for sexual and other services rendered. As soon as there is a breach in the

relationship, the man stops giving the woman any money, irrespective of whether there are children born of such a relationship" (22). The "commercial" nature of such relationships is described with obvious disdain for it ensures that the women involved are not valued or loved for any personal attributes, but rather are seen as objects of service who are readily discarded as soon as their usefulness comes to an end. The combination of racial and sexual factors thus has the potential to render the black women of South Africa powerless to prevent their exploitation.

To Magona's dismay, the broadening of her horizons which occurs with overseas travel does nothing to change her painful observations. In fact, they receive repeated confirmation. For example, when she travels to the International Women's Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels in early 1976 she notes:

I listened to the pain as woman after woman testified. Each woman represented a country. Each country, it seemed to me after hearing those cries of the heart, had its own way of making woman suffer.

Even where there was no legal handicapping of women, societal attitudes saw to it that she would remain in a subservient role. . . .

Men made policies the world over. Women suffered consequences. That much became clear to me. (141)

This statement articulates Magona's perception of the oppressed position of women "the world over," an awareness which was expressed in the first "volume" of her autobiography but can be seen to have gained new dimensions in the narrative of *Forced to Grow*. Unfortunately, in this instance her comments reflect one of the weaknesses inherent in much of liberal feminism - a tendency towards sweeping generalisation on the basis of sex without any qualification in

terms of race or class, discourses which also impact significantly on the position of women in society. As I have suggested earlier, Magona's insights are not always confined to this one-dimensional level, and in concentrating on her personal experience she is occasionally able to demonstrate the way in which different discourses interact to position her within a specific context in the South African situation.

The discrimination which Magona experiences and describes at a personal level also pervades the working situation of black women. She comments with regret that the opportunity for her re-entry into the teaching profession arises out of the dismissal of a teacher who is single and pregnant. It is ironic that this situation mirrors the predicament which Magona found herself in four years previously, except that she now benefits from another's pregnancy. However, her problems do not end on her resumption of a teaching position. In the eyes of the law she is a married woman and as such finds herself confined to a temporary post which ensures that "at the end of each school year I, and other married women like me, became jobless and had to reapply for our positions amid stiff competition" (52). There is no guarantee for these women that they will be re-employed, thus job and financial security is by no means assured. Elsewhere Magona comments ironically, "To compensate for the great sin of being married, I would become matriculated" (45). She hopes that by studying further and improving her qualifications she will be able to lessen the disadvantages posed by her married state and thereby stabilise her working situation. Magona thus provides insight into the multiple disabilities which face women in the teaching profession. Only when they are single and childless can they have some security - if they have children out of wedlock they are dismissed as a matter of policy, and if they are married their position becomes precarious anyway.

It is not only within the Education Department that Magona finds herself discriminated against. In the staff room one day in the course of a conversation in which all condemn the unfairness of white teachers receiving a higher salary, she makes a similar point regarding the position of black male and female teachers: when three teachers passed their matric exams the two men got twice the salary increase that she did. She recounts:

The words were hardly out of my mouth. The pack barked with discordant voices but one thought.

'No, Sindi! I am a man. I have a wife. I am a breadwinner.'

Pardon me! I had only three children to feed and clothe. And that I was doing solo.

But, obviously, to these men, some of whom were yet to marry (never mind have children), I did not qualify as a breadwinner. (68)

She realises that these people, who should know better as a result of their education and otherwise enlightened ideas, also have a differing set of values which they, often unconsciously, apply to the situation of male and female workers. One of the consequences of our South African situation in which, for so many years, race has been the primary attribute used to categorise and distinguish individuals is that people are only alerted to and protest against the obvious discrimination which is based on colour, overlooking the discrepancies which exist in their own circles between the treatment of men and women.

The experience of motherhood is given far more attention in Forced to Grow than in the first "volume" of Magona's autobiography. She is acutely aware that "Children brought up by *idikazi* were not expected to amount to much" (162), and is determined to refute all the dire predictions made by the members of her community. Magona is quite frank in discussing her role as a parent, which I want to consider more closely:

Drunk with my ability to discharge my duty - feed and clothe my children, take them to the doctor when necessary - it never occurred to me that what I was doing could have a negative impact on them. . . . I was so busy being the breadwinner that I now know my children never had a mother. I was the head of the family. Their well-being depended on me. I worked. I dished out discipline. I created a place where they would grow up well mannered, purposeful. I was father to my children. I shunned those things mothers do, cooing over their children, providing them with the gentler side of parenting; I deliberately suppressed things like these. They petrified me no end. I believed if I showed the children tenderness they would get spoiled as there was no father to counteract with stern discipline. . . . No, my children never had a mother. In me they had a father. (47-48)

This is not the only instance in the narrative when Magona characterises herself as a "father" to her children thereby eschewing the identity of a mother-figure. There is even an occasion when Magona's own mother says of her, "You are totally without motherly kindness" (95), suggesting her lack of attributes appropriate to the role of a mother. I find the division of parental roles which Magona sets up to be rather uncomfortable. In the above extract she seems to endorse a stereotypical viewpoint with little qualification or complication - the mother as a nurturing, emotional and kindly figure and the father as a strict disciplinarian who is responsible for providing for the family. In the context of a matrifocal or female-headed household Magona finds herself compelled to assume the responsibilities of both parents, and concentrates her attention on providing materially for her children as well as creating a disciplined environment for their upbringing. Although she succeeds in these goals the irony which emerges in Magona's tone in this passage suggests that in retrospect she sees herself as having been mistaken in adopting the father role, thereby failing to contribute to the emotional

development of her children as a mother should. The censure which she directs at herself seems to accord with society's criticism of those who do not display the "appropriate" behaviour or "expected" qualities of a mother, yet there are other instances in the narrative in which Magona can be seen to complicate the definition of motherhood and to transgress society's prescriptions.

That she sees motherhood as involving a selfless nurturing of others is supported by her definition of those people who have assisted her on life's rough journey, "These people, all of them, irrespective of race, sex or class, I call my mothers. Some have even been younger than I am. But I call all of them my mothers, for they have helped me become" (140). What is interesting about this description is Magona's use of the term "mothers" to apply to all those people who have had a formative influence on her life, thereby applying the term in a manner which draws on its connotations of child-rearing but does not make these positive qualities attendant on the biological condition of motherhood. At another point she comments, "In so far as my own life kept branching out, the less adequate I felt as a mother" (95). This could be interpreted as a guilt-stricken confession, but given the context in which the remark is made I would argue that Magona is attempting to illustrate how as her interests diversify she finds herself exceeding the traditional concept of motherhood which seeks to deny the expansion of self as a legitimate priority for the woman who is a mother. This idea is given support by other situations which Magona finds herself in. For example, when faced with criticism over her decision to leave her children and study overseas Magona is emphatic that she is not abandoning her children as people would suggest. She comments:

Never have I had the problem of guilt at being a working mother. What I do will benefit all of us eventually: that has been my guiding principle. I was not leaving them

for purely selfish reasons. I had never done that. Always, at the root of most of what I have done were the children. If I became a better anything, wouldn't that make me a better mother? (197)

Not only does she profess to have a clear conscience over leaving her children in South Africa, but Magona is also attempting to explain that self-advancement is not incompatible with fulfilling the responsibilities of motherhood, an opinion which many people seem to uphold.

It is perhaps because her circumstances forced self-reliance and self-questioning on her that Magona could be described as a "self-conscious autobiographer" in that she attempts to explore the processes by which her identity has been constructed (Daymond, "Taking New Bearings" 108). As in the first "volume" of her autobiography, Forced to Grow exhibits moments of agonised self-doubt and self-reflexivity in which she questions the nature of her identity, "Where was I? Who was I?" (163). Magona is determined to acknowledge and discuss her perceived weaknesses as an integral part of writing her story. At times she seems to be quite scathing of her actions, especially when referring to her younger self, as in her remark, "With the understanding the size of a point of a pin, I analysed my situation and arrived at a plan" (17). In retrospect she mocks her limited understanding of the situation with which she was confronted many years before. On another occasion she confesses, "I was a frightened little person who thought everyone else but me had a survival kit up her sleeve" (80). Such examples carry the implication that her powers of perception have grown in the interim and her personality has developed as a result.

However, in other situations Magona does not seem to be making this claim, but sharing her unresolved anxieties with the reader: "I have this fear that if I ever believe that others wield

power over my destiny, that I am so vulnerable, I might as well abdicate control of my life" (25). Magona would like to deny the influence which she senses others can exert on her life. Indeed, much of the narrative in Forced to Grow portrays her as determinedly in control of events. Yet, it is impossible for her to sustain this illusion and at a key moment in the text she confesses:

Sometimes I actually kid myself that I plan my life. But during those revealing moments when the nakedness of one's existence is laid bare, I know that nothing is further from the truth.

My life, if truth be known, is the result of errors, horrors and coincidence. It is as if to grow, something in my life has to die, to decay, to disintegrate. (192)

To some extent this description parallels a moment of "truth" in To My Children's Children which I discussed earlier in this chapter. I am particularly intrigued by the way in which her initial assertion, "I am the result of a series of losses, lacks, and lapses" (Children 16), is echoed in the words, "My life . . . is the result of errors, horrors and coincidence" (Forced 192). In the former situation I interpreted Magona's uncertainty to be symptomatic of her doubly marginalised position as a black South African woman and I think that her latter comment arises from a similar perception.

I have dealt with Magona's perceptions as they relate to her position as a woman within the black community, but the impact of the discourse of race on her sense of self (and that of her people) is something which the narrative of Forced to Grow deals with extensively. In To My Children's Children the comments which Magona made concerning race relations and the insidious effects of Apartheid were often refracted through the eyes of her younger self, and perhaps her most lengthy discussion centred on the situation of the black domestic servant and

her lowly positioning in the relations of power which operate in society. However, in Forced to Grow the examination of race relations is a pervasive concern of the text. This shift must be partly attributed to Magona's experiences as an adult which have resulted in a heightened awareness of the intricacies of racial oppression and interaction. There are occasions in Forced to Grow when she is outspokenly critical of the Apartheid government and its policies, as when she comments, "It has been singularly consistent in its persecution of the African, attacking the very foundation of our people - the family - robbing our young of a fighting chance to life, to dreams rightfully theirs" (19). With an observation like this Magona clearly situates her loyalties within the black community which is forced to endure such oppression. She is particularly horrified by her time spent working in Bantu Administration for although she was in the Welfare Section she found herself "near enough to the pass office, which was the control tower, to get to know its practices and to witness the translation of vile laws, their blind application and the horrendous outcomes they had" (83).

What I find most significant in this section of her autobiography is Magona's acknowledgement of the fact that working in these conditions habituates one to their injustices: "insidiously, what I had found shocking when I had first come to do this work began to shock me less and less" (88), until finally she finds herself on occasion unconsciously thinking in accordance with the laws of the Apartheid administration. She draws on the work of psychologists to label her experience "habituation," which she defines as, "familiarity that comes with frequent exposure or repetition; becoming accustomed to what was once staggering, bewildering or upsetting" (89-90). Magona soon quits social work for she despondently feels that "it could not be practised at that place, at that time, under the prevailing social conditions" (93). I would also suggest that her disillusionment stems from

the insight which she has gained into the complicity of herself and by implication of so many other black people in their own oppression. The experience of "habitation" must be a widespread phenomenon in a variety of situations although it is seldom confronted or even mentioned for it implicates the individual in the perpetuation of the unfair system which discriminates against him or her. I have not found this notion of personal responsibility which Magona expresses voiced as clearly by either Miriam Tlali or Ellen Kuzwayo in their writing. The directly personal tone which Magona adopts is characteristic of her autobiography and as such represents a breakthrough for black South African women's writing which Boitumelo Mofokeng puts into perspective with her observation:

Being able to write about and publish our internal struggles is rare for black women.

And writing in the first person is so special. Most women use the third person because they don't want to own up. It breaks the silence of women when they can start talking about what affects them personally. (Daymond & Lenta 78-79)

This "volume" of Magona's autobiography takes an in-depth look at the dynamics of the relationship between black and white in South Africa. There are moments when she is quite despairing about her situation, according with members of her community who characterise white people as ignorant and uncaring of black experience. For example, this impression is confirmed when in reply to her communication that on two separate occasions she has been accosted by a specific department store's security guards on suspicion of shoplifting, her white lawyer writes to her, "It is unfortunate and inexplicable that you should have been the victim of two similar incidents both involving this store" (118). Magona, by contrast, is totally convinced of the reason for her harrassment: "I knew, even as a child knew, that racism was the reason I 'should have been the victim of two similar incidents' from that shop and an

incalculable number of others from elsewhere in the country" (118-19), and she expresses disappointment at the lack of understanding which is often exhibited by so-called "enlightened" whites when regarding the situation of the black population. However, Magona by no means endorses a binary opposition which posits black as synonymous with good and white with bad. Her more complicated perspective largely stems from her elevation from a position of servitude or perceived inferiority which allows her to interact with white people on more equal terms. For example, when Magona joins the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) on enrolling to do her General Certificate of Education by correspondence she realises, "Suddenly, I was part of a brilliant rainbow, partaking of the wealth of human diversity that is South Africa's" (102).

Magona's interaction with white people is presented as a learning process which brings new dimensions of experience into her life. At one point she reflects, "Many would not think of white South Africans as people with anything to survive. I know that the concept is, to me, still novel. It is one of the handicaps with which I am still painfully grappling . . ." (105). I find it significant that she speaks of her own lack of awareness as a "handicap," suggesting a personal deficiency, a desire to know more about those who are "other" in relation to herself. This perspective contrasts with a discourse of racial separatism as advocated by the Black Consciousness movement which would undoubtedly question the legitimacy of such a pursuit. As Magona's horizons expand she finds herself being exposed to new situations. Of her involvement in Church Women Concerned she says, "In CWC there was a lot of learning for white women about the experience of black women. Black women had their lessons too. For me a whole strange world opened. What I had known about whites paled against what I began to glimpse, to suspect, to learn" (128). She is quick to acknowledge the difficulties and

misunderstandings often involved in the process of mutual discovery but is convinced that the insight which these relationships across the colour bar brings far outweighs the toll they exact.

Magona, perhaps because of the relative security provided by her position in exile at the time of writing the two "volumes" of her autobiography does not appear to be constrained to the same degree by the "acceptable" priorities of black revolution and liberation as the other South African black women writers, residing in this country, whose work has been discussed in earlier chapters. Indeed, Magona herself remarks on "a sense of calm that came from the distance I enjoyed away from the burning issues of South Africa" (215). Consequently, she is more at liberty to spend time attempting to theorise the nature of the relationship between black and white in South Africa, which leads to some interesting insights in her text. At one point Magona comments:

the tragedy of South Africa is rooted in our having preconceived notions about other groups. Whites know blacks. Blacks know whites. Those classified coloured know Africans and they are known to us. We know so much of groups that the individuals in these groups are completely lost to us. Faceless. (130)

The lack of interaction between different groups ensures that generalisations and stereotypes abound leading to misconceptions and misunderstandings which might be avoided if people stopped to examine and question the basis of their "knowledge" of others. Magona also looks at the question which she is often pressed to answer, " 'What do your people want?' " (130), and criticises it for the way in which it:

makes the false assumption that I, because of the colour of my skin, know the needs of all other people coloured as I am. It also assumes that the questioner, being of different colour, doesn't, couldn't and will never know these needs. . . . Colour, an

attribute, has been mistaken for quality, the essence. (130-31)

She is arguing for a notion of identity which empowers the individual in its recognition of difference as a positive attribute rather than as an immobilising force which inevitably leads to the suspension of communication. She does not suggest that the evils of Apartheid will magically disappear, but its demise can only be facilitated if more people changed their behaviour and attitude, attempting to "[do] things in their own lives, in little ways, that made a difference here and there without pretending or believing these were solutions to the evils of apartheid" (139).

In many ways the text of Magona's autobiography seems to construct her identity in terms which posit her as an integral part of the black community - black women in particular - who are united in their experience of oppression and the daily details of their lives under Apartheid. However, there are instances in Forced to Grow which complicate this impression of belonging and reveal that the formulation of a coherent sense of identity is somewhat more problematic than expected. The events of June 1976 had significant repercussions in Magona's life. She remarks, "I understood the desperate anger and frustration that had sired the eruption. I had gone around warning of exactly this kind of disaster. And now it had come, and I was not ready for its fury" (152). This is not the only moment in the text in which she speaks of her personal confusion and sense of inadequacy in the face of the happenings of June 1976. Despite preparing others for the violence which swept the country she describes herself as "completely unready and daily, in direct proportion to the growing conflagration, I saw myself go crazy. No one else seemed to notice my altered state. Or if they did, they certainly did not let on" (158). She is very vocal in her criticism of those who were ruled by cowardice and as a result "supported the insupportable" (160), in discussions which occurred.

Her own refusal to follow suit earned Magona many enemies at this time and she finds herself increasingly marginalised by her community, "Mine was a voice in the wilderness. A revolution was on. No one wanted to listen to trashy moderation. No one saw any value in evolution. Radical change was the goal" (190). She finds herself being maligned by members of her community, labelled as an informer because she questions the wisdom of continued protest actions and because she associates with white people on a professional and personal level. Magona's sense of her place in the black community is also disrupted on occasion by her white friends who question her representative status. For example, in a discussion concerning the viability of sanctions Magona finds herself "being accused by a white woman of elitism. . . . 'Sindi, *you* are educated. *You* are sophisticated. How do you know what black people, the ordinary black person in the street, want' " (169-70). Thus her sense of self is complicated by these experiences of alienation in terms of which Magona finds herself positioned as an outsider to the very community with whom she identifies, whose history and hardships she shares.

Magona ultimately arrives at the point when she decides that, "Drastic problems call for drastic responses. I decided to flee. Flee my children. Flee the country. Even if it was for only two years. I was battle-weary. And I wasn't even on the battle-front" (188). Here she refers to her decision, in 1981, to take up a scholarship to study in the United States at Columbia University for her Masters Degree in Social Work. This physical departure from South Africa can be seen as the culmination of Magona's disillusionment with the situation in this country which first manifested itself in late 1978 when she had consciously "bowed out of all bridge-building and all attempts at working for peaceful change in South Africa" (166). This should not be interpreted to mean that Magona endorsed the armed struggle. On the

contrary, she withdrew into herself, refusing all speaking engagements and other political invitations. Her response is partly provoked by the knowledge which a former colleague imparts to her that her file has come under close scrutiny by the Security Police to which she responds, "To say this piece of intelligence frightened me would be putting it mildly. I was bordering on a breakdown" (174). Her fears are primarily for the safety and welfare of her family if anything should happen to her. However, there is another dimension to her decision to withdraw from public life which Magona attempts to explore in the narrative of Forced To Grow. Of a pivotal trip to the United States in June 1978 she says:

I looked at South Africa from a distance, perhaps for the first time dispassionately. I felt such a relief that would be hard to describe.

Dear God! It was not up to me. History would unfold itself in South Africa. The country had reached a point of no return in the history it would write for itself. It was not up to me. . . .

After my return, all bridge-building stopped for me. . . . I was not less concerned than I had been before about the fate of the country. In fact, it could be I was more concerned now. But I was tired. Tired of talking to the converted. Tired of talking to stones no amount of talking would ever change. Tired of convincing others I was a human being. (182)

The tiredness which Magona admits to is seldom even alluded to in the writing of other black South Africans. In the context of an ongoing struggle for liberation such an admission would most likely be interpreted as tantamount to a betrayal of the cause. It could be argued that if each individual denied their personal responsibility and left the future of the country in the hands of "history" nothing would ever change. However, Magona has not been seen to pursue political legitimacy in her autobiography. She does not attempt to hide her emotions from the

reader, nor does she seek to justify the way that she feels. On the contrary, her predominant emotion is one of relief at having shared her situation, "I can't recall now when I had come to the conclusion that the fate of the entire country rested on my shoulders. But putting that burden down was a relief" (204).

The fact that Magona withdraws from all political activity and involvement has a significant repercussion in that she starts to write her reactions to events:

Newspaper reports triggered furious responses that I poured onto paper. No inhibitions existed in my new-found place. . . . The only feelings I took into consideration, the only feelings that mattered, were mine. My feelings, my truth, that was all that concerned me. What a relief! (183)

To some extent I see these sentiments emerging in the two "volumes" of Magona's autobiography, an attempt to share an intensely personal story which does not necessarily seek to be politically correct or acceptable. Magona receives praise from friends for her initial writing efforts, but still remarks, "Despite such encouragement, I did not embark on a writing career. I did not know I could write. I did not know anyone like me who did. Even the Xhosa writers I knew of were much older, all men" (184).¹⁰

In retrospect there is a happy irony in this remark for Magona was able to develop the confidence which she initially lacked and has had three books published in as many years. However, what should be taken seriously is her conviction that her case is not unique, that

¹⁰ It is interesting that she does not seem to know of Noni Jabavu, a Xhosa woman writer who had written and published two autobiographical novels by 1963: Drawn in Colour: African Contrasts and The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life.

many women have the ability and even the desire to write but due to their multiple responsibilities and the lack of suitable role models are unable to. She asks, "What wealth lies buried in our hovels, to be dug up one day? Daily battles just to exist sap energies to an extent hard to imagine. Goals remain goals far too long, perhaps long enough to disappear into vague regrets, frustration and hazy sources of malaise" (184). I would suggest that Magona's time spent in the United States, both as a student and subsequently working for the United Nations, removed her from a situation in which her writing endeavours were limited by a sense of personal inadequacy and subsumed by her other concerns and responsibilities, allowing her the space - physical as well as mental - in which to formulate a sense of her identity in the process of writing her life-story.

The concluding section of Forced to Grow is used to link the two "volumes" of Magona's autobiography together for it ties in with the opening of To My Children's Children as Magona once again addresses the younger generations of her family at whom her story is directed and attempts to recreate the atmosphere of a traditional storytelling session: "forget that I am sitting on a four-legged chair instead of a goatskin or a grass mat. Forget that we meet through your eyes instead of your ears. Listen, for my spirit, if not my flesh, is there with you" (232). Particularly interesting is her conclusion to Forced to Grow in which she instructs her audience: "Listen: '*Kwathi ke kaloku*, . . . Once it came to pass . . . , *kwabe kukho bantu bathile, zweni lithile* . . . there lived a certain people in a certain land. . . .'" (232). Despite the fact that in substantive terms there is very little that is traditional about Magona's narrative, her concluding words suggest the start of a traditional oral narrative and have the effect of leading the reader back to the start of the first "volume" of her autobiography, tying the two "volumes" together.

Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night: Resistance and Transgression

This short fiction anthology which was published in 1991 is Sindiwe Magona's second book, appearing in between the two "volumes" of her autobiography. Sue Marais has compared Magona's collection of stories to Njabulo Ndebele's Fools and Other Stories, claiming that both are representative of "narratives of resistance which deploy the generic potentialities of the cycle form to assert a solidarity and collective sense of identity which is both premised on, yet forged in defiance of the segregational and divisive impact of the ideology of apartheid."¹¹ This is particularly true of Part One of Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night,¹² entitled "Women at work," in which the stories, essentially a series of monologues linked together by the listening presence of the "narrator," Atini, relate the experiences of maids and their "medems." These mini-narratives are themselves framed by Atini's own story and her concluding reflections on their situation. In South Africa the institution of domestic service is essentially confined to black women, a phenomenon which is a direct result of the racial, social and economic make-up of our society. Consequently, this is a realm of experience which is unique to these women yet is simultaneously dependant on and a result of the pervasive influence of Apartheid.

In her review of Living Diedre Byrne comments on the structure of Part One which closely resembles the form of the short story cycle. She speaks of it as a "transgression of form" (146), and goes on to remark, "This fusion of discontinuity and coherence is admirably suited to the complex nature of South African society, where groups are rigidly separated and yet

¹¹ This comment was made in the abstract of her paper not subsequently given at the 1995 AUETSA Conference.

¹² Hereafter referred to in the text as Living.

form a single nation" (146). To some extent Part Two also reflects this idea of different entities which come together to form a whole, for the seemingly unconnected stories which it contains deal with various dimensions of black life, particularly as they impact on black women, such as the migrant labour system which disrupts family life, the vulnerability of black women and children in the urban environment as well as their strength and survival in spite of all the odds stacked against them (Moodley 12).

When examining Part One of Living I think it is interesting to consider what Ndebele, in his 1985 "Noma Award Acceptance Speech" included as an appendix in Rediscovery of the Ordinary, has identified as the task of South African writers: "to look for that area of cultural autonomy and the laws of its dynamism that no oppressor can ever get at; to define that area, and, with purposeful insidiousness, to assert its irrepressible hegemony during the actual process of struggle" (159). The area of experience which Magona chooses to focus on is unique to black women and under normal circumstances would be inaccessible to many people, black and white. In choosing to portray the perspectives of seven domestic servants Magona has taken the traditional colonial relationship and turned it upside down. The point of view of the colonised women which Magona provides succeeds in transgressing those oppressive categories which give voice to the coloniser or "whites only" and attempt to construct the colonised people as unthinking units of labour (Byrne 145-46). For many years black maids have not been supposed to talk but to concentrate exclusively on their work, a fallacy which Magona delights in dispelling (Byrne 145).

Part One opens with "Leaving" which describes the heartbreaking decision taken by a black woman to leave her children in order to care for them more effectively with the income she

hopes to generate as a domestic servant in the closest major town, East London: "She had found the key. I will not be a mother that way. She would fulfil her obligations as she understood them and provide for them. The only way she could be a mother to her children, she saw, would be to leave them" (6). The lack of any other viable alternative is emphasised in the text through the repetition of this idea towards the end of Part One when she again reflects that leaving home was, "The only thing I could do to be a mother. If I had not done that, I know that today not one of my children would still be living. And, perhaps, neither would I" (53). Their dire economic difficulties are compounded by her migrant worker husband's reluctance to support his family in the eleven months of the year he is away from them in the gold mines of Johannesburg. The self-sacrifice of this woman is particularly symbolised by two images in the opening pages: the figurative blood dripping from a thorn twisting in her heart is paralleled by the milk which she squeezes from her breasts, unable to feed her baby, as she journeys away from her family (Byrne 145). I think that the identity of this woman is deliberately withheld from the reader by Magona in the opening chapter of Part One in order to ensure that she is representative of the thousands of black women who are forced to make similar decisions and sacrifices in the course of their lives.

The second chapter of Part One is set eighteen months later and the reader is immediately introduced to a woman who can subsequently be recognised as the anonymous woman of chapter one, "I am Atini, although Mrs Reed calls me Tiny. I have been working for Mrs Reed for eighteen months now" (12). Magona is interested to explore the ideology inherent in the phenomenon of naming and she looks at both sides of the colonial relationship in doing so. Atini says of her new name:

I feel funny being called Tiny; I am a large woman. *Sidudla*, that is a name people

give to a fat person who cannot even pretend she isn't fat. But Mrs Reed said: 'Oh, I can't say your names, they're difficult. All those clicks and things. I'll call you Tiny.'

And so, I became Tiny; fat as I am. (14)

The irony of this situation emerges clearly in Magona's tone. Firstly, the name which Mrs Reed gives to Atini is totally inappropriate given her size. Secondly, the reader should note that Atini has no "clicks and things" in her name which Mrs Reed cites as the reason for being unwilling to learn to pronounce it. It is thus necessary to look elsewhere for Mrs Reed's motivations. In giving her maid the name of "Tiny" she not only succeeds in labelling her in a non-threatening and belittling manner, but also attempts to remove all aspects of Atini's identity, ensuring that, in Mrs Reed's eyes, Atini becomes just another maid rather than an individual with personal traits. The discomfort which her new name causes Atini must also be seen to stem from her unwillingness to be given an identity which originates with her employer and attempts to render her faceless, signifying nothing of the person that she is. However, in keeping with her project of empowering these black women Magona is quick to show the other side of this relationship in which the maids themselves name their employers in various ways, thereby appropriating the power inherent in this phenomenon.

The most obvious and pervasive example is the distortion by all the maids of the word "madam" with its connotations of respect and formality, to the rather more ambivalent term of address, "medem," which is used without any quotation marks in the text. The change which occurs should be seen to signify something beyond an inability of the maids concerned to master the correct English pronunciation of the word. I think that Magona is taking the conventional term which inscribes very specific relations of power and altering it to suggest something of the complexity which exists in the master/madam-servant relationship in which

the subjugation of the maid is not as complete as his or her employer would like to believe.

There is also something refreshing and subversive in the various names which the maids give to their medems. There is, for example, Stella who refers to her medem in a proprietary manner as, " 'my Goat Food Woman' " (18), because of their fridge which is, " 'full of leaves, seeds, growing things, and smelly rotting things' " (18). It is particularly significant that it is Mrs Reed, responsible for re-naming Atini, who is very seldom referred to by her proper name in the course of the maids' conversations. Stella calls her " 'stork legs' " (18), and Sophie echoes this in referring to her as " 'legs of a bird' " (30). On another occasion Virginia speaks of Mrs Reed as " 'Mrs Walk-on-arms' " (36), while Lillian calls her " 'the no-legs woman' " (49). Finally, Atini herself at one point refers to Mrs Reed as "kindling-legs" (54). I feel that the significance of these nicknames resonates beyond the humourous way in which they focus on a physical attribute of this woman. In sharing these names with the reader Magona has shown one of the ways in which these oppressed women are able to negate some of the authority of their oppressors by reconstituting their employers' identities in a manner which renders them harmless and even contains elements of ridicule and mockery. Another mechanism of defence, discussed by Jacklyn Cock in Maids and Madams, which the maids occasionally employ is to humour their medems by the assumption of an uncomplaining and/or cheerful facade which serves to effectively mask their true feelings of resentment or anger (7). For example, Lillian remarks that on certain occasions despite feeling overwhelmingly anger at an injustice, " 'all you can do is paste a smile on your face and say: "Of course, yes, medem, I'm very happy, medem" ' " (Living 52).

As in Sindiwe Magona's other writing laughter is shown to be a weapon which the maids

employ in their attempts to neutralise the hurtful effects of their subjugation. Atini shares with the reader that she and the other maids "laugh a lot about our work in the kitchens of white women. We laugh because if we did not laugh what would we do? Cry?" (59). It is clear from the narratives of Part One that crying is not a viable solution to the problems faced by these black women. Their support of one another often helps to alleviate the injustices which face them on a daily basis. However, Atini also reveals that there are moments of despair which cannot be prevented: "when a woman is alone - alone at night and can't sleep thinking of all these problems - then, she cries. She cries because she can see she may never escape from this hell" (60).

I think that Magona seeks to explore various dimensions of "this hell," the domestic worker's world, in the course of the narratives which the maids relate to Atini. The learning process which Atini describes herself experiencing near the beginning of *Living* is thus paralleled by the reader's growing insight into the world of these black women. In her attempt to create an authentic-sounding voice for the maids, who would probably normally interact among themselves in their vernacular language, Magona sprinkles her narrative with Xhosa and Afrikaans words which are not necessarily accompanied by any mediating translation for the reader. These range from single words such as "*mlungu*," "*mampara*" and "*makoti*," or "*kraps*," "*frikkadell*" and "*lekker*," to phrases, sentences and the occasional short paragraph in Afrikaans or Xhosa. This dynamic mixture of languages is often characteristic of the speech of black people in South Africa who are required to bridge between different languages in their daily lives. In commenting on this feature of the text the question of Magona's intended audience must be considered. As a South African with a sound knowledge of Afrikaans and a limited understanding of Zulu and Xhosa I still found parts of this text quite tricky to follow.

Consequently, I would speculate that although a foreign reader would undoubtedly be able to follow the story-line, many of the subtleties of the text would escape him/her when reading Living. Magona, when writing this book in New York, must have known that this could occur. Indeed, I would suggest that she has deliberately refrained from translating everything for her audience in order to preserve something of the unique character of these women and their experiences in the white households of the Eastern Cape. In The Empire Writes Back Ashcroft et al comment on this phenomenon of using untranslated vernacular words in a post-colonial text, calling it "a political act" which inserts and reminds the reader of cultural difference whilst simultaneously denying the "receptor" culture any higher status (66).

In their "conversations" with Atini the maids show themselves to have a widely developed sense of their exploited position in society which relates to many different aspects of their lives. They feel their labour to be unappreciated by the white people that they serve. Stella remarks with scorn, " 'Ho! White people! You slave for them. Slave for their children. Slave for their friends. Even slave for their cats and dogs. And they thank you with a kick in the back' " (21). Specific attention is paid to the relationship between white women, in the position of employers and the black women who work as their maids. The lack of respect and regard which white women consistently demonstrate towards their maids is repeatedly condemned in the text. On one occasion Sophie says, " 'These women we work for treat us like dogs, worse than their dogs, in fact. That is, most of them' " (33). At another point Sheila shares her doubts with Atini over the prospect of any change occurring in the relationship between maids and their medems, " 'Do you think that can happen? White women can learn not to call us girl? After all these years they're used to calling us anything they like. . . . Do you really think they'll learn that? Me, myself, I don't think so. I really don't think so' " (25).

Magona implies that such a transformation could only occur if the wider condition of black oppression prevailing in South African society was overthrown.

Atini does introduce a note of compassion which complicates the reader's impression of white medems with a remark like, "white women aren't having a good time all the way. With having maids. It can't be that much fun to have to take a total stranger into your home. Not all maids are good people" (58). However, such an insight is outweighed by Magona's efforts to shatter any complacent notion of sisterhood which white women might entertain towards their domestic servants. The text contains many examples of the injustices which characterise their relationships. Virginia remarks scornfully:

'White women are quick to see the favour they do for you but they never see any favour you do for them. Mine is always reminding me how she got my pass right. . . . ONE DAY! One day I will remind her it was not her who had to spread her legs for that white dog, the Bantu Inspector who made my pass right. I think she forgets that.'

(38)

Obviously, the implication is not that Virginia's medem has forgotten the circumstances surrounding her maid's pass, but that she chooses to ignore what actually happened preferring to comfort herself with a sense of her own benevolence, rather than confronting the sacrifice which was required of her maid.

Joyce is the youngest of the seven maids who converse with Atini and her sense of the inequitable relations of power between maids and their medems is the most sophisticated, perhaps as a result of the highly politicised character of her generation. She is not content to spend her life in another woman's kitchen, and hopes to continue with her matric once classes,

disrupted by the 1976 riots, have resumed. Joyce is particularly outspoken in her condemnation of those gestures which the white woman makes towards her maid in lieu of paying her a decent wage, like taking her to the doctor, giving her left-over groceries and old clothes or buying school books for her children. She says of this behaviour:

'The dribs and drabs the white woman sees as charity are nothing but a salve to her conscience, an insult to the maid's dignity, and an assault to her self-esteem. The maid remains in a never-ending position of indebtedness. . . . Feminism in this country has been retarded, in part, by this paternalistic attitude of white women towards black women. How can I be a sister to my father, the white woman?' (42)

In a speech such as this one Magona succeeds in pointing an accusing finger at those white women who do not acknowledge their debt to the black women who have freed them from the responsibilities of maintaining a home. White women are able to translate this freedom into many different aspects of their lives, while the black maid fails to be compensated with that which is due to her, " 'freedom from want, fair wage for sweat' " (45).

Atini is quickly informed by the other maids of her master's reputation for sexually harassing the family's domestic servant. At one point she is cautioned by Lillian, " 'You, get yourself a young man, I am warning you. If the husband of this strange woman you work for doesn't soon hear a man's cough here some nights . . . you will become his business; of that I can assure you' " (50). Although Atini does not seem to be subjected to any abuse, there is considerable discussion by the other maids of the case of her predecessor, Imelda. Through various comments the impression is created, although it is never explicitly stated, that Mr Reed was responsible for Imelda's pregnancy. The consequences of his actions are extremely far-reaching, for Mrs Reed who Lillian says accusingly " 'knows what her husband is up to

with the black girls' " (49), took Imelda to a doctor who following Mrs Reed's instructions deliberately " 'Cleaned her up not only for what was inside her then - but for all those that would have lain inside her in time to come' " (31). In writing of this issue Magona touches on an aspect of the relationship between white women and their black maids which is seldom discussed. Mrs Reed can be seen to express disapproval at her husband indulging his sexual urges outside of the marital bed by ensuring that Imelda, her "rival" for Mr Reed's attention, is sterilised. Thus, Mrs Reed does not have to confront any evidence of her husband's sexual philandering in the form of illicit, coloured children and consequently can pretend to herself that such sexual activity does not occur.

Even in those situations where the maids describe themselves being treated with benevolence by their employers, they are still shown to be trapped in a subservient relationship. Sophie's supposedly enlightened medem who works at the Advice Office has bought her a house for which Sophie is extremely grateful. However, she still feels herself to be constantly exploited, " 'Work. Work. Work. I work until I drop dead each day. *Whuwoo!* Get her money right out of my shoulders and my knees? That, she does. Oh, yes, that she does' " (32). It is ironic that her house acts as a means of keeping Sophie trapped in her situation. She shares her dilemma with Atini and cautions her against becoming trapped in similar circumstances:

'How do you leave a *mlungu* woman who has bought a house for you?

'I feel the house is cement; because of it I can never leave this woman. Cement is like that. Never put your feet deep into wet cement. If you do, make sure you get it out before the cement dries. My cement has dried and both my feet are in this woman's house. I am stuck - for the rest of my life. But, I shouldn't complain.' (34)

Each maid is able to relate why she is dependant on her job: Atini and others because of their

dire economic situation which compels them to earn an income in order to support their families, or Lillian who is trapped by the potential of financial reward in the form of a pension which is owed to her. She remarks, " 'I'm nailed here; I can't leave. When medem, that's her mother, when she left, she left my pension money with her daughter, this child, this thing I work for. That is my money and I'm going to wait for it even if I die; I'll die right here waiting for it' " (48).

At the close of Part One of Living Atini reflects on the two years and eight months which have passed since she left her children sleeping and went in search of a job. In all this time she could only journey home once when she brought her two youngest children to live closer to her in the nearby black township with a child-minder. She recounts the various fates of the other maids: several have left the area of their own accord or have been fired; Sophie's Advice Office medem and her family went overseas to live leaving her behind without a second thought; Joyce, the would-be matric student is still there; and Lillian's pension hopes remain on hold. Atini says of her situation, "No longer will I ask: what is hell? I know it because I am there. I know it because all these women tell me they are there" (59). Her sense of desperation and despair is, however, narrowly prevented from becoming overwhelming by the conclusion of Part One when she hears that Joyce has received a scholarship to study overseas. Atini's spirits are buoyed by Joyce's escape from her situation and she concludes on a positive note, "Shows you . . . you have to be determined. There *are* ways. If you know what you want and you don't give up . . ." (60).

Part Two of Living is entitled " . . . and other stories" and the eight short stories which Magona has included in this section combine to create an impression of the lives and

experiences of black women, dealing particularly with the oppression dealt to them by a combination of their race, sex and class. I wish to examine various aspects of six of these stories, especially focusing on the "element of transgression" which Diedre Byrne identifies in a few of them (146). "The most exciting day of the week" and "MaDlomo" are the two stories which I have chosen not to discuss for the issues which they raise are more fully expressed elsewhere in the collection.

"Flight" is the first story of Part Two and it describes the escape of a new wife from the village of her husband's people, where she is expected to live and work while waiting for her husband, a migrant labourer, to return home on his annual month of leave. The men of the village pursue her as she flees up the mountain side. The whole tableau is observed by a young girl whose description of events is worth considering in some detail:

I held my breath as I strained with her, willing her to elude them, urging her on and on and on.

My last glimpse of her: . . . there she was, flitting here and there between boulders, her long new-wife-length dress making her seem without feet. As she hurried escaping, she appeared to me to be riding the air - no part of her body making contact with the ground.

Away she floated; the men plodded behind her.

I saw her waft into the wall of mist. I saw it close the crack she'd almost made gliding into it. Like a fish slicing into water, she'd but disturbed it. And it rearranged itself, accepting her into itself. And away from those who harried her. (64)

I think that the excitement of the young girl and the fervour with which she silently urges the young woman on signifies more than her welcoming a break in the daily routine. Perhaps

sensing the parallels between the young woman's fate and her own future the girl sides with the woman who flees and ultimately succeeds in escaping the oppression of her tribal home. The other-worldly nature of the woman is emphasised: she appears to float along not touching the ground and the elements aid and abet her escape, accepting and concealing her to ensure that she eludes her pursuers. She is portrayed as being in harmony with the environment, while the men plod behind her, definitely out of their element and unable to recapture this elusive being.

The girl recalls all the conventional emotions which she is supposed to feel on an occasion such as this. She should feel sorrow at losing an aunt who, as befitted her status as a new wife, was given all the chores to do, saving the children from tedious work. She should sympathise with her uncle who has been left without a wife and has also lost the cattle which he gave as lobola for her. However, she finds herself experiencing none of these feelings and instead remarks, "All I know, is the thrill I felt watching her escape into the thick grey cloud and mist" (65). There is a distinctly subversive tone in this concluding sentence of the story for the narrator consciously discards what are regarded as the appropriate attitudes of her society and expresses a pleasure in the escape of the young wife which is almost sensual in its intensity.

In the story entitled "Nosisa," the central character is a young black girl of the same name who lives with her mother, a domestic worker, at the home of her employers. Although she is envied by her classmates for she has been fully equipped for school by her mother's medem, Nosisa is resentful of her situation. She longs to tell her peers, " 'Do you not see that daily, I watch my mother's enslavement? Unlike you, I have no shield in the shape of a home.

Nothing separates me from Mother's work. . . . Mother is a slave and I know, for am I not, daily, witness to that yoke?" (85). Magona describes how continually being forced to confront her mother's uncomplaining subjection has had a negative effect on Nosisa. She has effectively been robbed of the relatively carefree childhood which her classmates are able to enjoy living in the townships, far removed from the spectre of white domination.

Another consequence of growing up in this alien environment has been Nosisa's constant contact with the white child of the house, Karen. Initially these two were inseparable companions who shared both recreational and educational activities, but at a certain point their paths began to diverge and Nosisa was left behind, denied many of the opportunities of her white counterpart. When she goes to school Nosisa finds herself to be far more developed than the other black children, but, "this affirmation came a little late to unseat the feelings of inadequacy lodged in the little heart. The pain of knowing that she was not quite as good, not quite as clever, not quite as gracious . . . as that other child" (86). Such comparisons were continually made by Karen's parents and Nosisa, an intensely sensitive girl, has absorbed the notion of her own inferiority from them. She becomes filled with a despair which she feels unable to share with anyone, causing her to withdraw further and further into herself, "Boisterous and chatty usually, today Nosisa was quiet and filled with a silence her classmates did not understand" (81).

Ultimately Nosisa is driven to commit suicide which Deidre Byrne labels as "the ultimate transgression" (146), an unequivocal rejection of the injustices grounded in racial and class discourses which govern her world and that of her mother, ensuring that their future options are severely limited. After months of agonising over her predicament Nosisa consciously

decides on suicide as the only course of action open to her and accordingly douses herself in paraffin and sets herself alight. The scene of this self-immolation is the backyard of her mother's employers which serves to further indict the establishment and its inhabitants. I think that part of the tragedy of this story lies in the bewilderment and incomprehension with which her mother and her employers greet Nosisa's suicide, yet the reader will long recall the underlying causes of her violent, self-destructive behaviour.

The story of "Lulu" is narrated by Liziwe who as an eight-year-old was befriended by the older Lulu when she came to live with her family in New Site Location near Cape Town. To the young girl the seventeen-year-old Lulu was a part of "that world any little girl yearns for, the world of adult love, romance, and the mysteries of adulthood" (93), and she treasured their friendship. Through Liziwe's eyes the reader is able to observe the impact which Lulu's entry into the adult world, a world shaped by Apartheid, had on her. Firstly, her work as a domestic servant removed her from family and friends so that Liziwe "saw less and less of [her] and from the little snatches I caught, her life as a working woman was not quite as I'd imagined" (95), involving pre-dawn starts, late evenings and poor wages as the nanny of a white family's children. Lulu's state of mind is captured in Liziwe's sad observation, "Lulu's songs became less gay and less frequent" (95), the bleakness of her life causing a decline in her spirits.

After two years Lulu falls pregnant and as an unwed mother finds herself in disgrace with her family and the community as a whole who regard her as "damaged goods" who in becoming pregnant had "lessened her chances for a good marriage and diminished her lobola, the bride price her father would get in the event of her marriage" (96-97). Liziwe's mother even suggests that she should cease associating with Lulu, her new-born baby given as an excuse

for not bothering Lulu anymore. After a time Lulu's family find a "solution" to her situation, giving her baby to an elderly couple who could not have children and marrying her off to a widower who was much older than herself. Of Lulu at this time Liziwe remarks, "now her beauty had no joy. It was a quiet beauty; timid or wounded even. A melancholy, haunted beauty. Fragile" (98).

Years passed during which Liziwe lost contact with the people of New Site Location as the government's "shum clearance project" scattered families across several different townships (98). More than ten years later Liziwe happened to see Lulu and strode excitedly over to her, only to find herself met by lack of recognition and a disturbing "enormous nothingness" (99). As Liziwe's agitation mounts Lulu's sister arrives on the scene and explains that Lulu had been reduced to her present state at the hands of the police during the 1960 riots. She was an innocent bystander who happened to get arrested in the course of a police raid and after three days in custody enduring unknown torture and hardship she was released, transformed into the "empty-eyed woman" who stood before Liziwe in 1975 (101). It is not hard to discern Magona's motives in writing this story. She mourns the way in which the hardships incurred by a combination of her race and sex worked to destroy this woman's life. Apartheid society condemned Lulu to work as a domestic servant and then unleashed its violence on her, but her own black community, with its censure of unwed mothers and the unsatisfactory "solution" which it provided, also contributed to her transformed state of being.

"It was Easter Sunday the day I went to Netreg" is a short story which deals with, amongst others, the issue of abortion, the first time that this has been broached in the writing of the black women writers whose work I have examined thus far, although the topic will recur in

one of Zoë Wicomb's stories in You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town. The narrator of Magona's story, Linda, looks back on the events which occurred when she was just thirteen years old. Initially the reader is not informed of the significance of the day, learning only that Linda is waiting to be taken somewhere by her mother and her employer, Mrs Wilkins:

Mother, stooped under the weight of her employer's goodness, walked slowly from the car towards our shack. I watched her, and knew that the fact that today Mrs Wilkins's beneficence stretched to include even me, personally, weighed heavily on my mother's heart. The same knowledge paralyzed me. (103)

Something of the apprehension which Linda experiences is conveyed in this passage as is the pain with which her mother contemplates her indebtedness to her employer and the events which lie ahead. Linda thinks back to the netball match at which she realised "with utter searing clarity" (108), after taking a fall, that the "frightened, turbulent fluttering" she felt as she lay on the ground was because she was pregnant (107). She reflects, "that match was to be the beginning of the new me. Or should I say the old me? The new me, whatever else she is or isn't, is very, very old: older than any living person I know" (106). The age which she speaks of is obviously not a physical condition but reflects the mental anguish which she feels herself to have endured in the course of subsequent events.

As a young girl Linda's mother had fallen pregnant and was deserted by the father of her child, left to bring up her daughter single-handedly. Although Linda's boyfriend is also a migrant labourer she is not troubled by similar fears since, "He had assured me that he wanted to meet my parents and not only pay damages but pay lobola, the bride price" (109). This knowledge serves to pacify Linda's outraged relatives somewhat and they accordingly journey to the "Single Men's Quarters" where he lives. Magona strategically delays the story of this visit

until the conclusion of the narrative at which point it provides a startling climax and puts into perspective the events, particularly the abortion, which have already been described. In the interim Linda relates their visit to Netreg to a woman named by one of Mrs Wilkins's contacts who would perform an illegal abortion on Linda.

Of the actual details of the abortion she says, "What I do remember has never left my recall. On the other hand, what I have forgotten, I forgot with amazing swiftness: inside a week, and it was gone. Moreover, it has remained safely tucked away. It doesn't haunt me" (111). Initially Linda feels no pain and begins to relax convinced that the horror stories she has been told are untrue, but then, "Correction comes swift, hard and scorching; jogging the memory of my race" (112), reminding her of the pain which thousands of women have had to endure. The whole process does not go as it is supposed to and late that night Linda is taken in an ambulance to hospital where she loses her son. In her other writing Magona has displayed a scepticism towards religion which I think is continued in this story. The irony of the narrator having an abortion on Easter Sunday, a Christian holiday which celebrates the renewal of life symbolised by Christ's resurrection, is surely not unintended, although Magona's exact motivations for this "coincidence" remain open to speculation.

The day of her abortion, Linda recalls, robbed her of "a special part of [her] life as a woman" (113). She subsequently discovers that she is unable to bear children and finds herself unable to "have sex and enjoy it, because as a man's penis glides into me it triggers the memory of what glided out of me those many years ago" (113). Yet, the worst memory for her, what necessitated the visit to Netreg, is the knowledge of the identity of the father of her child. In addition to speaking of her own shock Linda shares with the reader: "Mother too has never

been the same since that Sunday we went to the zones to get lobola from the father of the child I was carrying, the day Mother saw Mteteleli and recognized my father" (113).

Magona's short story, "Two little girls and a city," is based on events which occurred some years ago on the Cape peninsula. On the same day in different areas of Cape Town a six-year-old white girl, Nina van Niekerk, and her black counterpart, Phumla Dyantyi, were both brutally murdered, their necks broken, and then subsequently raped by their respective assailants. Throughout the story there is a contrast in the privilege and luxury enjoyed by the white family as opposed to the hardship and bleakness of the black family's life in the township of Guguletu. Phumla's mother, Nolungile, comments specifically on the brutality of the migrant labour system, "instead of joining families it split them into bits and pieces like the grains of the sand" (137). However, the devastation of both sets of parents is equally real as is the horror of the crimes committed on the two girls.

It is interesting to observe the reactions of the white and black parents to the involvement of the police. Piet, Nina's father, feels reassured by their presence since, "He had great faith in the South African Police" (140). This is vastly different from the reluctance experienced by Phumla's parents which is summarised in the comment, "Guguletu people do not go to the police until they see that not to do so would land them in more trouble than they were in already" (146). The peace of mind of the white parents contrasting with the nervousness of the black is an inevitable consequence of the Apartheid system which in so many ways was designed to serve the interests of those who are white and steadily worked to disadvantage their black counterparts. Extensive newspaper coverage occurred following Nina's death: "CLEAN UP SEA POINT - screamed the headlines for weeks after. And the dirt, the scum

alluded to, was other human beings whose other-ness set them apart, rendered them so unlike the owners of the strident voices all raised in holy ire" (153). Yet, in showing the suffering of the black parents Magona has countered this claim of "other-ness," revealing it to be a misconception fostered by racist laws and attitudes.

The outrage which Nina's murder caused is contrasted strongly with the lack of public reaction to Phumla's death:

Today, no one knows the name of the little girl found in a rubbish drum at the back of the butcher's shop. They don't know it today, for they never knew it then.

Even the few who remember the sad tale often wonder what her name was. Since the story never made the news, most never knew her name. They only remember how her knees had to be sawed to fit her into a coffin. (153)

The "they" and "few" referred to in this passage are the white people who have some vague recollection of the incident for, Magona makes it quite clear, many people in Guguletu still remember the murders, "They remember the sorrow. The grief of mothers. The murder of innocent little girls. . . . They remember the horror. And, to this day they still wonder, how they found themselves foremost among suspects. Great sorrow. And burning anger" (154). Magona questions the justice of a system of law which indiscriminately points an accusing finger at those people who are different from the (white) norm. The anger which the people of Guguletu experience originates both in the injustice of their by virtue of their skin colour being automatically regarded as suspects in the murder of Nina van Niekerk, and also in the relative obscurity, the public indifference, which surrounded the horrific murder of Phumla Dyantyi, ignored by the white public whose focus was only on the death of their own.

"Now that the pass has gone" is the final story in this section of *Living*. It expresses two distinct feelings: an optimism regarding the future of South Africa as well as a sober reminder of the pain and oppression which black South Africans have been subject to in the past. The story is set in 1987 after the pass laws were rescinded, a fact which causes the narrator and her companions to be filled with jubilation. She describes the mood of her people, "Hopes were high. Black people were ecstatic. With the pass gone, they reasoned, could *uhuru* be far behind? And abroad, from black and from white. We all wore glee like a banner; relieved from the scourge of the pass" (156).

The one person who does not share their happiness is the narrator's mother whose perspective extends beyond the present moment in which the younger people are immersed. In an effort to explain the reasons for her pessimism the mother relates the story of China, a young man whom she had once encountered when returning from a visit to her brother's family. China was being forced to live in poverty, scrounging a living from returnable cans, bottles and the goodwill of passers-by from which he attempted to support his wife and family. He had resorted to this because his pass only permitted him to look for work in an area where there were few opportunities and the resulting competition fierce. His comment to the narrator's mother mirrored the hopelessness which he felt, " 'That is what the pass did to us. It fenced us in. We could only graze here and not over there. And here, where we were fenced in, where our best chance was, there was nothing. A big fat nothing. Only starvation' " (163). The telling of this story confronts the narrator and her friends with a harsh reminder of many other "stories about the hardship, the hurts, and the humiliation the pass has inflicted on the African people. . . . I have not escaped the ravages of the pass. None of us have escaped. The pass is in our very souls" (168). The legacy of such Apartheid legislation will linger for many years,

haunting the lives of black South Africans and complicating the processes of change and reconciliation.

Nevertheless, the narrator is determined not to yield to a pessimistic contemplation of the past and instead finds consolation in the resilience which her people have displayed in the face of all odds. Magona's authorial voice emerges strongly in the concluding paragraph as the narrator speculates:

Yet, the millions of Chinas: children, men, women - in their millions, bonsaid . . . by the pass - have they not survived? Just by being alive, being here to tell the tale, have they not triumphed? Now that the pass has gone, deep down will the roots go; and the tree shall burst the sweetest of fruit amidst blazing flower. Surely, now that the pass has gone . . . surely, the starved and shrivelled roots will swell and spread and throb, shooting branches far and wide. Surely, the time is now, now that the pass has gone. (*Living* 168).

In 1992 in her review of *Living* Asha Moodley suggested that the "questions" which Magona poses in this concluding passage echo rather ironically (12), a sentiment which other critics might well have endorsed at the time. However, writing this section of my thesis in 1995, I am inclined to be more generous and to permit myself to share in some of the optimism which Magona expresses in the image of growth and development which encapsulates her hopes regarding the future of South Africa.

CHAPTER FIVE:

The Short Stories of Zoë Wicomb

Introduction

Many of the biographical details available on Zoë Wicomb are deliberately paralleled by those of her central character, Frieda Shenton, in You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town, which Wicomb has described as a deliberate flirtation with autobiography (Hunter & MacKenzie 93). Wicomb was born in 1948 in a remote Griqua settlement in the Western Cape, near the small towns of Vredendal and Van Rhynsdorp, where the men made a living by working on the nearby gypsum mine or on white farms and the women worked in the towns as domestic servants (Hunter & MacKenzie 81). Wicomb's father was the teacher at the local school and he encouraged her from an early age to use education as a means of escaping the racial oppression which characterised their world (Hunter & MacKenzie 89). In particular, her parents identified English as essential to upward mobility and made a determined effort to speak it themselves and to teach their children. Wicomb recalls, "[W]hen I was about six we got a radio and my mother literally used to sit and listen to the news, and articulate after the newsreader. And so we were taught to speak English" (Hunter & MacKenzie 89).

After completing an Arts degree at the University of the Western Cape, Wicomb emigrated to England where she spent twenty years in voluntary exile, first studying English Literature at Reading University, then lecturing in English at Nottingham, and spending time as writer in residence in Glasgow and Strathclyde University. She returned to the University of Cape Town as a visiting lecturer in 1990, and a year later took up a lecturing post at the Department of English at the University of the Western Cape, specialising in feminist and cultural theory

and applied linguistics (Malan 210). At the end of 1994 Wicomb returned to Britain to be with her husband and daughter and to teach over there.

Wicomb's writing career can be loosely divided into two categories of work. The first of these is her fictional and creative writing which first appeared in 1987 as a book of connected short stories entitled You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town.¹³ She has subsequently had two short stories published: "Another Story" which appeared in the 1990 collection Colours of a New Day: Writing for South Africa, edited by Sarah Lefanu and Stephen Hayward, and "In the Botanic Gardens" included in 1991 in The End of a Regime? An Anthology: Scottish-South African Writing Against Apartheid, edited by Brian Filling and Susan Stuart. In addition to this, both in her personal capacity and as an editor of the Southern African Review of Books, Wicomb has written several insightful critical essays and reviews which show an appreciation and interrogation of the many ambiguities which exist in the discourses operating in South African society. In my opinion, one of the primary features which sets Wicomb apart from other South African black women writers is the way in which her critical insights and opinions are intertwined with her fiction, informing and complicating the narratives which are presented to the reader. It is useful to briefly look at a few of these concepts in order to more fully appreciate Wicomb's projects in her fictional writing.

She is concerned that people should appreciate the constructed nature of the discourses which inform their lives, particularly a notion like culture, and in her article entitled "Tracing the Path from National to Official Culture" she remarks that the reflectionist model of culture which many people still believe in has "been demolished by Raymond Williams, who points out that

¹³ Hereafter to be referred to as You Can't Get Lost.

culture 'is never a form in which people happen to be living, at some isolated moment, but a selection and organization, of past and present' " (242). The process of formulating a so-called national culture is fraught with difficulties, and Wicomb is able to find an example of the discrepancies which can occur when the events happening around her do not coincide with the rhetoric being expressed at a political and national level. She remarks rather ironically:

For instance: Albie Sachs announcing that gender equality will be enshrined in the constitution. At the same event, we are confronted with a band of fully dressed male musicians fronted by women in skimpy "traditional" dress with nothing to do but click their fingers and gyrate to the gaze of the audience. (243)

Her point is not to dismiss the significance of a notion like national culture which she recognises as a necessary construct to counter the divisions wrought in South African society by colonialism and Apartheid, but she seeks to alert the reader to the way in which the pluralism implicit in the two terms "nation" and "culture" becomes subtly transformed in the popular phrase "national culture" which erroneously suggests a monolithic and fixed concept of identity and culture that is supposedly shared by all members of a nation (244).

When attempting to formulate a literary or cultural theory for the South African situation the diversity and contradictions inherent in the discourses of society should be celebrated rather than attempting to impose a single hegemonic version. In her 1990 article, "To Hear the Variety of Discourses," Wicomb advocates that the point of departure for such a theory should be, "a conflictual model of society where a variety of discourses will always render problematic the demands of one in relation to others and where discursive formations admit of cracks and fissures that will not permit monolithic ideological constructs" (36). Wicomb translates this concept into her fiction where the strands of various discourses co-exist and are

played off against one another, deliberately revealing the ambivalences and contradictions which are often obscured in the work of other South African black women writers. In "An Author's Agenda" she is even more specific about conflict as a fundamental part of the literary process when she informs her audience, "An understanding of language as a site of struggle or as a conductor of ideology will empower us as both readers and writers" (16). Different discourses and even versions thereof are continually competing for legitimacy and supremacy in our society, a struggle which all should remain aware of

When speaking of her intellectual influences Wicomb refers to a range of writing which includes European, American and African literature. She remarks specifically on the encouragement she has found in reading the work of black American women writers, Toni Morrison in particular, and of South African literature she says, "I admire Gordimer, Coetzee and Ndebele but find almost all South African writing interesting: you can't separate yourself from the products of your culture even if you do write in reaction against certain things" (Hunter & MacKenzie 82). She emphasises that writing does not come easily to her, is something which she experiences as "not an entirely coherent process" (Hunter & MacKenzie 95). Part of her difficulty stems from the fact that, as she says, "I don't feel that I have any authority, an uncomfortable position for an author to be in! Obviously that's not quite true, but I feel as if I'm writing in the faintest of pencils, that I'm frightened, not quite in control" (Hunter & MacKenzie 84-85).

Various factors have contributed to the sense of inadequacy which Wicomb experiences with regard to writing. She recalls the time which she spent in England at university as having a paralysing effect on her:

I came to see writing as an embarrassing and presumptuous activity. The subtle British racism made me feel that it would be presumptuous of me to write and even to speak - what I had to say was of no interest to my teachers . . . so that I was thoroughly and successfully silenced by the English education system. It took a very long time, and immense effort, to find my voice. (Hunter & MacKenzie 83)

Race and gender are two further factors which Wicomb identifies as integral to her perceived lack of authority. She relates this sense to the South African situation in which she perceives matters of gender being denied legitimacy, suppressed by the national liberation struggle which is generally accorded primacy (Hunter & MacKenzie 90). Of her personal response she remarks ruefully: "In spite of being liberated by feminism, by black consciousness (although that's never a complete process), I still find that I spend a lot of time apologising and disclaiming which is very irritating, and yet I continue to do it" (Hunter & MacKenzie 88).

Wicomb displays her sense of uncertainty in the interview conducted by Eva Hunter when she condemns her own collection of short stories in rather harsh terms as "a weak, overwritten book" (Hunter & MacKenzie 84). She describes herself as baffled by the positive response which it has elicited in readers, finding the praise rather insulting, "[I]t felt like not being taken seriously. In the end it paralysed me so that writing now is even slower and more painful. I don't like You Can't Get Lost; I am appalled by the fact that my own critical faculties were not as sharp as they ought to have been" (Hunter & MacKenzie 84). When pressed by Hunter for more specific details of her unhappiness Wicomb seems to relent somewhat and qualifies her criticism, "A lot of my dissatisfaction is simply to do with the prose: I do think it's overwritten, I have a tendency to use a lot of adjectives - I can see there the basis of cleaner lines, simpler stories, simpler language" (Hunter & MacKenzie 92). Her tendency for

self-doubt and lack of self-assurance is, I believe, one of the factors which contributes to making You Can't Get Lost a significant addition to the writing by black South African women, for it is an intensely self-aware and self-reflexive work which explores and problematizes many different dimensions of the experiences of its principal character, Frieda Shenton.

In "An Author's Agenda" Wicomb touches on the issue of the writer's social responsibility which she prefers to conceptualise as an issue of "responsibility in the broadest sense, based on the belief that all signifying systems affect the ways in which we perceive the world" (13). A similar sense emerges in her interview with Eva Hunter when Wicomb shuns the notion of duty in her position as a writer in exile to remark instead on the sense of responsibility which she feels towards the people she portrays in her writing. She says, "The whole question of representation, the question of how you represent their language I think is a crucial one" (Hunter & MacKenzie 87). In her replies to Hunter's questions Wicomb also reveals a strong sense of herself as a woman writer and, more specifically, a black women writer who cannot simply embrace the term "feminist" without qualifying its white, heterosexual connotations to more accurately represent her position in society (Hunter & MacKenzie 90). Wicomb problematizes the issue of her intended audience when, on the one hand, those who she writes about are largely illiterate and, on the other hand, she lacks the confidence of a writer like Toni Cade Bambara "who talks about her writing as crucial cultural maintenance" (Hunter & MacKenzie 86). She realises that as she left South Africa so many years ago, "I couldn't possibly claim to write *for* this culture, but I am writing *out* of this culture. I certainly couldn't write out of a British culture where I'm an outsider" (Hunter & MacKenzie 86). Indeed, the time which Wicomb's heroine spends in Britain is marked by a silence in the corresponding

stories which Wicomb compares to her own life there of which she says, "I refuse to comment on it because my experience there was about being silent. I was certainly not going to give my heroine any voice in Britain" (Hunter & MacKenzie 87), for a moment ironically collapsing the distinction between herself as author and the character of Frieda Shenton, something for which she has berated many reviewers (Marais 42).

Wicomb finds herself highly frustrated by the way in which black women's writing is "always received as if it's autobiographical, almost as if we're incapable of artifice, incapable of fictionalising" (Hunter & MacKenzie 93). In her article "To Hear the Variety of Discourses" she remarks that this pigeon-holing of black women's texts not only occurs in South Africa but also "prevails in the white cultures of Europe and the USA: whether written in first or third person, we produce social documents that speak of our personal experiences and grievances and which therefore are primarily of social and anthropological value" (42). Consequently, part of her project in writing You Can't Get Lost is to deliberately flirt with the notion of autobiography. Many reviewers are lured into equating Wicomb with her heroine, Frieda Shenton, as in her narrative she draws extensively on her own experiences, the people and landscape with which she is familiar. Sue Marais makes the point that the ease with which Wicomb can be identified with Frieda Shenton can lead to the (erroneous) "assumption that the stories comprise a mimetic reflection rather than a narrativization based on, but at several removes from, the author's actual experiences" (37). Complacent notions of autobiography are repeatedly subverted and undermined in the text with perhaps the most dramatic example of this provided by Frieda's mother who is dead near the beginning and alive at the end of the collection.

Wicomb emphasises that she is not seeking to impose any kind of order or fixed meaning with her writing. She says:

[I]t's not what I'm after, precisely because there isn't order, there's conflict and that's not only in the South African situation. If I *am* grasping around for something fixed and orderly, the gaps *between* the stories at the same time undermine coherence. I think it's important to have chaos on the page, an alternative to the camouflage of coherence that socio-political structures are about. (Hunter & MacKenzie 92)

This comment provides an interesting point of entry to a discussion of You Can't Get Lost, an exploration of the "chaos on the page" which Wicomb has attempted to create.

You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town: "Chaos on the Page"

Zoë Wicomb's collection of connected short stories is an example of a "short fiction cycle," a form of writing which is situated somewhere between the disconnectedness of a collection of autonomous short stories and the coherence of the novel proper (Marais 29). It is interesting that the dualism and ambivalence which is inherent in this form can cause some confusion when attempts are made to categorise it. In the course of an interview with Wicomb Eva Hunter refers to the collection first as "a series of pieces rendered novel-like" (Hunter & MacKenzie 80), and at a later point as Wicomb's "first novel" (93). In her paper "Getting Lost in Cape Town: Spatial and Temporal Dislocation in the South African Short Fiction Cycle," to which I am greatly indebted, Sue Marais speaks of the way in which the essentially hybrid character of the short fiction cycle makes it "a form especially apposite to the South African context, where the conflict between community, solidarity and national unity, on the one hand, and dissociation, segregation and 'apartheid,' on the other, is notorious" (29).

Until fairly recently this genre has been characterised by two contrasting directions in South African literature. On the one hand, in the hands of a writer like Miriam Tlali, this form has sought to "assert the bonds of affinity and to depict unified subjects defined in and by their communities *despite* the pernicious effects of the segregational and deracimative policies of the State" (Marais 31). The second response, often associated with so-called white writing, has been completely the opposite, "emphasising the divisions between and within communities, and the concomitant sense of personal culpability, of dislocation, and of psychic fragmentation in individual consciousnesses" (Marais 31). I would support Marais's suggestion that a new strand is developing within this genre, as evinced in works like Ivan Vladislavic's Missing Persons and Zoë Wicomb's You Can't Get Lost, which "constitutes a far more fundamental literary examination and transgression of notions of 'community' and 'identity' - or the lack thereof - in South Africa than has previously been the case" (32).

Several reviewers have referred to You Can't Get Lost in terms which omit any reference to this highly complex project of Wicomb's. Most culpable, in my opinion, is the article by Carol Sicherman which often attempts to read Wicomb's work in terms of political correctness and effectiveness, developing such theses as, "As Frieda grows older, the stories include explicit references to politics" (112). The error of her approach is, for me, epitomised in her remark, "[Wicomb's] fiction aims at what Ndebele has called 'the rediscovery of the ordinary' " (111). Although Sicherman qualifies this statement by referring to the " 'growth of consciousness' " (112), which is the aim of such a project her approach does at times suggest something of a misinterpretation of Wicomb's objectives. Sicherman places emphasis on examining "Frieda's story more broadly as a depiction of the formation of South African 'Coloured' identity, which means looking as well at obstacles to forming Coloured' identity" (113), which is undoubtedly

an important aspect of You Can't Get Lost. Many sources pose this as the work's primary concern. The back cover of the book talks of a "superb portrayal of a woman coming to terms with her rejected racial inheritance . . . the stories intertwine as incidents recalled build up to give shape to Frieda's identity." In addition, the introduction to Wicomb's interview describes Frieda Shenton as the focal character, "whose intellectual and emotional education the work traces" (Hunter & MacKenzie 80). In her review of You Can't Get Lost Annemarie van Niekerk attempts to situate Wicomb within a tradition of black women's writing in South Africa when she remarks:

Even though the historical documentary nature of, for example, Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali and Ellen Kuzwayo's writing is not characteristic of Wicomb's work, her narratives are shaped by the relationships and experiences within a specific spatio-temporal moment which reflects on prominent incidents in South African history. (94)

She follows this up with the curious comment: "However, her skilful creative transformation of this material should prevent critics from marginalizing it as mere historical or cultural documentation" (94), which unintentionally provides a glimpse of the all too frequent fate of black women's writing in South Africa.

There are only a few critics who seem to voice the opinion, with which I am in total agreement, that You Can't Get Lost presents a new and exciting phenomenon in the field of South African black women's writing. In her article "Reading, Gender and Nation: Epistemologies in South African Women's Writing," Sarah Nuttall expresses her conviction that, "Wicomb's writing is positioned very differently to almost all other black South African's women's writing . . . [She] exposes, and plays with, dominant tropes in black women's writing"

(11). Nuttall, whose primary concern is with the concept of reading in South African texts and society, goes on to remark, "Wicomb is engaged in a highly literary project, and, not surprisingly, 'reading' is frequently figured in her work. Many texts too - largely **European** - are encoded or embedded in Wicomb's, and her work could be said to be in dialogue with these" (11). The **intertextuality** of Wicomb's writing is an important aspect of You Can't Get Lost, which amongst other things self-consciously foregrounds its own status as discourse or story thereby emphasising "the fictiveness of *all* visions/versions of South African reality/identity," and "including within itself a reflexive commentary on the conventions and politics of both representation *and* interpretation" (Marais 33). Marais goes on to speak of the radical and transgressive nature of the short fiction cycles like Vladislavic's or Wicomb's which:

not only set out to expose the fictionality of the grand myth of apartheid as a "master narrative," but also self-consciously meditate on their *own* (re-)presentations of South African reality as discursive constructs. They therefore both install *and* contest, in typically postmodernist fashion, the narrative conventions of continuity and coherence in order to project the contemporary situation in South Africa as a state not only of political and existential but also of aesthetic breakdown, similar though not identical to the postmodern crisis. (32)

In examining the validity of this statement I wish to start off with a brief discussion of the ways in which Wicomb *installs* a sense of continuity and coherence across the stories in You Can't Get Lost. The most obvious device employed by Wicomb is the existence throughout of the character of Frieda Shenton, who has been variously described as "the heroine", "the central character", "the **focal** character" or, the term which Marais, drawing on narratology, employs - ie "narrator-focalizer" (33). Her presence in all of the stories seems to provide the reader with a fairly consistent and reliable perspective on events, places and people. She is not

the only character to recur in the course of the narrative. Frieda's father and mother appear or are referred to frequently, as do members of the extensive number of uncles and aunts which comprise Frieda's family. Other characters such as Frieda's close university friend, Moira, or the local doctor, Dr van Zyl, are also present or mentioned in more than one story thereby creating a sense of continuity in the collection. This is supported by the time sequence of the stories which apart from a few flashbacks run chronologically, starting with Frieda's childhood, moving on to her days at school and as a university student and ending with her visits to South Africa away from her home in England (Marais 34). Marais also points out that this temporal sequence of "home-Cape Town-exile" is matched in spatial terms by the three major settings employed in You Can't Get Lost - Namaqualand, Cape Town, and an unnamed area in England (34), although I would caution that the relationship is not merely one of simple correspondence. The structural cohesion which such devices seem to provide "creates the impression of a continuous narrative and of a secure identity and place, an impression apparently reinforced by the title of the collection" (Marais 34). However, as subsequent discussion will show, the text itself belies this notion as it is characterised by a repeated sense of alienation, disruption and dislocation which transgresses and subverts any attempts at simple or complacent interpretation.

It is possible to see the epigraphs which precede the stories in You Can't Get Lost as encapsulating many of the themes and concerns of individual stories as well as the narrative as a whole. For example, the extract from The Mill on the Floss by George Eliot which starts, "In writing the history of unfashionable families one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society . . .", contains a pointer to the collection's emphasis on the social value of English (Marais 42), as well as an ironic reference to one

aspect of Wicomb's project. According to some perspectives, in writing about Frieda Shenton and her family Wicomb is writing "the history of unfashionable families," and she deliberately exposes and plays with notions of "good" or "genteel" society. In the opening story of the collection, "Bowl Like Hole," the title itself is a reference to language with the so-called "correct" usage or pronunciation of English words seen as essential to upward mobility. In support of this notion Marais identifies "Language - and English, specifically - [as] the real source of tension between Frieda and her mother" (39). Not only does she remonstrate with her daughter, " 'I've warned you not to speak Afrikaans to the children. They ought to understand English and it won't hurt them to try. Your father and I managed and we all have to put up with things we don't understand' " (You Can't Get Lost 4), but she also turns on her at the end of the story, venting her frustration at what she perceives as her own short-coming when her husband has told her:

'Mr Weedon said that the mine was like a bowl in the earth. Bowl like hole, not bowl like howl. Do you think that's right?'

She frowned. She had been so sure. She said, 'Of course, he's English, he ought to know.'

Then, unexpectedly, interrupting Father as he gave details of the visit, she turned on me. 'And don't you think you'll get away with it, sitting under the table like a tame Griqua.' (9)

Mr Weedon is described in reverent terms by Mrs Shenton as " 'A gentleman, a true Englishman' " (2), " 'A true gentleman' " (3) and, " 'a civilised man' " (4). She compares his habits and mannerisms with those of the local farmers, concluding, " 'these Boers could learn a few things from him' " (3). However, Wicomb deliberately undermines these notions of

genteel manners in allowing her characters to misinterpret the various status symbols which characterise Mr Weedon. For example, the significance of Weedon's wife wintering in the Bahamas is lost on Mr Shenton who "tutted sympathetically. He would hate to spend several days away from home, let alone months" (3), and having a chauffeur is interpreted in terms of the "modesty of the man who preferred to sit alone in the back seat of his own car" (6), rather than as a sign of wealth or arrogance. Wicomb's characters remain oblivious to their misguided interpretations, while the reader is alerted to their misapprehensions. The irony of the situation is compounded by the parallels inherent in the gift which Frieda's father brings her, "[He] handed me a lump of gypsum which I turned about in the sun until its crystal peaks shimmered like a thousand stars in the dead stone" (9), which echoes Mr Weedon's own actions, "[He] turned a lump of jagged gypsum in the sun so that its crystal peaks shimmered like a thousand stars in the dead stone" (7), and his expressed desire to give the gypsum to his daughter, who he says, " 'just loves the simple things in life' " (7).

"Jan Klinkies" is the title of the second story and the name of Mr Shenton's mad cousin who began to act extremely strangely following the loss of his land under the Group Areas Act, in particular collecting "A wondrous variety of cans" (16), which he piles up in his garden and ties up in a tree. Although no explanation is provided in the text for his actions I would venture that he has taken to collecting tin cans precisely because they represent something which no one would try to take away from him. His family console themselves by recalling clichés like "Blood is thicker than water" (12), and do their duty by visiting him according to a roster so that Mr Shenton's turn comes around twice a year. Jan's only "coherent" expression in the course of the story is, " 'Whatcomfortsaboerispoisontome' " (17), which he repeats five times in rapid succession thereby revealing the consternation which the loss of his land has

aroused in him. In addition, he now refuses to drink coffee, commonly referred to as "Boeretroos" (17), and has also "given up Rooibos tea with its illustration of an ox wagon scaling the Drakensberg" (17), for it reminds him of those who are responsible for the Apartheid legislation which resulted in the loss of his land. Jan Klinkies seems to have taken refuge in madness to escape the oppressive system which had regulated his life. I would suggest that the eccentric oblivion which he appears to have attained is more honest than the behaviour of his family who attempt to ignore the system of Apartheid and fail to acknowledge the impact it has on their lives. Frieda does not simply dismiss Jan Klinkies as the other members of her family do. Instead, she attempts to attribute to him an inner life, suggesting that there is meaning in his actions. When confronted with a huge pile of empty, rusting tin cans she muses, "I suspected that careful aesthetic considerations had been at play. The cans so callously shoved aside might have been placed one by one, interrupted by the stepping back to appraise from a distance and perhaps replace or reposition" (16).

In this story, and others, Wicomb confronts the issue of "racism" within the Coloured community in which people are often evaluated and placed in a hierarchy according to the lightness of their skin and the texture and straightness of their hair. For example, in "Home Sweet Home" the "pale skin and smooth wavy hair" of Frieda's Aunt Nettie are described as the "attributes that lifted her out of the madam's kitchen" and "won her a teacher for a husband" (102). In "Jan Klinkies" the Shenton family harbour reservations about Jan's wife, Truida, who has now left him. They claim that she had made a good marriage, while Jan had married beneath him: "Truida, in spite of her light skin, came from a dark-complexioned family and there was certainly something nylonish about her hair. . . . There was no doubt that the little hairs in the nape of her neck were rolled up tightly like fronds unfurled by the

cautious hot comb" (14). In illuminating such issues as well as the gossip which can surround them Wicomb draws attention to the potentially destructive nature of such behaviour, ultimately representing a hypocritical and futile attempt to deny their Coloured identity in favour of a white ideal.

In many subtle ways aspects of the story entitled "When The Train Comes" prefigure the events of Frieda Shenton's life depicted in subsequent stories, thereby illustrating Wicomb's interest in the various levels at which different narratives interact (Marais 34). Firstly, this story describes several of Frieda's experiences of parting from her family, particularly her father, and her friends, Sarie, and at an earlier point in her life, Jos. Furthering her education has been the principle reason for these separations which are later echoed in Frieda's decision, articulated in "Home Sweet Home," to leave South Africa in order to pursue her studies at a university in England. Two other events in this story are subsequently realised elsewhere in the collection. Sarie consoles Frieda who is going away to the private white school, St Mary's, with the thought that she "might meet white boys" (33), and she fantasizes in Cinderella-like fashion about "the eyes of Anglican boys, remote princes leaning from their carriages, [which] penetrate the pumpkin-yellow of my flesh" (33). Ironically Michael, who is Frieda's boyfriend in "You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town," is a white "steady young man" (66) whose penetrations of Frieda's flesh have resulted in her falling pregnant. The oath which Frieda swore with her childhood friends, "that we would never have babies" (28), finds a macabre echo in the decision which she takes to terminate her pregnancy and the backstreet abortion which she has in "You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town" (Marais 34).

In "When The Train Comes" the reader is first given the impression that Frieda's mother is

deceased when her father makes an awkward attempt to explain menstruation to her, " ' . . . always be prepared . . . it does not always come on time. Your mother was never regular . . . the ways of the Lord . . . ' " (22). This story also reveals the young Frieda Shenton's discomfort and misery at being fat, an affliction which she repeatedly refers to, on two occasions stating that this condition has the power to make her cry. One of the reasons for her overweight state seems to be that her interaction with her father who, she says, "knows nothing of young people" (22), is particularly awkward and all that he can offer her in the way of comfort is food. The very first time she was upset about going away on the train he stopped Frieda's tears when he "slipped a bag of raisins into [her] hand" (24), and on this occasion she says, "Pa takes a stick of biltong out of his pocket and the brine in my eyes retreats" (24). Frieda shows her awareness of the metaphorical role which food plays in their relationship with her comment, "I eat everything he offers" (24). Carol Sicherman interprets this fattening of his daughter by Mr Shenton as an attempt to obliterate her gender to which she adds: By making her 'not the kind of girl whom boys look at' (You Can't Get Lost 21), he frees her from the prison of her gender" (113). However, I can find little evidence to support this notion. On the contrary Frieda is intensely self-conscious of her appearance and shrinks under the gaze of two Coloured youths on the station platform.

She even interprets the disdain and scorn expressed by the Coloured boy who speaks to her in terms of her appearance, "The boy's voice is angry and I wonder what aspect of my dress offends him" (33). His anger stems from her imminent departure to the exclusive St Mary's which he perceives as a betrayal of the Coloured community and he attempts to unsettle her by saying, " 'There are people who bury dynamite between the rails and watch whole carriages of white people shoot into the air' " (34). What ultimately gives Frieda the courage and will-

power to board the train can be found, I think, in a parallel which is drawn between Jos, Frieda's childhood friend who only attended school until she was nine, and the domestic servant Frieda observes carrying her madam's bags on the white platform. Of Jos we are told at one point, "Then she slipped her hand under a doekie of dyed flourbags and scratched her head. Her ear peeped out, a faded yellow-brown yearning for the sun" (28). This is echoed in Frieda's later description of the maid who "slips a hand under the edge of her white cap to scratch. Briefly she tugs at the tip of her yellow-brown earlobe" (35). Frieda experiences a tight feeling in her chest and turns to look the other way as she is visibly reminded of the possible consequences of not getting on the train and seeking to further her education. It is a rather childish retort, but she nevertheless has the final word when she turns to the mocking Coloured boy and remarks disdainfully before boarding the train:

Why you look and kyk gelyk,

Am I miskien of gold gemake? (35)

"A Clearing In The Bush" contains two switching perspectives, that of Tamieta, a Coloured woman who is in charge of the cafeteria and Frieda Shenton who is now attending the "new Coloured university" (46), which is presumably the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The story takes place the day after the assassination of the Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd which occurred on the 6th of September 1966, and as such it is one of the few stories in You Can't Get Lost anchored in history by the provision of a direct reference to an historical event. However, Wicomb continues to blur the line between fiction and reality for she describes Verwoerd as sustaining a "fatal shot" (39), when he was actually stabbed to death by a parliamentary messenger (Kenny 265). The title of this fourth story in the collection could be interpreted as simply a reference to the location of UWC which Frieda describes as being

located within "a fringe of respectably tall Port Jackson and bluegum trees that marks the clearing of university buildings from the surrounding bush. These raggle-taggle sentinels stand to tin-soldierly attention and behind them the bush stretches for miles across the Cape Flats" (41). However, it is also a title which invites other explanations as evinced by Carol Sicherman's interpretation that "'bush' seems to suggest . . . the savagery of apartheid, and the 'clearing' implies an intellectual response to it: a space for thought. Frieda's African 'bush,' her hair, suggests that those deemed savages by the Europeans are beginning to assert their own aesthetic and political criteria" (115). I would question the validity of this remark in the light of two principle factors. Wicomb casts doubt on the notion that "those deemed savages" have opened up their own space with the founding of the university. One of the lecturers refers to Verwoerd as having been "the architect of this place" (43). It is ironic that this remark is interpreted literally by Charlie, Tamieta's assistant in the kitchen, when it is obviously a reference to Verwoerd's separate development policy. His priorities regarding tertiary education resulted in the racial segregation of South Africa's universities, the formation of UWC and three other "ethnic university colleges" under the "Extension of University Education Bill" which was enacted in June 1959 (Kenny 166). There is also the rather negative portrayal of the quality of education which the Coloured students are receiving, particularly if Retief, Frieda's English lecturer, is representative of the calibre of the staff employed there.

Frieda is struggling to complete an overdue essay on the novel Tess of the D'Urbervilles. She disagrees with the interpretation of the novel which Retief has given the students, but is unable to formulate an alternative so that she is ultimately forced to abandon her attempt to understand "the morality of the novel" and simply "earn a mark qualifying for the examination"

by giving Retief "what he wants, a reworking of his notes " (55). As she sits in the cafeteria writing her essay she registers as one of the background noises "the amicable hum of Tamieta and Charlie" working in the kitchen (48-49). However, in reality their conversation tends to be far from friendly. Of interest is their discussion of the annual phenomenon of the Coon Carnival. Tamieta speaks of this event in very negative terms, " 'Sies . . . I don't know how you Slamse can put yourself on show like that for the white people to laugh at on New Year's Day' " (47). By contrast Charlie focuses on the subversive potential of the occasion, the opportunities which it provides for the normal rules of interaction between Coloureds and whites to be broken, particularly when " 'we get all the whities and rub the black polish over their faces' " (48). His descriptions of this event carry echoes of aspects of the notion of carnival as expressed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his commentary on Rabelais. Bakhtin describes the carnival in these terms:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (10)

Many critics have expressed reservations concerning the notion of carnival as a truly subversive occasion. Amongst these, the paradoxical disempowerment and containment of resistance by allowing it a controlled environment in which it can be expressed and exhausted, needs to be remembered. However, in the dark years of Apartheid the Coon Carnival, an occasion which still occurs annually, provided a welcome opportunity for its participants to indulge in behaviour which disregarded the laws and conventions which normally governed the interaction of black and white, a prospect which Charlie looks forward to with wicked

enthusiasm.

Another issue which "A Clearing In The Bush" focuses on is the gendered division of Coloured society which becomes obvious in the students' planning of their boycott of the university's memorial service for Verwoerd: "The boys drift instinctively to the back to join the dark bank of murmuring males while the girls settle with their coffees at separate tables" (51). These gender roles can also be observed in other aspects of the story. Frieda and her friend Moira feel constrained by the length of their skirts, "In the seated position these shrinking hemlines assert a dubious freedom" (52), which contrasts with the bodily freedom exhibited by their friend James who quite naturally "turns the chair around and sits astride it, spreading his legs freely" (53). The two girls are only allowed access to the details of the males' discussion regarding the boycott when James permits them, a power which he consciously enjoys wielding over them. Frieda remarks with frustration, "It is clear that he will nurse the apple of knowledge in his lap, polish its red curve abstractedly until we drool with anticipation. Only then will he offer us little lady-like bites, anxious for the seemingly mastication of the fruit and discreet about his power to withdraw it altogether" (53). At a further level of exclusion is Tamieta who is not even told of the Coloured boycott of the memorial service and consequently finds herself the only Coloured person there apart from a few Theology students who have chosen to defy the student boycott. However, her attendance at the ceremony has nothing to do with mourning Verwoerd and she allows her mind to wander as she waits for time to pass before venturing from the university, "chin up into the bush" (61), as she makes her way home.

The comfort inherent in the reassuring title of the collection, You Can't Get Lost in Cape

Town, is paradoxically and deliberately betrayed by the dominant mood or tone of the title story, which, says Sue Marais, "describes the emotional and physical severances which ultimately precipitate Frieda's decision to leave for England, that is, to cut the umbilical cord of country and kin" (35). "You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town" depicts the increasingly strained relationship between Frieda and her white boyfriend, Michael, primarily as a result of her pregnancy and her decision which she translates into action in the course of the narrative to have an abortion. It seems to me that Carol Sicherman's characterisation of their relationship in terms of Frieda's "capacity for social and political rebellion" (116), and her assumption that the abortion with which Frieda and Michael's association ends "presumably symbolizes the impossibility of crossing the color line" (116), represents a somewhat contrived and politically self-conscious interpretation which overlooks the intricacies of Wicomb's project.

Frieda must journey by bus to meet Michael who will drive her to the home of the backstreet abortionist. He counters her anxieties about getting lost en route with what Sue Marais has described as a "seemingly reassuring but ultimately callous comment" (34), which displays no real understanding of Frieda's fears or disorientation: " 'You can't get lost in Cape Town. There', and he pointed over his shoulder, 'is Table Mountain and there is Devil's Peak and there Lion's Head, so how in heaven's name could you get lost?' " (73-74). The impatience which he displays serves as another reminder to Frieda that their relationship is collapsing and as she recalls the happier times they have spent together she remarks, "I hold, hold these pictures I have summoned. I will not recognise them for much longer" (77). When Frieda refers to herself as "lost, hopelessly lost" (67), or later remarks "I ought to know where I am" (73), she is not only alluding to her inability to recognise any landmarks but also her increasing

sense of isolation and alienation from the familiar things which surround her.

At one point in the narrative of "You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town" Frieda thinks to herself: "Desire is a Tsafendas tapeworm in my belly that cannot be satisfied . . . Will I stop at one death?" (77). This is a reference back to Verwoerd's assassin, one Demetrio Tsafendas who in explanation for his attack on Verwoerd blamed a giant tapeworm in his body which tormented him and made him act as he did (Kenny 266). The positioning of this reference together with the question which follows it is used by Wicomb, suggests Sue Marais, to "explicitly link Frieda's destruction of her unborn child to an event of grave historic and political significance, a fusion of the private and public realms which neatly epitomises the South African psychosis with regard to culpability" (39). The question also brings to mind the other "deaths" which Frieda under the "direction" of Wicomb is responsible for, her mother "excluded" from the early stories and her father from the last (Marais 40).

The way in which Frieda's abortion is described is rather interesting since it employs images which work to counter the happy endings of the fairy-tale plots which she had imagined for herself in an earlier story like "When The Train Comes" (Marais 34). She describes herself as "Deflowered by yellow hands wielding a catheter" (80), and the woman who performs the abortion is pictured as her "grotesque bridegroom with yellow teeth" (80). The "kiss of complicity" (80) which the woman plants on Frieda's cheek repels her yet she confronts the question, "have I the right to be fastidious? I cannot deny feeling grateful" (80). This kiss is just one of the references within the story which directly or indirectly recall biblical imagery, suggesting the kiss with which Jesus was betrayed by Judas to the Roman authorities. Frieda's purse containing the money to pay for the abortion, "A man's leather purse. . . . It is small,

U-shaped and devoid of ornament, therefore a man's purse" (65), compares with that owned by Judas, "a concealed leather purse, a pouch devoid of ornament" (72) in which the money earned by his betrayal of Jesus jingles. A further example can be found in Frieda's response to the white woman's question, " 'You're not Coloured, are you?' . . . I say 'No', and wait for all the cockerels in Cape Town to crow simultaneously" (78-79), the denial of her identity as a Coloured akin to the disciple Peter's denial of Jesus three times before the cock crowed. Only the woman's Coloured servant is not fooled by Frieda's answer and she is filled with an admiration which encompasses Frieda's boldness in telling the lie itself as well as the success which she has in deluding the white woman.

The story also draws a parallel between what Frieda perceives as the inflexible and disapproving demeanour of God, her father and Michael, the "men" in her life. As Michael berates her for her decision to have an abortion Frieda thinks to herself, "God is not a good listener. Like Father, he expects obedience and withdraws peevishly if his demands are not met. Explanations of my point of view infuriate him so that he quivers with silent rage. For once I do not plead and capitulate; I find it quite easy to ignore these men" (75). By implication, Michael is also inserted into this passage for he is the man whom Frieda is currently in the process of ignoring. At one point she remarks "God will never forgive me" (67), and at the close of the story, after disposing of the expelled foetus in a street dustbin, she thinks "I do not know what has happened to God. He is fastidious. He fled at the moment that I smoothed the wet black hair before wrapping it up. I do not think he will come back" (81). Her feeling that God has deserted her contains the inference "that Michael, too, has absconded, since the meaning of his name ("who is like the Lord") associates him with God (Marais 35).

Frieda's reaction to her feelings of being lost and her sense of loss at various points in "You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town" is to instinctively "long for the veld of [her] childhood" (73). She finds reassurance in the thought that, "There the red sand rolls for miles, and if you stand on the koppie behind the house the landmarks blaze their permanence. . . . In the veld you can always find your way home" (73). However, the romanticism and fictitiousness of this sentiment is immediately revealed in the next story in the collection, "Home Sweet Home" (Marais 35). Frieda returns home to Namaqualand where members of her extended family have gathered for her farewell before she travels to England to further her studies there. She is repeatedly criticised by her family for her decision to leave South Africa, but she meets their censure with a silence that is partly induced by what she terms her "guilty secret: I will not come back. I will never live in this country again" (90), which she conceals from the family. In an attempt to escape their scrutiny she goes down to the river hoping to find some comforting familiarity in the landmarks of her youth. However, she finds the landscape virtually unrecognisable, transformed by a huge flood and is forced to acknowledge that her attempt to find oblivion from self-awareness and the disturbing knowledge of the ever-widening gulf between herself and her family has even been thwarted by the veld (Marais 36). She remarks with longing:

Did I not hope that my senses would quiver with receptivity, that all these sights and sounds would scratch about in the memory like hens in the straw until they found the perfect place to nest. Where in feather-warm familiarity I could be the child once more, young and genderless as I roamed these banks alone, belonging without question to this country, this world. (92-93)

Carol Sicherman interprets the new landscape which confronts Frieda in terms of "horror: the 'swirling' flood of nonwhite rage that will alter the South African political landscape beyond

recognition" (117), but I think that it is rather intended to be more symbolic of the increasing alienation which Frieda feels towards her country and, particularly, her family. At one point she poses the question, "Why do I find it so hard to speak to those who claim me as their own?" (94), to which various factors in the story suggest an answer.

When observing the interaction of Frieda's family it is possible to see how they comfortably inhabit a world from which "the harsh realities of apartheid, of dispossession and racial segregation, which have actually determined their existence" (Marais 36), have been excluded. This state of oblivion can be observed in the clichéd expressions which they constantly employ in "Home Sweet Home" and the other stories of the collection: "Blood is thicker than water" (12, 168); " 'There's no place like home' . . . 'home is where the heart is' . . . 'a woman's work is never done' " (99); " 'it never rains but pours . . . every cloud has a silver lining' " (169), the list is extensive. In addition, her family's love of stories, a repertoire which they regularly repeat and inhabit has come to replace the reality which surrounds them. Frieda comments on this phenomenon:

They cut their stories from the gigantic watermelon that cannot be finished by the family in one sitting. They savour as if for the first time the pip-studded slices of the bright fruit and read the possibilities of konfyt in the tasteless flesh beneath the green. Their stories, whole as the watermelon that grows out of this arid earth, have come to replace the world.

I would like to bring down my fist on that wholeness and watch the crack choose its wayward path across the melon, slowly exposing the icy pink of the slit. I would like to reveal myself now so that they will not await my return. But they will not like my stories, none of them, not even about the man in the train last night. (87-88)

Sue Marais argues that the oblivion of Frieda's family can be seen to arise from the way in which "they unquestioningly take language at its face value. . . . [They] are simply not aware and therefore not disconcerted by any perceived disjunction between word and object, fiction and reality: they are both politically and linguistically unconscious" (36). As a result of her education Frieda does not have this escape and she longs to shock her family into awareness, to smash their self-deception by revealing that their complacent "sense of continuity, appropriateness and completeness" (Marais 36), is nothing but a construct. Wicomb herself says, "In a sense I wanted to write about the kind of alienation that comes through education" (Hunter & MacKenzie 91), and it is indeed Frieda's education that "has led her to an awareness of the textuality of reality and of the fictionality of self as a unified sensibility, a coherent and autonomous subject" (Marais 36). She is particularly aware of the way in which language works to structure the world according to certain parameters largely beyond the control of the individual. Contrasted with her family's self-assured employment of language is Frieda's frustration: "The traffic of words is maddening. I am persecuted by a body of words that performs regardless of my wishes, making its own choices. Words will saunter in and vanish in a flash, refusing to be summoned or expelled" (98).

There are other examples in the text of the impact which Frieda's awareness has had on her perceptions. In contrast to her boyfriend Michael's smug appreciation of the immutable landmarks of Cape Town, expressed in "You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town," or her family who describe Cape Town proudly as, " 'The most beautiful city in the world you know, and the richest' " (86), Frieda is unimpressed by these outward attributes which work to disguise and conceal the harsh political realities of the city (Marais 35). She comments:

I do not give a fig for the postcard beauty of the bay and the majesty of the mountain,

the pretty white houses clinging to its slopes and the pines swaying to the Old Cape Doctor. A city of gleaming lavatories with the smell of disinfectant wafting from its pines. And the District Six I do not know and the bulldozers, impatient vultures, that hover about its stench. (86)

One of the problems inherent in Frieda's increasing alienation from her family and the country of her birth is highlighted in the words of her old Oom Dawid who remarks sharply, " You have to put your heart with someone. Now you don't want to know about Vorster and you don't care about the Queen and our Griqua chief isn't grand enough for you. It's leaders we need. You young people with the learning must come and lead us' " (95). At this point Frieda is so aware of the ambivalences and discontinuities inherent in her situation that she is unable either to believe in any of the institutions, familial or political, which are fundamental to her world, or to accept the responsibility of working to transform them.

At the close of the story Frieda ventures down to the river again and this time is confronted with the sight of a mule caught in a patch of quicksand which initially struggles wildly, but after a time "holding its head high, the animal remains quite still as it sinks" (103). Carol Sicherman describes this image as "a terrifying emblem of a people doomed by its inability to resist" (117), and goes on to propose that, "The dignified acquiescence of the mule as it dies suggests the attitude of Frieda's family; this is the imposed identity and fate that Frieda is escaping" (117). While I would agree with the general import of Sicherman's remarks, I feel that certain qualifications need to be introduced. The reader is given no evidence to support the notion that these people once resisted their situation and now have succumbed to the inevitable, which phrases like "inability to resist" and "dignified acquiescence" suggest. Rather, their state is presented as one of self-assured oblivion. It is Frieda who in the fate of

the mule sees an alarming image of her potential future if she does not flee the country: her critical faculties gradually blunted so that she loses the ability to identify and resist those discourses which attempt to structure her world and experiences, becoming submerged in them as the mule sinks within the quicksand.

Despite Frieda's conviction that she was leaving South Africa for good the next story in the collection, "Behind The Bougainvillea," is again set in this country which Frieda is visiting after almost eleven years of living in England. Her decision to return home was an abrupt one, made in the midst of a harsh English winter as she longed for the sunshine of Africa. Her time spent in England is largely marked by a silence in the text with the few brief references made characterising her experiences in rather negative terms. At one point she remarks, "Am I not here precisely because I am tired of being stared at by the English? Please God, I can bear no more scrutiny" (111-12), which suggests that she has not been able to blend unobtrusively into the English society, but has found herself an outsider, an object of curiosity. Her sense of alienation is underscored by her reply to a request to talk about England, " 'The telly will give you a better idea than I can. Mine will always be the view of a Martian' " (123).

On this visit home Frieda finds that interaction with her father remains awkward and they struggle to communicate, "like tourists in a market place" (109). In this story Wicomb again raises the question of education as an alienating force, particularly concentrating on the issue of literacy. In order to placate her father's concerns regarding her ill-health, the result of a bronchial infection, Frieda reluctantly goes to the local doctor. While waiting in his yard in the company of other black patients she finds herself too embarrassed to read the book which she has brought with her: "I settle on my haunches against the wall and open my bag for a book

but cannot bring myself to haul it up. Such a display of literacy would be indecent" (106). Her self-consciousness results from the people who surround her amongst whom the only evidence of "literature" is a photo-story which two girls share (110). By contrast, Frieda's reading material is evidence of her education, an English novel, unnamed in the text but in fact by William Golding (Nuttall 11).

It is interesting that Frieda is finally driven to open the book in an effort to avoid the scrutiny of a black man who enters the yard and stares unashamedly at her, "I burrow in my bag for a book and allow it to fall open. Under that gaze I cannot allow my hands to tremble while searching for the correct page" (111). In commenting on Frieda's haste and nervousness Sarah Nuttall makes the observation, "The book, as material object, now participates in a whole other, sexual and racial, discourse" (11). Instead of providing escape Frieda's predicament is worsened by the act of reading for the passage at which the book opens is a particularly racist one "in which Golding delineates the fine distinctions of a character's skin colour" (Nuttall 11). Frieda has the irrational fear that the paragraph has been reflected in the stranger's sunglasses and her reaction is to "flush with shame" and "put [her] arm across the print" (111), in an effort to conceal the words. A few minutes later she finds that this step is not enough and takes further action, "Guiltily I stuff the novel back into my bag and drop my head on to my knees" (112).

She attempts to take refuge in the past by recalling her childhood memories of rain which rinsed the sky and washed the earth as opposed to the incessant, miserable precipitation which she left behind in England. However, these recollections only bring her a temporary respite for they lead her to recall the fifth commandment to "Honour thy mother and thy father so that

thy days may be lengthened . . ." (113). However, she omits the concluding phrase ". . . in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Exodus 20: 12), and instead responds, "I do not, dear God, wish to lengthen my days" (113). At the most obvious level Frieda's omission and substituted response refers to her desire to escape the man's scrutiny. However, Sue Marais also points out that it could be interpreted as "an index of her desire to remain away from South Africa, the country which she hates (You Can't Get Lost 174) and which, because she is a member of the dispossessed majority, patently does *not* belong to her - or vice versa" (40).

As she observes the man Frieda suddenly recognises him as someone with whom she had exchanged secret love letters as a young girl. Secret, because her father had not approved of Henry Hendrikse, describing him as "almost pure kaffir" (116). By contrast, the Shenton family, "had an ancestor, an Englishman whose memory must be kept sacred, must not be defiled by associating with those beneath us. We were respectable Coloureds" (116). Frieda is highly embarrassed by her memories and attempts to leave the doctor's yard, but Henry intercepts her and they go to a nearby room where, after some desultory conversation, they end up having sex. She says, "I relax at his haste and correctly predict that it will not take long. My body registers a fleeting disappointment so that I have every reason to be pleased with the transaction" (123). The irony of this "transaction" between them emerges when Henry asks her about an old acquaintance of hers, Olga Simson, and Frieda recalls how she had betrayed Henry in the past by emphatically denying their relationship to Olga as he stood within earshot with the words, " 'don't be silly. Would I be writing to a native?' " (124). "I have always miscalculated the currency of sex" (124), she states ruefully, supposing him to have been after "revenge" for her erstwhile denial. However, Wicomb can be seen to complicate matters further, revealing the complex levels at which a discourse like sexuality can

operate. As subsequent revelations by her father show, Frieda might have been wrong again, for Henry is allegedly a government spy, who could have been using her to acquire information about the whereabouts of the politically active people that she used to associate with.

In "A Fair Exchange" Wicomb focuses her attention on the "transaction" of storytelling as the reader observes Frieda and Skitterboud engaged in an unspoken yet discernible process of give and take, a complicated exchange of her spectacles for his story. During her visit home Frieda initially seeks the old farm worker out in the hope of procuring dagga from him. However, after a while she finds that she no longer wishes to acquire the dagga, but is "content with the story" (137) that she slowly coaxes from him. One of the ways in which she persuades him to talk of his past is by allowing him to wear her prescription glasses which open up a new world in the familiar veld for him. He wants her to give him the glasses but initially she resists, telling him, " 'It's not that I don't want you to have them, they're just no good to you. It will damage your eyes wearing glasses not specially prescribed for you' " (139), to which he responds, " 'But I can see better with them' " (139). Her attempt at reasoning, " 'That's not the point' " (139), is met with Skitterboud's determined, " 'But it is precisely the point' " (140), a verbal sparring match which is characteristic of their exchanges. Finally, however, in a tacit acknowledgement of the effort it has taken Skitterboud to tell her his painful story she relents and tells him to keep the glasses which he triumphantly walks off wearing.

Although "A Fair Exchange" opens with the story of Skitterboud and his wife Meid who live with their three children on the farm of Baas Karel, the reader is made aware that it is actually Frieda who is telling their story which she has gleaned from her conversations with

Skitterboud. Wicomb explores the notion of the story as a construct, an assemblage of carefully selected pieces. Frieda remarks:

Skitterboud's story is yellow with age. It curls without question at the edges. Many years have passed since the events settled into a picture which then was torn in sadness and rage so that now reassembled the cracks remain all too clear. They soften a facial line here and pinch into meanness a gesture elsewhere. A few fragments are irretrievably lost. Or are they? If I pressed even further . . .

Such, however, is my excuse for having constructed this portrait: the original has long since ceased to exist for him; only here is the story given its coherence. I am after all responsible for reassembling the bits released over the days that I sought him out as he moved with the winter sun around the pondok. (136)

In this retelling of Skitterboud's story Frieda has selected fragments from his narration of events and has pieced them together to produce a version which suits her imagination and priorities. The explication of this conscious process, the foregrounding of this story as a fictional construct which draws on "the real" should, I feel, be interpreted as a reminder to the reader of Wicomb's own concerns in writing the stories of You Can't Get Lost, her careful montage self-consciously advertising its status as fiction.

The intertextuality of Wicomb's writing and the discursive nature of the collection as a whole is particularly evident in the short story "Ash On My Sleeve" (Marais 38). This title is drawn from a line in Arthur Nortje's poem "Waiting," and also features in the first epigraph to You Can't Get Lost which contains two short extracts from the poem and can be seen to encapsulate many of the thematic concerns of the text as a whole (Marais 38). The second epigraph is also drawn from one of Nortje's poems, entitled "Immigrant" which follows

directly after "Waiting" in Nortje's Dead Roots: Poems, a complete collection of his work which was published after his death. Nortje's biographical details in many ways resemble those of Frieda Shenton and Zoë Wicomb herself and, in a similar way, many images in the poem "Waiting" are deliberately mirrored by descriptions in the story which, says Sue Marais, highlights the "textual and, indeed, intertextual nature of subjectivity" (38).

The title of the poem is echoed in Frieda's first contact in twelve years with her university friend Moira who breaks off a telephone conversation to come and greet her, "' . . . I just had to be rude and say my friend's here, all the way from England, she's waiting . . . '" (146). The closing ellipsis occurs in the text thereby opening up the possibility of ambivalence. The implication is that Frieda will either get what she is waiting for, or that she is waiting in vain and fulfilment will continue to elude her. By the conclusion of the story it would appear that the latter option has been realised as Frieda lies awake in the children's room, "I lie in my nightdress on the chaste little bed and try to read. The words dance and my eyes sting under heavy lids. But I wait. . . . I wait" (162). Just as Nortje's desire for a re-connection in the poem was thwarted, "The amplitude of sentiment has brought me no nearer / to anything affectionate" (91), so Frieda finds her efforts to re-acquaint herself with Moira frustrated (Marais 38).

The fourth stanza of Nortje's poem reads:

You with your face of pain, your touch of gaiety,
with eyes that could distil me any instant
have passed into some diary, some dead journal
now that the computer, the mechanical notion

obliterates sincerities. (90)

These lines are almost directly evoked in Frieda's description of Moira (Marais 38), and are acted out by Frieda when she attempts to become re-acquainted with her friend by an exploration of her house, "I tug at things, peep, rummage through her kitchen, pick at this and that as if they were buttons to trigger off the mechanism of software that will gush out a neatly printed account of her life" (154). Sue Marais remarks on the irony that, having been included in the stories of You Can't Get Lost, Moira has in fact been narrativized and immortalized in something of a "diary, some dead journal" (42). Although moments of intimacy, characterised by mutual laughter, periodically create tentative connections between Frieda and Moira their relationship remains awkward. Aside from their laughter Frieda remarks, "our speech, like the short letters we exchanged, is awkward. We cannot tumble into the present while a decade gapes between us" (147). It is, however, not only the passage of time which separates these two, but also the distance of continents and Frieda's education: her "linguistic facility and her narrative skills . . . are the real source of the chasm which alienates her from others" (Marais 39).

I think that within the story itself Wicomb also plays with the notion of intertextuality and the intertwining of different media. Of particular interest here is the way in which Frieda recalls an old photograph of Moira, her face "lifted quizzically at the photographer" (150), with her own foot intruding in the bottom of the picture at the very moment when she *has* figuratively put her foot in it with her caustic remarks concerning domestic servants. She thinks to herself:

I wish I could fill the ensuing silence with something conciliatory, no something that will erase what I have said . . . I who in this strange house in a new Coloured suburb have just accused and criticised my hostess. She will have seen through the deception

of the first-person usage; she will shrink from the self-righteousness of my words and *lift her face quizzically* at my contempt. (150 emphasis added)

Moirira, however, does none of these things and to Frieda's bewilderment the moment passes without comment. This should not be taken to signify a lack of awareness on Moira's part. Rather, she reserves her insights for when her husband is absent for he seems to inhibit and criticise her ideas. In particular she offers a useful summary of the ambivalences inherent in the formation of a Coloured identity:

'Ag Frieda, but we're so new, don't we belong in estates like this? Coloureds haven't been around for that long, perhaps that's why we stray. Just think, in our teens we wanted to be white, now we want to be full-blooded Africans. We've never wanted to be ourselves and that's why we stray . . . across the continent, across the oceans and even here, right into the Tricameral Parliament, playing into their hands. Actually,' and she looks me straight in the eye, 'it suits me very well to live here.' (156)

This is the only point in the story at which Moira confronts Frieda directly, articulating the difficulties of not "belonging" to either white or black groupings in the country which has resulted in a corresponding lack of direction for her people, an uncertainty about their past and their future. Despite her denial Moira does, by implication, accuse Frieda of cowardice for straying from South Africa and the problems which face its Coloured population, although, ironically, the reader is aware that Frieda's experience in England has also been that of an outsider who is not accepted into any community.

The final story of You Can't Get Lost entitled "A Trip To The Gifberge" forms a fitting conclusion to the collection as a whole for it draws attention to several different aspects of Wicomb's project. Most obvious is its self-conscious foregrounding of the stories' status as

fiction epitomised in the re-appearance of Frieda's mother who plays a central role in this story. Despite the direct and indirect references to her demise which occur in the text (22, 24, 101, 109, 163, 172), "A Trip To The Gifberge" demonstrates that Frieda's mother is "in fact" alive, her death an invention of the narrator and/or author, while it is supposedly her father's death which has prompted this visit back to South Africa for Frieda (Marais 37). The significance inherent in the "resurrection" of the mother has provoked some other interesting commentary. Carol Sicherman describes Wicomb's twist in the narrative as not only an "attempt to prevent the book from being read as her own autobiography, but also to downplay the personal psychological element in her main character" (114). She continues this line of thought with her subsequent comment, "By removing the mother and retaining the anglophile father, Wicomb maintains her emphasis on Frieda's development as a South African who is a woman" (115). I think that this explanation has more to do with Sicherman's determination, which I have demonstrated at various points in the course of my discussion, to analyse You Can't Get Lost in terms of its supposed political conscience and correctness than with Wicomb's own agenda. Some insight is provided into her point of view when in an interview Wicomb herself describes the mother's reappearance as "a metaphor for returning: it's a homecoming, in both the physical and another sense" (Hunter & MacKenzie 91).

There are several similarities between Mrs Shenton and her daughter which could facilitate communication between them. For example, they can both be seen as outsiders to the Shenton family. Frieda journeys home having been told at the airport of her mother's curious behaviour at her father's funeral when she renounced her connections with the Shenton family saying, " 'He's dead now and I'm not your sister so I hope you Shentons will leave me alone' " (169). This has come as something of a shock to the family who had accepted Mrs Shenton

when their initial misgivings at the fact that she was " 'A Griqua girl' " (167), were countered by her attributes, " 'such nice English she spoke and good features and a nice figure also' " (167). Mrs Shenton has grown tired of being tolerated by what she scathingly regards as a family of " 'Boerjongens, all of them' " (165), and has never forgiven Frieda's Oupa Shenton who once " 'had the cheek to call [her] a Griqua meid' " (165). Initially, though, there is no acknowledgement of the qualities which they share and the reunion between Frieda and her mother is presented as a somewhat conflictual process characterised by constant bickering and arguing. One of the issues which they battle over is Frieda's use of the English language. Her parents went to great lengths to teach their daughter to speak English which they perceived as the key to her upliftment. However, in the process Frieda became alienated from her family and friends who were predominantly Afrikaans-speaking (Marais 39). Her mother now shows an acute awareness of the segregative potential of language and accuses Frieda of using her English as a weapon against her. At one point she remarks with great feeling: " 'My mother said it was a mistake when I brought you up to speak English. . . . Now you use the very language against me that I've stubbed my tongue on trying to teach you it. No respect! Use your English as a catapult!' " (171).

The topic of Frieda's stories which are to be published elicits a similar tirade from Mrs Shenton who counters her daughter's assertion that " 'they're only stories. Made up. Everyone knows it's not real, not the truth' " (172), with an extended speech which highlights certain features of the storytelling process:

'But you've used the real. If I can recognise places and people, so can others, and if you want to play around like that why don't you have the courage to tell the whole truth? Ask me for stories with neat endings and *you won't have to invent my death.*

What do you know about things, about people, this place where you were born? About your ancestors who roamed these hills? You left. Remember?' She drops her head and her voice is barely audible.

'To write from under your mother's skirts, to shout at the world that it's all right to kill God's unborn child! *You've killed me over and over so it was quite unnecessary to invent my death.* Do people ever do anything decent with their education?' (172 emphasis added)

Perhaps most important in this speech is the evidence of the mother's awareness that she has been purposefully omitted from Frieda's stories. This is not the only occasion on which Mrs Shenton draws attention to what Sue Marais has described as "her daughter's Electra complex and matricidal literary tendencies" (37), for at an earlier point in the narrative she has directed a similar rebuke at Frieda, " 'You've tried to kill me enough times' " (163). In "allowing" Mrs Shenton to comment on this phenomenon the stories self-consciously and deliberately engage in a process which interrogates not only the authority of their narrator, Frieda Shenton, but also by extension query the credentials of the author herself (Marais 38). In addition they problematise their status as supposedly (semi-)autobiographical record and raise the issue of "which or whose discourse (if any) is to be believed" (Marais 37).

Mrs Shenton's reaction of distaste and horror to her daughter's stories forms an ironic prefiguring of Wicomb's own family's response to the publication of You Can't Get Lost. She remarks that they seem to be embarrassed by the book, "presumably because they might recognise something of themselves and also because I write about abortion and sex in the first person. . . . There are unfavourable portraits which are drawn from members of my family and which they won't acknowledge" (Hunter & MacKenzie 83). Just as Wicomb's reviewers seem

to have difficulty in distinguishing between her writing and autobiography, so her family have been offended by the "real" details of their lives which Wicomb has incorporated in her fiction. She comments further, "Being petit-bourgeois, they are concerned with upward mobility and don't want to be reminded of an embarrassing past" (Hunter & MacKenzie 84), yet I would suspect that she derives a degree of pleasure from their discomfort.

The trip to the Gifberge which Frieda and her mother make together represents an important step in the rebuilding of their relationship. It is ironically the death of Mr Shenton which liberates his wife, allowing her to make a journey to the mountains which she has always dreamed of but which her husband had continually thwarted with a variety of excuses. In commenting on the significance of Mrs Shenton's trip to the Gifberge Wicomb describes it as something of "a metaphor for all sorts of things that she as a woman was barred from" (Hunter & MacKenzie 94), and later comments further, "In a sense I have to kill off the father, in order for her to speak. . . . the reason the mother doesn't have an influence [in the earlier stories] is because she is suppressed, she is silenced by the father. Perhaps her reported death in the early stories can be read as her suppression" (Hunter & MacKenzie 94-95).

Mrs Shenton has certainly regained her voice in this final story of the collection and has some valuable insights to offer her daughter. Of particular interest is the exchange between the two of them on the impact of cultural discourses on the "value" of certain objects. While Frieda interprets her personal identity and that of her people in terms of "linguistic and literary constructs" (Marais 37), which are always implicated in a wider web of meaning, her mother has an "apolitical" perspective which enables her to look beyond the impact of apartheid or white values on her life (Hunter & MacKenzie 91). This way of interpreting the world can be

applied to people, as when she is able to dismiss the condescending attitude of a white man like Mr Friedland with the words " 'those people have nothing to do with us. Nothing at all' " (176), but is particularly evident in her response to plants and the land. She expresses this viewpoint in the following terms to her daughter:

'You who're so clever ought to know that proteas belong to the veld. Only fools and cowards would hand them over to the Boers. Those who put their stamp on things may see in it their own histories and hopes. But a bush is a bush; it doesn't become what people think they inject into it.' (181)

Frieda is silenced by her mother's vision which provides an alternative way of perceiving the world around her. "[T]here is," says Wicomb, "something to learn from the so-called apolitical person as well, who experiences her country and her history in a different way" (Hunter & MacKenzie 92), a lesson which Frieda in her "renewed" contact with her mother has the opportunity to assimilate.

Wicomb says of Frieda, "it's only through moving away that she can come to accept her family" (Hunter & MacKenzie 91). Her sense of a personal and communal identity which develops over time and space is on one level possibly symbolised by the state of Frieda's hair in the course of the short stories. As a young girl she takes elaborate precautions to secure and straighten her hair (26). It is constantly being "tugged and stretched and taped" (93), in an effort to stem its tendency to curl and before travelling to England she wonders, "What will I do when it matts and shrinks in the English fog?" (93). In the final story of the collection Frieda's mother remarks disparagingly, " 'And your hair? What do you do with that bush?' " (178), to which Frieda replies, " 'Some perfectly sensible people . . . pay pounds to turn their sleek hair into precisely such a bushy tangle' " (178). The fact that she no longer makes any

attempt to straighten her hair could be read in terms of Frieda's acceptance and inhabitation of her Coloured identity.

However, You Can't Get Lost does not end with any neat and tidy explanations or summations. There is still an elaborately padlocked fence which prevents Frieda and her mother from getting a total view of the plains below from the top of the Gifberge (179), although Wicomb diminishes the significance of this barrier with her remark, "nevertheless there is also somehow a space that has been created *through her absence* in which she and her mother can see things together and at least talk about their differences. That is important: to recognise difference without valorising it" (Hunter & MacKenzie 91). Frieda and her mother may still be bickering, but they are succeeding in communicating thereby breaking the silence of an earlier story like "Home Sweet Home" in which Frieda consciously did not invite discussion with her family. Frieda is even able to voice the possibility of her returning to live in Cape Town to which her mother responds, "'Ag man, I'm too old to worry about you. But with something to do here at home perhaps you won't need to make up those terrible stories hey?' " (182), which as the closing words of the collection form "an ironic reflection on the volume's awareness and, indeed, embodiment of discursive options, its presentation of South African reality as a range of conflicting rather than monolithic stories, both personal and public" (Marais 41).

"Another Story": Reclaiming "History"

This short story is included in the volume entitled Colours of a New Day: Writing for South Africa which was published in 1990. Once again Wicomb's writing reflects an intertextuality which is designed to implicate the narrative in a number of different discourses. The Deborah

Kleinhans in Wicomb's story represents an allusion to Sarah Gertrude Millin's character of the same name in God's Step-Children, a novel which was first published in 1924 (Nuttall 11). Millin's novel traces the painful history of several generations of a family, her particular interest being the way in which the "flaw" of their black blood manifests itself in the life and personal traits of one member of each of the succeeding generations. Deborah Kleinhans was one of the first generation of mixed blood, the Coloured daughter of a white English missionary, the Reverend Andrew Flood, and his Hottentot wife, Silla. In his chapter on Millin in White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa, J.M. Coetzee argues convincingly that "Millin's ideas on race . . . are not a mere hotchpotch of colonial prejudices but an adaptation of respectable scientific and historical thought, only barely out of date at her time" (138). I would suggest that Wicomb is aware of the authority on racial matters which Millin's text might once have been accorded and has consequently written "another story" in which the ironically named Sarah Lindse, a history lecturer at the University of Cape Town, invites her great-aunt, Deborah Kleinhans, whom she has traced in the course of drawing up a family tree to pay her a visit in the hope of learning more about their family history.

In Wicomb's story Deborah can be seen to have survived the trials and hardships of her life by making up or reading stories which have allowed her to escape into a comforting fantasy world. However, the bewildering new experience of her flight to Cape Town exposes certain contradictions in her perceptions of the stories which she has always read. Unaware of the incongruity of her position as the only elderly Coloured woman on the flight Deborah worries about how she will be recognised by her great-niece. She thinks to herself:

Perhaps she should wave a white handkerchief or something. That was what people did in *Rooi Rose*, which only went to show that *Rooi Rose* was not for people like her.

She could never do such a thing, make a spectacle of herself. It must have been the flight through high air that made her think such unusual thoughts. As if she had taken a feather duster to her head so that those stories, she now clearly saw, were for white people. (6)

Deborah has a moment of revelation as she realises that the actions which she has read about in the stories of Rooi Rose cannot be translated into realities in her own life, but are only applicable to white people, particularly the women who read the magazine (Nuttall 11). Initially this discovery does not upset Deborah unduly for it does not imply that she should stop reading white people's stories. Just as "she was used to wearing white people's clothes and eating their left overs" (6), she reasons that she can read their stories provided she does "not expect to behave like a *Rooi Rose* woman" (6). However, she will never again be able to lose herself in these stories for her previous identification with the characters is now interrupted by her knowledge of herself as "other." In addition, in the course of the narrative it becomes clear that she will no longer be able to derive any pleasure from these stories when she describes them to her great-niece as " 'Good stories that seem to be about real life, but well, when you think about it, you won't recognise anyone you know. They'll give you no useful tips' " (12).

Sarah is anxious for her great-aunt to share the history of their family with her, but she resists saying firmly, " 'No point in brooding over things that happened a long time ago. I haven't got time for those old stories' " (12). She counters the young woman's assertion that their family history is an interesting story that needs to be told with the outburst, " 'And what would you know about it? . . . It's never been interesting. Dreary as dung it was, sitting day after day waiting for something to happen' " (12), making up stories to pass the time and relieve the

boredom of her life. When Sarah asks her if she remembers a white woman (a reference to Sarah Gertrude Millin) asking questions about their family and then writing their story in a book, Deborah responds angrily, "No, I don't believe it. What nonsense, of course there was no such woman. A book for all to read with our dirty washing spread out on snow white pages! Ag, man, don't worry; it wouldn't be our story; it's everyone's story. All Coloured people have the same old story' " (12). From the reluctance which she evinces in telling the family history and the negative terms, such as "dirty washing" and "the same old story," which she uses to describe their past, it is clear that Wicomb ironises the fact that Deborah has internalised the racist perceptions which often prevail(ed) in South African society regarding mixed-race people (Sicherman 120).

This is certainly the viewpoint expressed by Sarah Gertrude Millin in God's Step-Children. In her preface to the 1951 edition of the novel she referred to the "mixed breeds of South Africa" as "the offspring of the careless and casual; unwanted in their birth; unwanted in their lives; unwanted, scorned by black and white alike" (xii). At one point in "Another Story" Sarah Lindse quotes an extract from Millin's novel which characterises some of these Coloured people in even harsher terms as, " ' . . . nothing but an untidiness on God's earth - a mixture of degenerate brown peoples, rotten with sickness, an affront against Nature . . . So that was the farm' " (10). This perception is offered on page two hundred and ninety-three of the novel by Barry, a preacher who is one of the fourth generation of mixed blood. He has spent most of his life passing for white, but returns to Griqualand West when news of his mother's imminent death reaches him where he is forced to confront the "horror" of his own black blood which fills him with revulsion and changes his life forever. In her desire to rewrite her family's history Sarah Lindse rejects the version which has been handed down to her in a text like

God's Step-Children. Lindse and by extension Wicomb do not share Deborah's conviction that the story of Coloured identity and history is always "the same old story" (12), which must be one of the reasons that Wicomb has written "Another Story." The sense of different versions of history each with their own priorities and motivations is further emphasised in the text with Deborah's own experiences of relating the story of her trip to Cape Town. Ironically she herself contradicts the notion of there being only "one story" when she tells two different versions of the events which had occurred to her neighbour, Mr Lategan, and later to his wife, defending her right to embellish and change the "facts" of her story with the indignant thought, "If things were slightly different the second time round, well she was telling it to someone different and he should have had the decency to keep quiet" (15).

The conclusion to Deborah's story provides the most startling example of what I interpret as Deborah asserting her right to control her own story, an acknowledgement of the fact that for too many years her life has been governed by other people's stories and their versions of her own. The security police come to arrest Sarah at five-thirty in the morning and, oblivious to the irony of the situation, Deborah initially offers to make coffee for them. However, at the moment when she registered "the precise timbre of the sergeant's voice as she finished pouring the coffee" (15), saying, "Milk and sugar for the other two but just black and bitter for me" (15), she responded in a manner that initially appears totally out of character: "Then without thinking, without anticipating the violence of the act, Deborah Kleinhans took each cup in turn and before his very eyes poured the coffee into the sink. Together they watched the liquid splash, a curiously transparent brown against the stainless steel" (15). I think that it is the lack of respect in the sergeant's voice and his unqualified assumption that Deborah will serve the policemen their coffee just as they want it which causes her to react as she does, rebelling

against the many years of subservience and ill-treatment which she has had to endure as a domestic servant. Her subversive gesture which confounds the police sergeant suggests that she has begun to inhabit "another story" which does not represent an attempt escape the realities of her life and is more relevant to her own experience than the stories which she used to read in Rooi Rose.

"In the Botanic Gardens": Dislocation and Alienation

This short story was published in 1991 in a collection of writing entitled The End of a Regime? An Anthology: Scottish-South African Writing Against Apartheid. Wicomb's connection with this volume can be most likely explained in terms of the time which she spent as a writer in residence in Glasgow in 1990 during which period she undoubtedly had contact with the Glasgow Anti-Apartheid Movement, whose evening of readings by Scottish-based writers was the start of a project which culminated in the publication of this book. "In the Botanic Gardens" tells the story of a Coloured mother, Dorothy Brink, who journeys to Glasgow following the mysterious disappearance and presumed death of her son, Arthur, who is studying on a scholarship over there. In her one brief reference to this story which occurs in her footnotes, Carol Sicherman characterises it as a narrative which deals with generational differences (122), but I would suggest that Wicomb is more concerned with exploring the dislocation which Dorothy experiences at being in a foreign environment where her needs and rights are accorded only cursory attention.

Various factors contribute to Dorothy's sense of alienation and marginalisation. The Scottish official with whom she deals in Glasgow, a Mr MacPherson, speaks English with an accent which confuses and disorientates her so that she struggles to follow his words, thinking that

"he might as well have been speaking a special language understood only by those in national costume" (126). As a result Dorothy finds herself becoming ashamed of her own English which in comparison, she feels, "would squeak like crickets in a thornbush" (126). In their interaction language thus acts to inhibit rather than facilitate communication between them. Dorothy finds herself cast in a passive role which accentuates her discomfort, "the man did not expect her to say anything. He had introduced her to himself: 'Eh, Mrs Breenk' and replied to his own enquiry after her welfare, 'How are you? As well as can be expected, eh' " (126). In addition he appears to be quite disinterested in the issue of her son's disappearance and keeps getting side-tracked as he talks to her, carrying on "like any tourist guide" (128), about the attractions which she must visit while in Glasgow.

Dorothy's concentration is continually broken by memories and images of Arthur which flit through her mind, distracting her from what Mr MacPherson is saying. He, in turn, does not seem to be able to separate the distraught woman sitting before him from his recollections of "television images of South Africans at gatherings, black women ululating and stamping their feet" (128), behaviour which he is terrified that she might replicate in his office. The suggestion that the Scottish officials are involved in a conspiracy to cover up what really happened to Arthur, who was involved in politics, is always hovering in the narrative. They will not allow Dorothy to meet with Arthur's fellow students again, giving the excuse that they are writing exams. Yet, at her initial meeting with one of her son's friends the girl had alleged that the police "had done nothing: a tired police constable had arrived two days later to ask obscure questions and did not come back. That it was a conspiracy, but she [Dorothy] did not know what that could mean" (131). Dorothy is quite bewildered at the thought of any possible intrigue surrounding her son's disappearance. She recalls all his comments about the

need for secrecy and codes surrounding his political activities and finds herself becoming paranoid, reading ulterior motives into all the events that happen around her.

Her sense of alienation caused by being in a strange environment is accentuated and illustrated in her heated exchange with a taxi driver whom she mistakenly accuses of trying to give her counterfeit money. Self-righteously she informs him, " 'Listen man, here in England the notes say Bank of England' " (131) and responds to his frown with the reprimand, " 'No good sitting there with a mouthful of teeth; if you've got something to tell me why don't you speak?' " (131). She is flabbergasted by the reaction which he gives her, driving off after he has hissed, " 'Just fuck off Missus. Bank of England! Where do you think you are? This isn't fucking England' " (131). Dorothy's ignorant assumption that "surely Scotland was part of England" (131), is a classic faux pas which would probably elicit a similar reaction from most Scottish people and it highlights the difficulties she experiences in adjusting to an environment so far removed from her usual existence. In an attempt to recapture something of her son Dorothy goes to the Botanic Gardens which was one of Arthur's favourite haunts and, according to Mr MacPherson, the place where he was last seen. In the heated hot-house she finds plants from all over the world, including South Africa, arranged according to their country of origin, so that it is possible to "tread the entire world" (133) in a few moments. The ease with which Dorothy "travels" this world is ironic when viewed alongside her bewildering experiences of "real" inter-continental travel. Despite the fact that there are plants from South Africa in the Botanic Gardens it is significant that Dorothy does not recognise many of them, perhaps emphasising her sense of alienation. She cannot feel at home in the corner which is labelled "South Africa" since it actually represents a Scottish impression or interpretation of South African identity which does not cohere with her personal experience or perceptions.

Not surprisingly Dorothy is unable to find any trace of her son in the Botanic Gardens although in her desperation she initially imagines that it is Arthur whom she sees in a photograph hanging at one of the displays. As she realises her mistake Dorothy thinks despairingly to herself, "Why was this photograph of a black man mounted here to break her heart?" (133), perceiving it as a deliberate reminder of her loss. She becomes overwhelmed with grief and, disorientated and confused, takes refuge in a replica of a Papua New Guinea hut which represents an environment that is more familiar to her: "Dorothy sank to the earth floor of the . . . hut, leaned her head against a wooden post and spread out her legs comfortably" (134). Here she is found by a guard who assists her, calling a taxi to take her back to her hotel. Months later, when remembering this experience, Dorothy recalls that the uniformed man spoke softly and kindly to her. In thinking back she "could have sworn that the man had spoken to her in Afrikaans, '*Alles sal regkom Mevrou,*' but she could of course not be sure" (134). The security guard is the only person who seems to have displayed any concern for or kindness towards Dorothy during her stay in Scotland. Since she does not recall his actual words and in her distress was not even conscious of them at the time, I would argue that it is their kindly sentiment - a non-verbal quality - which Dorothy remembers as "Afrikaans," representative of the environment in which she feels most comfortable and at ease. The unsettling quality of Dorothy's experience is emphasised by the way in which many questions are left unanswered in the story with Dorothy ultimately returning to South Africa without having solved the mystery of Arthur's disappearance, unable even to have realised her poignant wish to at least see his body and thereby be comforted by the certainty of his death.

CHAPTER SIX:

Conclusion

This final section of my thesis is intended to provide a brief overview of some of the contributions made to the overall voice and sense of identity of black women in South African society by the four black South African women whose "fictional" and "autobiographical" writing I have examined. As formulated in my introductory chapter I have attempted to bring a mode of analysis to their writing which draws on different features and emphases from the various discourses of feminism available to the South African critic in order to most productively illuminate those aspects of their work chosen for discussion. These have included an exploration of the positioning of black women through the interaction of the discourses of race, class and sex; a focus on how the various writers have reflected on or have constructed a sense of their own identities; an examination of the situations in which they have complicated and/or transgressed the dominant patriarchal societal attitudes and priorities which they are "expected" to adhere to - some critics would even argue that simply the act of taking up a pen and writing constitutes a violation of what is "expected" of these black women; as well as a concentration on the writers' sense of the lives and needs of other black women in their communities. Such concerns have been accompanied by a pervasive interest in attempting to identify and examine the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions which emerge (insidiously or deliberately) at various moments in their texts.

Miriam Tlali talks about her writing as her way of fighting to bring about social change both within the black community and the larger South African society. In expressing her project in these terms she succeeds in highlighting the two most pervasive concerns in her writing - the

interaction of the discourses of racism and sexism in order to position black women within a specific context in society. In her first novel, Muriel at Metropolitan (1979), Tlali seeks to expose and explore the inequities integral to the Apartheid system and the ways in which these affect the daily lives of the black community, as well as providing strategies for coping in this hostile environment. What is significant about this novel is the way in which it foregrounds a black woman's voice and perspective that had previously been seldom heard in South African literary circles. In addition, Tlali's protagonist, Muriel, occasionally expresses opinions on matters traditionally considered masculine areas of influence and discussion. Although she prioritises a woman's voice Tlali does not overtly challenge the gender relations which exist in black society, although at times her narrative does work to complicate the status quo. Ultimately, through the course of action adopted by her protagonist at the conclusion of the novel, Tlali affirms race as the top priority for the black South African woman. The discourse of class also briefly emerges as a concern in Muriel at Metropolitan, but it is not given any extended treatment and, furthermore, becomes somewhat problematic for Tlali's own positioning as a white-collar worker complicates her perspectives, at times causing an unconscious identification down on instead of with her fellow black South Africans.

Tlali's second novel, Amandla (1980), is written in response to the Soweto riots of June 1976, describing the repercussions of these events on the lives of the black community. Consequently, the issue of gender relations is very much relegated to a secondary role in the narrative and, where it is discussed, ostensibly seems to endorse a highly conventional portrait: the man as front-line activist and the woman as patient, loving, supportive wife, mother and homemaker. However, nine years later when Tlali's collection of short stories, Footprints in the Quag, is published her focus can be seen to have altered somewhat. Not only is she

concerned with the impact of Apartheid on the lives of black South Africans, but now also directs her attention to an examination of situations and gender relationships within the urban black community itself, especially as these affect the lives of black women who are seen to be not only victimised by "the system," but also by their men. In various stories she voices criticism of the conduct of black men towards their wives and families, decries the institution of marriage when it adheres to outmoded traditional concepts which favour the interests of black men, and focuses on the issue of sexual abuse endured by black women at the hands of black men. In other instances the institution of motherhood is portrayed in ways which go beyond the conventional domestic and childbearing connotations of the role, to instead signify women's initiative and resourcefulness in all spheres of life. Finally, in the last story of the collection, in all the advice given by two young women to their older friend on marriage and the division of responsibilities which should exist within a heterosexual relationship there is no mention made of either the concept "mother" or the biological fact of motherhood, perhaps suggesting that Miriam Tlali is starting to conceive of a space beyond motherhood for black women to inhabit.

Ellen Kuzwayo, whose own life's fulfilment can be seen in the course of her autobiography, Call Me Woman (1985), not to have been measured solely in terms of marriage and motherhood, talks about authorship as a dual process. It provides a way of giving her people a voice and a forum for sharing the experiences of the black women she worked with as a social worker, as well as embodying a cathartic outlet which allowed her to escape the emotional tensions which had accumulated in her over many years. Despite her articulation of this personal dimension of the process of writing, comparatively little of her text is devoted to her personal story and feelings. Rather, Kuzwayo is primarily concerned with the situation of

black women in South Africa. She praises their contributions to society and succeeds in redefining the "western" feminist concept of motherhood as a site of oppression and personal powerlessness - creating an image of the strong and politically active mother who speaks from this position with authority and power. In addition, there are significant moments within the narrative when Kuzwayo succeeds in getting away from the specific categories of "masculine" and "feminine" to reveal a variety of self-divisions at work in her construction of a sense of self in the course of her autobiography.

In Call Me Woman Kuzwayo identifies a stifling of black women's potential and their contributions to society resulting from a combination of "the system" and the conduct of black men. It is interesting to observe how she struggles to maintain a focus on the culpability of black men - her adherence to the philosophy of Black Consciousness brings about conflicting loyalties which she has difficulty in reconciling, leading to significant moments of tension and ambivalence in her writing. These moments should not be used to dismiss the significance of her feminist impulses and insights but rather should be interpreted as positive, the tentative articulation of a new realm of experience in the life of the black woman.

Kuzwayo's short story collection, Sit Down and Listen (1990), does not provide the critic with as much access to issues of feminism and gender relations as her autobiography did, primarily because of the nature of the project which she has attempted. In these stories Kuzwayo has assumed a "storytelling" mode of narration which seeks to project an organic relationship with South African oral culture and oral narrative traditions, with somewhat mixed results. Unfortunately, she does not appear to have clearly thought through the implications of her position as a "storyteller" and has on the whole displayed an inability to effectively adapt the

oral tradition from which her stories emanate to a modern literary context. This has led to an awkwardness in her writing and in her relation to the text which somewhat detracts from the significance of the issues - including marriage and polygamy, as well as the complicity of the Apartheid system and black men in the exploitation of black women - which she chooses to discuss in the course of the various stories.

The two "volumes" of Sindiwe Magona's autobiography, To My Children's Children (1990) and Forced to Grow (1992), are characterised by the distinctly personal note of her narrative which has no equivalent in the writing of either Miriam Tlali or Ellen Kuzwayo. Magona expresses a tentativeness and questioning with regard to her sense of self, a self-reflexivity and self-doubt which contrasts with the determination with which a writer like Kuzwayo attempts to construct and convey her identity as a coherent, self-determining being. In addition, Magona opens up new perspectives in her writing with her use of humour and irony as a means of going beyond the confirmation of hardship to the articulation of other possibilities - laughter as subversive, a way of surviving the adverse social conditions which characterise the experience of black South Africans.

Despite the fact that her focus is on her own story - an exploration of the various factors which have contributed to her sense of self - Magona's comments in the course of the two "volumes" of her autobiography extend beyond her situation to comment more generally on the positioning of black women within South African society. She explores the dimensions of the powerlessness which often characterises black women's experiences - as victims of discrimination in the working environment where domestic workers are forced to accede to the authority of their employers, or female teachers find themselves with little job security and

less earning potential than their male counterparts; or as wives and mothers whose position is circumscribed by societal expectations and the authority accorded to black men by a combination of traditional practices and modern law. Magona can be seen to criticise those obsolete societal attitudes which direct censure at a single woman who falls pregnant and/or which make dire predictions concerning the fate of the children in a female-headed household. Her own experience of marriage is described with great disillusion - the combination of her husband's lack of responsibility and selfishness and the injustices of the Apartheid system working to stifle her ambitions and to lower her self-image. In addition, she draws attention to the double standards which operate in different areas of society - particularly sexuality - according status and respect to men whilst simultaneously criticising and condemning women in the same or similar situations.

Magona displays a highly developed perception of the role of racial discourses in her positioning - and that of black women generally - within society. However, on the whole she appears to be less concerned with the political correctness and concomitant acceptance of her writing than either Tlali or Kuzwayo, thereby enabling her to discuss phenomena which do not appear in their work, such as her experience of habituation to the inequities of Apartheid or her tiredness and personal disillusion with the liberation movement. Magona is particularly interested in probing the intricacies of inter-racial relations, refusing to endorse any simplistic binary opposition between black and white. These prevailing concerns of sex and race to a large extent obscure the discourse of class which underlies much of Magona's personal story as she progresses from her humble origins, through times of great economic hardship to her relatively prosperous and upwardly mobile position in the United States. On the occasions when class is a specific concern in her autobiography it usually acts as a complicating factor in

her sense of self, problematising her relationship with regard to the wider community.

Magona's short fiction anthology, Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night (1990), represents quite a different project from the "volumes" of her autobiography. This book is divided into two parts, the first section essentially a series of monologues linked together by the listening presence of the "narrator" Atimi, which narrates the stories of various maids and their interaction with their white "medems." Domestic service is a realm of experience which is unique to these women yet simultaneously dependant on and a result of the pervasive influence of Apartheid. Magona succeeds in subverting the traditional colonial relationship by providing the reader with the perspective of the colonised woman whose voice is usually obscured by the dominant discourses operating in society. In the course of the narrative she reveals the methods of self-empowerment and the mechanisms for coping with daily injustices which these domestic workers have devised. The language used in the text is a mixture of English, Afrikaans and Xhosa - frequently unaccompanied by translation. This is important for creating an authentic impression of interaction, yet also works to preserve something of the unique character of these women and their experiences. These stories problematise the unequal relationship between white women and their domestic servants. For the most part medems get a real drubbing, yet Magona's tone is tempered by flashes of compassion for their position.

The eight short stories in Part Two provide insight into the lives and experiences of black women in South African society. These narratives are occasionally characterised by an element of transgression which reveals black women in the process of formulating new ways of thinking about themselves, their men or the impact of the Apartheid system, or acting in

contravention of societal expectations. These include, the flight of a newly married wife from her husband's family with whom she is expected to live while he is away working for eleven months of the year; the tragic suicide of a black girl determined to escape the oppressive circumstances of her life; and a black schoolgirl's experience of abortion and its repercussions, the first time this topic has been broached in the writing I have examined.

In my introductory chapter I explained that the order in which I had decided to examine the work of "my" four writers was not determined by any chronological considerations. Rather, chapters were being organised to chart what I perceived to be a progression between the various writers - in part marked by their increasingly self-reflexive and more overtly feminist treatment of themes and issues concerning the "fictional" and "real" identities and/or lives of black women within South African society. This perception has proved to be particularly valid in relation to the writing of Zoë Wicomb whose positioning as the final writer discussed in my thesis is justified by the complexity and sophistication of her fiction - a book of connected stories, You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town (1987), as well as two other short stories, "Another Story" (1990) and "In the Botanic Gardens" (1991).

Various qualities serve to differentiate Wicomb's writing from that of the other three black women. In the course of her career Wicomb has written many critical essays and the insights and opinions which these reveal are interwoven in her fiction, informing and complicating the narratives. For example, she talks of language as "the site in which difference is reproduced" ("Discourses" 43), and emphasises the diversity and contradictions which are inherent in the discourses of society, claiming that these should be celebrated rather than expected to conform to a single hegemonic vision. Wicomb is resistant to the prevalent critical assumption that all

black woman's writing, whether intended that way or not, can be interpreted as "autobiography" or social documentation. Consequently, part of her project in You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town is to deliberately flirt with autobiography - to tempt her critics into identifying her with the central protagonist of the stories, Frieda Shenton, but then work to shatter this complacent sense of continuity at various junctures in the course of the narrative. She also works to problematise and question many of the prevailing discourses which are accepted as a natural part of society.

Wicomb's writing displays an intertextuality which I have not found in the work of the other black women writers, drawing on different texts in order to foreground the status of her stories as fiction and to effectively situate them within a wider set of discourses. In "Another Story" Wicomb seeks to "reply" to Sarah Gertrude Millin's God's Step-Children, first published in 1924, in order to rewrite the version of the history of Deborah Kleinhans and her family which Millin composed. In addition, Wicomb occasionally foregrounds the process of story construction in order to illustrate the process of selection, omission and assemblage which is usually obscured by the writer. The way in which Frieda's family unquestioningly inhabits language, using clichéd expressions and telling stories which have come to replace reality, is not possible for Frieda herself who has a highly developed sense of the textuality of reality and the accompanying fictionality of the notion of the self as an autonomous, coherent subject. Literacy, and education in general, is portrayed as an alienating force which heightens her self-consciousness and opens a gulf between Frieda and her extended family.

As well as her focus on these issues Wicomb's work is simultaneously grounded in the complexities inherent in the positioning of the so-called Coloured community in South African

society. She explores such phenomena as the gendered division of this society, the "racism" which operates in its perceptions and the desire for upward mobility which characterises its social pretensions. Wicomb's project seems to incorporate many of the concerns displayed in the writing of the other three black women, yet it also succeeds in situating these issues within a wider context which complicates and enhances the multi-faceted nature of her fiction.

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