

THE ABANDONED WOMAN IN SINDIWE MAGONA'S WRITINGS

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## DEDICATION

To Thama, Mom Agnes, Godfrey, all my brothers, my sisters and beautiful friends.

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## ABSTRACT

In Chapters One and Two the theme of abandonment of women in the works of Sindiwe Magona is contextualised. Chapter One deals with such pertinent issues in the literary theory of feminism such as the concepts of silence, voice, sexism, and patriarchy which relate to and inform the theme of abandonment in Sindiwe Magona's works. Chapter Two relates the theme to the life of Sindiwe Magona herself and also to the condition of black South African women in general. In Chapters Three to Five the theme is explored in greater detail using Sindiwe Magona's autobiographical novel, *To My Children's Children*, her short stories, *Living, Loving and Lying awake at Night* and her latest novel, *Mother to Mother* for textual illustration. In the final chapter, Chapter Six, recommendations are made on how the problems of abandonment, marginalisation, and subordination of women as highlighted in the writing of Sindiwe Magona could be solved in present-day South Africa. The dissertation ends with a conclusion that since Sindiwe Magona's works were written some progress has been achieved in the eradication of gender discrimination.

## ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS DISSERTATION

TCC - *To My Children's Children*

MM- *Mother to Mother*

LLLAN- *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night*

FTG- *Forced To Grow*

## CHAPTER ONE

### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 . WOMEN AND ABANDONMENT

A preoccupation in the writing of this dissertation revolved around its title. It certainly has to do with women and abandonment. Actually, if I am going to be sensitive to generalities, I have to admit to the extensiveness of these two concepts: women and abandonment. Women are certainly not a homogenous class, yet it is undeniable that women of all classes share some of the following crucial interests: their voice, space, and place at home and in the community at large.

Although in the industrialised countries of Europe and North Africa tremendous progress has been made in the last fifty years in achieving gender equality, there still prevail some significant discreet and overt gender prejudices and abuse as the following United Nations Report testifies:

Large-scale epidemiologic surveys of sexual assault have emerged in industrialized countries. Survey data compiled in the 1980s by the United Nations Statistical Office indicate that approximately one in four women in developed regions has been hit by an intimate partner. These are representative statistics: Belgium, 25 percent; Canada, 25 percent; New Zealand, 17 percent; and United States, 28 percent (Stromquist, 1998: 61).

In the Third World, women's struggles are severe. Their status is much more marginal as they must fight for access to food, health care, education, and housing, in addition to bearing heavy burdens for house maintenance, child care, and family well-being and having to satisfy social claims on fertility and on being responsible for fidelity in marriage. There are variations to be sure, some due to custom, others to law, still others to religion, but many are mainly the result of poverty and lack of social development. In South Africa, the status of black women was complicated further by Apartheid and they suffered double marginalisation of racial discrimination and gender oppression. The following statistics reveal show how vulnerable black women were and still are:

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) conducted a survey among its women members in 1988. At one factory employing 45 women and 25 men, over 40 of the women were classified as operators and earned R144.00 per week...The men classified as operators earned R171.45 per week (Stromquist, 1998: 567-8).

The consequence of the lower income levels on the confidence level of women has been well noted by Marxists and feminists.

Low wages keep women dependent on men and encourage women to marry. Married women must perform domestic chores for men and the family... The cycle is complete-patriarchy and capitalism form an interlocking system (Stromquist, 1998: 309).

It is no wonder that many black women feel totally helpless when they are physically abused, or abandoned by their husbands and left to fend for their children by themselves somehow! Secondly, as most of the leadership positions in communities tend to be occupied by males, some of whom are well known in their communities for oppressing their wives, most women rather choose to remain silent over cases of their harassment and violent abuse.

This strategy of silence has baffled many researchers and social workers. Makofane (1999), after an exhaustive study of numerous abused and traumatised women in present Limpopo province, laments as follows about the unwillingness of the women to speak out:

Most women are unwilling to consult the social workers because of the fear that if their husband find out about this, their relationship will be jeopardised( p3).

It is in this context of 'silence' that this dissertation seeks to examine and discuss the theme of abandonment. The term 'abandonment' does raise representations of inferiority. It is characterized by low living standards, general economic dependence on other people (Torado, 1985: 610), marginalisation, depression and low self-image. Thus while physical abuse can be seen and sometimes treated successfully, the trauma associated with abandonment is much more profound. Sindiwe Magona exposes the tragic consequences of abandonment on wife, children, and society at large in many of her short stories as well as in her latest novel, *Mother to Mother* (1998). The short story, "Nosisa" is about a bright young school girl called Nosisa staying with her mother in the backyard of the house where the mother is a domestic worker. This backyard is the only home Nosisa has ever known. She has grown up in it and watched over the years the humiliation of her mother and her mother's lack of protest at this humiliation. One day on her way back 'home' from school Nosisa suddenly begins to talk to her companions complaining about how they have been envying her for living in a 'white area'. The tragedy is that her mother does not complain about her condition. The tension at home has been building up gradually and



now she is beginning to see things which are not there:

“Listen. Please, listen to me. Listen and stop envying the way I live. It is I who must envy you. Do you not see that daily, I watch my mother’s enslavement? Unlike you, I have no shield in the shape of home. Nothing separates me from Mother’s work. Nothing separates her from the place where she works. It is her work, her home, and the only place where she can be. Mother is a slave and I know, for am I not, daily, witness to that yoke (p. 85)?”

In *Mother to Mother* Mandisa, the mother of the boy who murdered Amy Biehl relates the murder to the life of bitterness and frustration that the boy has shared with the mother.

It’s been a long, hard road, my son has travelled. Now, your daughter has paid for the sins of the fathers and mother who did not do their share of seeing that my son had a life worth living (p. 3).

The situation of the black African woman as represented by Sindiwe Magona can therefore be summarized as a prison-house of ‘nervous conditions’ in which the woman is trapped by the demands and pressures of femininity and motherhood, patriarchy, economic necessity, cultural inhibitions about the privacy of family life, and race relations.

## 1.2 A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON ABANDONMENT

Various conceptual and analytical frameworks can be employed to analyse the condition of women. Each of these frameworks places the site of oppression and advocates its own methods of reform. Feminism being a social movement, in addition to providing an analytical perspective, compels adoption of advocacy. This necessitates what Becker has called a ‘conscious partiality’, that is, empathizing with the oppressed group (Becker, 1971: 122). There are multiple feminist perspectives in the social sciences and among activist groups, each perspective having its own agenda for social reform.

This dissertation seeks to adopt a multi-faceted feminist perspective on the issue of abandonment of women as presented in Sindiwe Magona’s works to constantly relate the fictional works to the unequal and unfair conditions black South African abandoned women in particular and to contemporary South African life in general. Hence this dissertation has not one voice but many. These are: the further detection of women’s unequal and unfair conditions in contemporary life,

the attribution of these inequalities to policies, decisions, and dynamics derived from beliefs that masculinity and femininity constitute distinct natures, the firm resolve to correct these inequalities, particularly by envisaging alternative social arrangements that do not impose definitions. Thus, inequality is traced to pervasive ideologies supported by patriarchal institutions. Also, arguments about the importance of economic and class distinctions dominate. Most often, the dissertation considers various forms of oppression that arise from patriarchal ideology, as well as its intersection with class and race. The entries do play attention to laws and practices, or in some cases, personal autonomy as important in the quest for altered and improved social orders.

A feminist perspective is manifested in this essay in yet another form: the identification of gender issues in problems and arenas considered less touched by gender principles. That women's issues are human issues becomes evident as the repercussion of many of the latter have strong gender components. One of the main contributions of this dissertation is that it locates the forms and dimensions of women's subordination in the wide array of issues that constitute everyday life thus showing that gender does not function merely as a single additional marker in social and cultural transactions but as a force that affects context and process simultaneously, as a major organizing schema. This dissertation therefore reveals gender functions as a massive project of social relations involving the state, the economy, culture, kinship, child rearing, sexuality, and communications.

Magona embodies this multi-faceted feminist perspective. While acknowledging the peculiar female desire for fulfilment through motherhood, she also decries how females are now been blackmailed into that womanhood. Through her interaction with other African women writers she has now come to the realisation that the marginalisation of black women in post-apartheid South Africa is simply an extension of that history of the abandoned black woman.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BORN TO INEQUALITY

#### 2.1 CONTEXTUALISATION

In the previous chapter, the theme of abandonment was grounded in feminist theory and contextualised in the global quest for justice and equality. In this chapter an attempt is made to bring the topic down to specific practical issues by relating it firstly to the condition of life in post-apartheid South Africa and secondly to the life of the writer, Sindiwe Magona herself.

The 1994 report of the United Nations Development Programme states “that not much [development in countries] can be achieved without a dramatic improvement in the status of women and the opening of all economic opportunities to women” (UNDP, 1994: 4 in Stromquist, 1998). Development workers all over the world constantly report problems of gender-based violence emerging in the midst of all economic and social activities ranging from income-generating projects to leadership development. In addition, recent global studies show that discrimination and violence against women have persisted in spite of concerted efforts by community leaders and governments to enforce gender equality (Collins & Andersen, 1990; O’Connell 1994). In South Africa too various studies have shown that black women are exposed to double discrimination because they are both black and female (Lessing, 1994; Nnaemeka, 1998).

With the advancement of women’s studies in recent years, greater attention is now being paid to the marginalisation of women in society and the effect of that on children. Studies have shown that children of persistently abused and abandoned women do not attend school, drop out due to inability to buy uniforms, books and pay school levies. Most of these children roam the streets, where they are exposed to forms of violence, crime and unhealthy living. While some return to their parents’ homes in the evenings, others join gangs of street children and forget about their homes, especially where such homes are characterized by domestic violence and severe poverty. From an early age, these children learn to abuse substances (smoking, glue-sniffing), and become ‘hardened’.

The girls are more susceptible to child labour than boys. Where their mothers are the household heads, young girls, some as young as five, are left to take care of the siblings during the day while the mother goes off to look for work. The girls take up the role of household heads much earlier than boys because they have to look for ways of feeding their siblings. School dropouts soon enter 'employment' housemaids and baby-sitters at the tender age of between six and fourteen.

The abused mothers notice this deterioration in themselves and their children. Yet, as many social workers have remarked, many of these women who have been victims of such marginalisation are reluctant to come out openly to expose the perpetrators and seek redress.

This is a common thread connecting the narratives and autobiographies of black women in South Africa: there is usually no blame from the mother who is left to raise the child (Nnaemeka, 1998: 201).

This 'silence' which has mystified and even horrified social workers is perfectly understood by many feminists to be a woman's rejection of the patriarchal hegemony. Deborah Cameron (1999:24) explains that as language is controlled by male power, for a woman to 'speak out' in situations when that woman has been abused and marginalised by a male is tantamount to legitimising that abuse and marginalisation.

'Speech' and 'silence' have been powerful metaphors in feminist discourse used to figure all ways in which women are denied the right or the opportunity to express themselves freely (Nnaemeka, 1998: 3).

As literature is a reflection of reality, it does not come as a surprise that this 'silence' is also noticeable in the works of many black female African writers who are supposed to become liberated from the inhibitions of their patriarchal communities. Nnaemeka offers the following explanation for the reluctance of black women to expose their menfolk in cases when their men abuse and seek to marginalise them:

It has been common for black women activists and writers to excuse the patriarchal conduct of black men out of sympathy for their plight under white domination and out of a common loyalty to the struggle (Nnaemeka, 1998: 201-202).

As Nnaemeka suggests, political solidarity accounts for this situation. Ruth Mompati (1982: 108), a South African woman activist, seems to agree:

The South African woman finds the order of her priorities in her struggle for

human dignity and her rights as a woman dictated by the general political struggle of her people as a whole. The national liberation of the black South African is a prerequisite to her own liberation and emancipation as a woman and a worker.

This silence of black South African women writers on such an important matter also reflects how black African women in general react socially to incidents of abandonment, victimisation and marginalisation in real life. Most black African women refrain from complaining openly about their relationships with their men because cultural traditions regard the relationship between a man and a woman as an extremely private matter that should not be aired in public. This cultural practice is illustrated by the fact that traditional black men and women do not normally sit together and talk:

Before it was a silent life between men and women. They never spoke to one another, not even husband and wife. Neighbouring women would pass the evenings chatting and spinning, and you would talk to other women at the wells and at the grinding stone. Women never spoke in presence of men: they'd be ashamed and above all scared that they'd be beaten by their husbands on returning home. So women kept their ideas to themselves, even sharing these would have been a help to the community. As this is normal here, women never complain, thinking 'that is how things are' (Fatimata in O'Connell, 1994: 13).

Thus, the phenomenon of 'silence' has therefore to be attributed not just to one cause but a complex of causes such as political solidarity, cultural inhibitions against complaining openly about matters supposed to be very private, and to all the strong feelings that are in the black African tradition pertaining to duties and responsibilities womanhood.

Sindiwe Magona must have been aware of the charge that black African women writers are silent about the menfolk abusers because she tries to explain and account for it in the following statement:

The African woman is too busy being poor, hungry, and when times are good, too exhausted from the demands on them to worry about their voice being heard. And when times are bad and times have been bad - very, very bad for women in Africa for too long- then their very lives are at stake. Runs in men-made wars, refugees and their children, their lives hopeless dislocated. How free are they then, to say what's on their minds? (Indaba99, 1999: 37).

Her statement rightly suggests that the silence of black African women must be examined against the background of social authority and control. When females are regarded as subordinates from

an early age, they are inclined to regard themselves merely as tools of their menfolk. When such a woman is oppressed and victimised, her upbringing makes her accept her oppression and victimisation as a natural course of action against which she has been accustomed not to complain.

## 2.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Most women are reluctant to enter into a therapeutic contract with the social worker as they suspected that their spouses might find out about the arrangement which could be detrimental to their relationships. The unwillingness of the abused wives to involve their partners in therapy, or to permit the social worker to encourage their spouses to participate in the helping process, created great concern among social workers. The needed assurance from the social workers that their partners would not be told about their visits to the agency for fear of exacerbating the tension and violence. Some of the men categorically stated that they refused to listen to women as men are vested with power and control, and regarded it as within their right to maintain discipline in their homes by whatever means (p 3).<sup>1</sup>

This observation made by Makofane (1999) in her investigation into the behavioural attitudes of abused women in the Northern Province captures the complexity of the female in the family. On the one hand, the husband 'categorically' imposes a closure on any discussion of the relationship between husband and wife by insisting that as male he is superior and his word should be and is the law in the house. On the other hand, the female who has been abused and violated is denied a voice with which to complain about her ill-treatment. This scenario summarises the dilemma and frustration not only of the abused women but also of many social workers. As in societies in general, the exact degree to which violence against women exists in South African society is difficult to establish because many of the abused women refuse to come forward to lodge claims for redress. But that the problem exists has been widely acknowledged.

A recent Amnesty International report paints a shameful picture of the condition of women in Southern Africa.

Despite firm commitment by Southern African governments to eliminate all forms of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and girls to reduce their

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<sup>1</sup>Similar statements are made by the following: Collins & Andersen (1990), O'Connell (1994), Nnaemeka (1998), Ruth Mompati (1982), Fatimata (1994) and several others.

vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, there continues to be evidence of widespread economic, social and legal discrimination along with high levels of violence, including sexual violence, against women and girls (<http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/2002/southernafrika12052002.html>: 5 December 2002. Women and Girls Still Facing Discrimination and Violence).

The 2001 Report from the Committee on the elimination of Discrimination against Women paints an equally shameful picture:

The disempowerment resulting from discrimination against women is reinforced by abuse of power perpetrated against women with diverse racial identities that result in social exclusion. The discrimination the women suffer is frequently the result of traditional, patriarchal and historical prejudices. (World Conference against Racism: Durban, South Africa 2001: <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/racism/02-contributreaties.html>).

These two reports note in particular that economic deprivation and poverty make women directly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and violence. The reasons for this can briefly be described as the cultural and structural. The family in South Africa is an institution that acts as the primary agent of socialization into class and gender identities. The solidarity of the family has always been valued in South Africa. Its contexts reflect broader social relations and power structures (Du Boulay, 1974; Hart, 1992). Women occupy subservient positions in the family in relation to the men, and this is reflected in the wider community institutions where religious laws, customs and practices keep women subjugated. Although their position in the family can shift within various groups according to class or age, most women are expected to serve their families, bear children, and preserve the African cultural traditions (Hart, 1992: 27).

An ideological starting point for considering the African family is the cultural significance of the sanctity of marriage. Women have to do their best to preserve the family. Marriage is considered to be of paramount importance to African women to the extent that it becomes the most important goal in their lives. Through marriage, they are supposed to gain all the necessary respect and social approval that are elements of a successful and worthy life. They are supposed to feel fulfilled in their roles as wives and mothers and be prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their marriage, that is, to keep the family together as a token of honor and respect. As a result, women in violent relationships, often suffer years of oppression and degradation, only because they are taught to live their lives according to the traditional values that allow the man

to be the master simply because he is a man.

No matter what women do in their lives, they are always expected to think about these concepts first. For instance, if a woman decides to complain about the husband, she should be aware of the personal and familial costs that the consequent social disapproval for her actions will bring. In South Africa this traditional African family system places the female in a perpetual position of inferiority. At home, in marriage, or at work the female is constantly reminded of her subordinate status. Hence, Madlala (1994:7) correctly describes the plight of black African women in South Africa as follows:

The system of racial, class, and gender domination has effectively marginalised the majority, excluding them from major decisions affecting their lives. In the workplace they are abused and exploited by their bosses. In the community they suffer political and social repression. In their homes they experience domination and violence from their male relatives-their husbands, partners, brothers, and sons.

With respect to the cultural violence against women in the family is under-reported because it has often been accepted within societies worldwide, particularly those with very strong traditional values concerning gender role differentiation and power distribution. In this context, social values and attitudes support the man in his position as the powerful head of the family whose absolute power cannot be questioned by anyone. The afore-mentioned assertions (p. 19) by the men referred to by Makofane who insisted that they were the heads of their households and they had every right to treat their wives any way they thought fit is a typical illustration of the mind-set about the status of females. As a result, it becomes extremely problematic for a black African woman to speak out and expose the male perpetrator of her abuse. For example, such women fear that the society would not be supportive of them if they went public; they would feel ashamed and guilty because they would be accused of bringing what should have been treated as a private family and sexual matter out into the public domain; and that their husbands would retaliate by molesting them harder later or their children taken away from them. Since all these women in the first place would be depending on their husbands for financial support and in the second place would have grown up with all the cultural inhibitions of female inferiority mentioned earlier instilled in them, speaking out would be a big dilemma for them. It is no wonder therefore that the vast majority choose the safe option of remaining silent.



This dissertation will focus on how Sindiwe Magona uses her novels and short stories to discuss the complex issues surrounding the theme of the abandoned woman. The following are some of the principal issues that will be discussed either as causes or consequences of the incidence of the abandoned woman: unwanted pregnancies, improper child-spacing, domestic violence, work-place harassment, over-crowded shanty dwelling, high lobola demands, and high unemployment. Many of these elements can feature as both cause and consequence. For instance, high lobola demands can force a man to abandon his wife. The same high lobola demands can make a man feel that he owns his wife and can therefore make any demands on her body at any time. That can lead to strains in the relationship which can result in the man going elsewhere to get his satisfaction.

Many of the elements mentioned above feature prominently in Magona's novels and short stories. The subjects of her writings are her own experiences as a female growing up in a patriarchal society, marrying early and becoming saddled with many children only to be abandoned by her husband. In addition, to these strong autobiographical elements, she also uses as her subjects the experiences of relatives and friends and co-workers whose lives mirror her own. Her novels and short stories are therefore like case-studies of abused and marginalised women traumatised by instances of patriarchal, sexual and class oppression, abandonment, and harassment. In reading her novels and short stories, one therefore is always reminded that the works are not pure fiction but confessions of traumatised women.

### 2.3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This study therefore aims at achieving the following:

- To investigate the significance of the theme of the abandoned woman in the works of Sindiwe Magona
- To analyse the ways in which the theme is explored in each of her works, namely *To My Children's Children* (1990), *Mother to Mother* (1998), *Living, Loving and Lying awake at Night* (1991), and *Forced to Grow* (1992)

- To relate issues pertaining to the theme of the abandoned woman as discussed in her works to the social situation in our country
- To examine the setting, characters, narrators of the works and discuss how they represent Sindiwe Magona herself on pertinent issues
- To determine the ways in which her writing can be used as a model to eliminate anti-social or detrimental practices and encourage a more equitable distribution of family resources as well as a more flexible sharing of parental responsibilities in order to create greater opportunities for women within and outside the family.

#### 2.4 JUSTIFICATION OF TOPIC

The theme of abandonment in the works of Magona is predominantly the exposition of a female condition since the effects of abandonment are both physical and psychological: they transcend race, class and ethnicity. Recent global studies on women show that the effects of violence against women are in most cases merely physical at all but rather much more comprehensive and discrete:

It seems crucial to emphasize that violence against women often entails that a sophisticated and systematic wearing down of a woman's autonomy and self-esteem on spiritual, emotional and mental levels, well before the first blow is struck, which partly explains many women's attitude of self-abnegation, physical violence being about the last stage of execution. Also, violence against women is in a high number of instances devoid of physical contact, which makes it elusive and difficult to define. Often women experience gender violence but have no recourse because not only do they have no external bruising but they have not even been touched physically, to my belief and experience, this does not make it less violent (Afshar & Maynard, 1994: 199).

As already mentioned, Sindiwe Magona's works are like case studies of real black African women under stress. This dissertation therefore avoids treating her works in abstract terms as pure fiction. The works are throughout analysed in relation to their social and political context and the appropriate comments made and lessons drawn. This dissertation appears at a moment of intense social, political, cultural, and economic transformation in South Africa. Since the early 1990's. the world has moved toward a freer and more competitive market. But the horrors of poverty,

unemployment, rural neglect, and population increase continue, and new, brutal realities have emerged: AIDS, ethnic cleansing and environmental deterioration. These changes affect women, certainly. But women are not mere victims of rapid transformation, their ability to cope with change as either researcher or activists is considerable. And so is their capacity to generate change itself.

## 2.5 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS<sup>2</sup>

Sindiwe Magona was born in 1943 in Gungululu, a village about fifty kilometres from Cape Town. At the age of five, her family was moved to Blaauvlei location in the vicinity of Cape Town. Forced removals uprooted the family once again in 1961 when they had to go to Gugulethu township. Although Sindiwe Magona's parents were not educated, they constantly made sacrifices for the sake of their children, such as to have their children educated. Her father was a petrol attendant and her mother a mere domestic servant. After attending school in the township, Sindiwe was thus sent to a Christian boarding school.

When Sindiwe Magona started her primary school career, her father bought her a long gym-dress because as a traditionalist he believed any girl above the age of ten, should dress to cover not only the knee, but a good five to ten centimetres below it (TCC: 71). This scene is touchingly described in *Children* where Sindiwe accounts how she developed a sense of self-contempt and pity. At the age of ten, she was already regarded as a woman. She, for instance, was not allowed to go and see films and join the Girls' Guides because she was a girl (TCC: 74) while her brother, Jongi, was allowed to go out after his chores had been done. What happened in this family illustrates different treatments of two little children of different gender in one family, a common feature in traditional African society.<sup>3</sup>The passage summarizes the entire problem associated with

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<sup>2</sup>In the compilation of Sindiwe Magona's biography, I have relied on Kathy Perkins (*Black South African Women: Anthology of Plays, 1999*) as this work is frequently regarded as one of the most consistent on Sindiwe Magona's life and literary career.

<sup>3</sup>Sindiwe Magona's situation relates directly to the life of Tambudzai in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *Nervous Conditions*, where a woman's inferiority is stated and reinforced. The passage below is revealing:

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my

the male dominated world, that is the relationship between males and females. The boy child is given preference in all things. Tambudzai gets the opportunity to education only after the death of her brother, Nhamo. Babamukuru is obliged in the absence of any male children to take Tambudzai to the mission school.

Another major catastrophe in Sindiwe Magona's life was an unplanned premarital pregnancy which emphasizes her powerlessness within the traditional patriarchal system. This caused family's disappointment because it could no longer expect as high a bride price for her as it would had she been a virgin bride. Magona thus points out:

In the African tradition life is celebrated and children are treasured. It is ironic that women, the bearers of these national treasures, 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. She is too old for you (FTG: 20-21).

At last, she managed to complete her schooling and landed a teaching job, but was ill-prepared for the responsibilities facing her. Moreover, her salary as a teacher was determined by her race and gender. Magona conveys her total shock as follows:

Yes, teachers salaries, a decade after I had started teaching, were still so low as to elicit scorn from everybody from domestic workers to common criminals (TCC: 105).

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callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died, and there are reasons for this more than the mere consequence of age. Therefore I shall not apologise but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion (p. 1).

The passage summarizes the central problem associated with the male dominated world, that is the relationship between males and females. The boy child is given preference in all things. Tambudzai gets the opportunity to education only after the death of her brother, Nhamo, since Babamukuru is obliged in the absence of any male children to take Tambudzai to the mission school.

Having received her teaching certificate in the early 1960's, Sindiwe embarked on a teaching career. During her second year of teaching, Sindiwe became pregnant again and was forced to resign since it was against departmental regulations for a pregnant woman to teach (FTG: 18). Sindiwe's pregnancy coupled with her dishonourable discharge from her teaching had reduced her confidence in her newly-acquired status of mother. As a result, she saw herself as a failure: A young wife. An expectant mother. No longer employed. I was a housewife. Nothing more. Nothing less. In my clear eyes, I had fallen. Far short of what I had dreamt of becoming. But, I could see no way out of the quagmire in which, even as I watched myself wallow, I sank deeper and ever deeper, with each passing day (TCC: 110).

During her four year teaching break, Sindiwe became a domestic servant, a fact she remarks that domestic service did more to her than it did for her. It introduced her to the fundamentals of racism (TCC: 145). In the final year of her domestic service, her husband moved to Johannesburg, leaving her to care for their three small children. A year after his departure, Sindiwe resumed her teaching career. Her own experience of the harsh realities of township life coupled with her humiliation by a violent and often brutal husband, however, lends authority to Magona's writing about the plight of the black women, one of the outstanding characteristics of her writing.

However, Sindiwe always wanted to be a writer:

I was always good with words, and if there was going to be one essay read at school, it would be mine. I used to win prizes a lot. At 17, my ambition was to one day write a book. I did not know anyone who wrote books. (Magona in Perkins, 1999: 3 ).

In 1981 Sindiwe began writing seriously after having come to New York to attend Columbia University where she enrolled for Master's degree in Social Work. Magona left South Africa in 1981, as she puts it, she was "sick and tired of apartheid" (Magona, 1999: 1). She returned to South Africa in 1982, but shortly afterwards, she got a position at the United Nations. In April 1984, Sindiwe thus once again headed for New York. In New York she spoke to groups about life in the townships and decided to start writing about her experiences and township life. Magona has written two autobiographical works, *Forced to Grow* and *To My Children's Children*, the latter being a finalist for the NOMA Award, the most prestigious publishing award in Africa. She has also published two collections of short stories; *Living, Loving and Lying awake at Night*,

recently selected as one of Africa's Best Books of the 20th Century, and *PUSH-PUSH and other stories* (<http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/MagonaEN.html>. Article by Tony Simoes da Silva. 5/20/2002).

In 1993, Hartwick College awarded an Honorary doctorate in Humane Letters to Magona. In 1997, Magona was a New York Foundation on the Arts Fellow in the non fiction category and attended the International Women's Writing Guild Summer Conference at Skidmore College three times (in 1989, 1998 and 1999). Although the promotion schedule of *Mother to Mother* afforded her just a weekend in 1999, she indicates that:

I always return emotionally rejuvenated and spiritually affirmed, rebirthed in the 'womb' of her IWWG Sisters collective vibrancy, caring, generosity and nurturing (<http://www.iwwg.com/profle.html>. Magona, Sindiwe. International Women's Writing Guild: In Your Own Words. pp1-3).

Although in some ways she had become an integrated New Yorker, her work has always allowed her to stay in contact with her homeland. Magona has visited South Africa at least once a year since she left in 1980 (<http://www.riverdalereview.com/93099/news3.html>. Article by Ioana Veleanu. 5/23/2002; <http://worldwriters.english.sbc.edu/Magona.html>. Sindiwe Magona's lecture on "An Accident Life" (5/23/2002). Despite being two decades removed from living in South Africa, the country still serves as the background for all her books. For example, *Children* is a memoir that chronicles what it means to attain womanhood in a society where patriarchy and apartheid have constantly conspired to degrade and enslave women economically, politically and sexually. In *Living*, Sindiwe Magona depicts the world of poor South African women struggling to survive and provide for their families while in *Mother*, she traces the causes behind a murder perpetrated by a mob of young men in the black township of Gugulethu.

Apart from being an internationally read author, Magona has contributed to encouraging African writers to continue writing:

Right now, in the times of modern history, even those of the history of world literature, we are completely absent. We are not there. Let us join hands and collectively work to change that (Magona, 1999: 39).

Significantly, her voice joins those of other women writers who articulate similar concerns such as Helene Cixous who challenges women to become more than they have been: "Write! Writing

is for you, you are for you your body is yours take it” (Con Davis & Finke, 1989: 732). With effusive energy, Cixous then calls on women to break their silence by writing and reading. She meditates on the possibility of social change through writing. Magona further adds: “I see myself returning to South Africa to write. I love writing. I think it is important for us to write” (Magona in Perkins, 1999: 5).

In *Children*, Sindiwe Magona speaks about an invisible league of women, world-wide and remarks:

Although I did not know it then, by the time I reached home I had joined an invisible league of women, worldwide, the bearers and nurturers of the human race whom no government or institution recognizes or rewards, and no statistician captures and classifies (p 106).

She knows it partly experience and later reflection, but she also knows it and joins it by writing about it. By writing to expose the harsh realities under which black African women live, Sindiwe Magona has become part of a community of women writers dedicating their works to the improvement of the collective identity of the female. In that sense, she breaks the boundaries of the conventional genre since she writes about women as ‘bearers and nurturers’: about women as social and biological reproducers. They maintain, in this sense, familial and cultural structures and practices. Sindiwe Magona’s texts accomplish this. (That is certainly the intent of the opening “to let you know who you are and whence you are” (TCC: 1). She is recovering and preserving an experience that few would ever write or care about-certainly in the South Africa of her childhood, youth, and young adulthood, even in the South Africa of the 1980's.

## 2.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The significance of this study lies in the fact that Sindiwe Magona’s works are treated not simply as fiction but also as models of social and cultural behaviour. Sindiwe Magona herself views her characters as extensions of herself and of people around her. As such, Sindiwe Magona’s novels and stories are meant to be regarded as the vocal expression of memories of countless women whose voices have been suppressed in society. In other words, her writing gives her a voice to speak out on behalf of countless millions of black African women in South Africa, a privilege they are denied of in real life. In thus focussing on the social problems highlighted in Sindiwe

Magona's works on the one hand and on the other on the remedies suggested in her works, this study endeavours to achieve two things at the same time: to critically analyse her works of art while simultaneously contextualising her as an educated black African woman marginalised, humiliated, and silenced because of her gender yet using her pen to claim a voice for herself in particular and for her black African womenfolk in general.

## 2.7 LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

There is very little material on the life of Sindiwe Magona. I tried to contact her personally in order to interview her on her life and writings which could have helped in enriching my project. Unfortunately the arrangements broke down at the last minute. As a result, the information contained in this dissertation has been obtained mainly from comments made on her life and works by critics. I cannot at this stage vouch for the accuracy and reliability of the sources of those comments but I hope that through this research more light be shed in the near future about how factually the works represent her real life.



## CHAPTER THREE

### SHATTERED DREAMS — *To My Children's Children*

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters, the topic of the abandoned woman was contextualised: in Chapter 1 it was grounded in feminist theory; and in Chapter 2 it was related to the life of Sindiwe Magona the writer, in particular and to the condition of black South African women in general. In this chapter the topic is discussed in relation to Sindiwe Magona's autobiographical novel, *To My Children's Children* (1990). In this novel Sindiwe Magona gives a detailed account of her life from roughly 1943 when she was born to 1966 when she was 23 years old, married, but sans husband. The novel discusses such matters as unplanned pregnancies, early marriages, class and gender conflicts, job and political pressures which acted as causes and effects of Sindiwe Magona's own abandonment by her husband at the young age of twenty three, leaving her to fend for her three children alone without a regular job.

As mentioned earlier in chapters 1 and 2, Sindiwe Magona regards her writing as giving her a voice to speak on her own behalf as well as on behalf of the countless black African women about their trauma of marginalisation, abuse, and abandonment. In the discussion that follows therefore the novel *To My Children's Children* is not treated as an independent text abstracted from the reality but as a fictional autobiography in which Sindiwe Magona uses her writing as a voice to talk about matters which she, as a female in a patriarchal society, would not have otherwise been able to talk about in real life.

The novel is presented in the form of a traditional African folk tale told by an old woman to her grandchildren gathered around her by the fireside in an African village. Sindiwe Magona herself is the narrator and as the title suggests she projects herself through her imagination into the future and imagines herself as a grandmother telling a story to "her children's children".

The subject of the story that she is telling is explained at the beginning of the novel.

As ours is an oral tradition I would like you to hear from my own lips what it was like living in the 1940's onwards; what it was like in the times of your grandmother, me .. I may not live long enough to do my duty to you, to let you

know who you are and whence you are. So I will keep, for you, my words in this manner (ibid. 1).

As Sindiwe Magona was born in 1943, the implication of the phrase “living in the 1940's onwards” is that her story is specifically about her life and also about her as a female growing up in a traditional African community dominated by afore-mentioned rigid patriarchal controls and finally about a black person growing up in South Africa when the Nationalist Party was slowing establishing the apartheid system. The thematic significance of Sindiwe Magona herself presenting her personal history in her own voice is that the reader is able find out what her views are about herself, her community and her country in the formative first twenty five years of her life.

### 3.2 SETTING

The place-setting of the novel is two-fold: the village of Gungululu where Sindiwe Magona was born and Cape Town where the family was moved to under government-policy of forced removal when she was about five years old. Sindiwe Magona describes the life in the village of Gungululu in glowing terms:

It was in such a warm human environment that I spent the first five years of my life. I had much attention, much discipline, much loving, much caring, much play, much work, in short, total immersion into a group where my own place in it was clearly defined. . . I was happy, I was loved. And my world seemed safe and secure (p. 7).

Gungululu was a small Xhosa village community with all the characteristics of a traditional African society. It is therefore no wonder that Sindiwe Magona felt ‘safe and secure’ there.

She also stresses the significance of her grandmother in her life. Through her she gained >total immersion’s into Xhosa traditional literature and culture.

Always, there was at least one adult, usually grandmama, sitting with us around the fire. To keep us awake, she would tell us iintsomi, the fairy tales of amaXhosa. Looking back now, I can see clearly how iintsomi are an essential and integral part of the socialization of the child among amaXhosa. The lazy youngster who would not bother to learn from his or her elders was: usually he or she ended up without a spouse because no one would marry such a sluggard. Always, good behaviour was rewarded and bad punished (pp. 5-6).

According to her it was through her grandmother that she gained an awareness of her own creative and how literature is used in African culture as an instrument of education and morality in which 'good behaviour was rewarded and bad punished'.

This awareness of literature functioning as a social tool would grow with her and eventually dominate the vision of her own writing as the voice of countless black African women silenced by the constraints of their traditional and political societies.

Sindiwe Magona's picture of the location in Cape Town to which the family moved is in sharp contrast to her description of her home village of Gungululu.

When we finally arrived at Blaauvlei, the location where we were to live, a tinshack location, sprawling as far as the eye could see, awaited us. Here, each shack declared to all and sundry that it had nothing to do with any other shack. Such was the complete lack of co-ordination in whatever one could care to think of (p. 21).

Whereas in Gungululu she felt 'safe and secure', at Blaauvlei she felt alienated. That sense of communality that characterised life at Gungululu was totally absent at Blaauvlei because each "each shack declared to all and sundry that it had nothing to do with any other shack". It was also there that she became aware of the insecurity of life caused by death through accidental and sudden means; an insecurity which was unknown back in the village of Gungululu.

When I returned the older of the two men was saying: "He became cold; there and then. Cold. ... Dear Bhuti Sondlo was no more. Felled by a hit-and-run car the night before (p. 35)".

### 3.3 MAGONA AS MAJOR CHARACTER

In the previous section, Sindiwe Magona, the narrator, gives a picture of the two places where she spent her growing years. In this section attention is focused on how she saw herself during her formative years. One of the matters that talks about is her consciousness of her domestic and social roles responsibilities as a female.

As soon as a child can walk and talk, that child is given tasks to perform, even if those tasks are in the form of helping someone else. Sweeping, carrying water from the river, feeding the chickens and collecting eggs, fetching firewood,

stoking the fire, grinding or stamping corn: relative to a little girl's age, these were some of the tasks I was given, Boys would milk the cows, goats, and sheep, and also herd the livestock (p. 4).

These gender roles and responsibilities ensure stability within a small traditional community such as Sindiwe Magona's childhood village of Gungululu. However, when they are enforced in a modern society that is supposed to be cosmopolitan, they become dangerous stereotypes. Sindiwe Magona soon realized this when these gender roles were enforced at school.

Schools could teach girls certain skills which they could, in later life, employ in the home and with their families. Consequently, girls would spend as much as one-fifth of their time in school doing needlework (Sharpe; 1994). Black boys would study history, geography, English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, and black girls would go for Religious Instructions and Needlework (FTG: 42).

Sindiwe Magona relates this stereotyping that the educational system endorses to the situation in which females are made to regard themselves as inferior and to accept their marginalisation in society as the normal way of life. There is enormous variety in the division of labour between women and men from one society to the next, but broadly speaking the responsibility for domestic work-cooking, washing and so on-rests primarily with women. The girl child is always disadvantaged in our culture. She is seen by her mother and all the women in the house as having to do all the chores and duties of a woman-cook, do the laundry, clean and sweep.

Most men are trained from infancy to depend on women for their basic needs for food and comfort. Some women, for their part, vigorously defend their roles, as the household is the realm in which they exercise considerable authority and expertise. Others accept the situation with resentment. Many women and men tend directly and indirectly to discourage young boys from taking on domestic tasks.

Side by side with the hours most women spend to ensure that children and the aged are well cared for, they carry out a vast range of unpaid domestic labour. Over and above the fact that many women simply have too much to do, there are two main problems associated with domestic work: first, the fact that it is done mostly by women, and not men or boys and, second, it is low-status work.

Another matter that Sindiwe Magona emphasises in her story is racial discrimination. When Sindiwe Magona realised that black children were being treated differently from children of other races, that obviously added to her sense of alienation which she began to experience on arriving at the location in Cape Town.

I had started school at age seven years and five months. The law stipulates that African children start school only after the seventh birthday. White and coloured children my age, under no such 'protection', were beginning their third year of schooling (p. 48).

Later she was able to use this and other experiences of separate racial educational policies for a hindsight reflection on the callousness of the apartheid system.

All this was in keeping with the government's three-tiered system of education whereby real and sincere attempts at education were made only for the white child, with the child classified 'coloured' getting consolation fare and the African child trained to be a human bonsai, dwarfed in mind and soul in complete accord with his shrunken body and evaporated aspirations for any future worth the name (LLAN: 79).

The most interesting matter that Sindiwe Magona talks about in her story is her own growing up from a child into a woman. Mention has already been made of her feeling of stability and security as a child in her hometown village of Gungululu later to be replaced by a feeling of alienation and insecurity when she was brought to Cape Town. Her accounts of her school life suggest that she was a brilliant learner and her steady academic progress gave her a sense of optimism that in future she would rise through her education and overcome the cultural, social and political constraints imposed on her as a female and an African. This sense of optimism especially pervades her account of how she steadily completed her secondary education, entered teacher training college and eventually qualified and was appointed a teacher.

Then, without mentioning the actual circumstances leading to the event, she describes how her teaching career was brought to an abrupt end by her unplanned pregnancy.

A complication, perhaps embarrassment would be a more appropriate word, was that the gentleman in question did not have lobola, the bride price my parents expected in return for their educated daughter's hand. And here I had the misfortune or stupidity, depending on where your sympathies lay, of allowing myself to be spoiled by a migrant labourer, a man who, at any given time of day, any day of the month, could have his pockets turned inside out with no danger of littering the streets of Guguletu with coins (p. 108).

According to the conditions of the educational system at the time, black female teachers were not supposed to fall pregnant out of wedlock. Hence, Sindiwe Magona suddenly found herself out of a job and the secure future which she had been looking forward to was suddenly shattered. As her husband was an impoverished casual labourer, she was compelled to take any work that came her way and that invariably meant domestic work. She felt humiliated and degraded.

Her situation as an unmarried mother prompted her to enter into the following discussion of the whole question of the lobola system and its effect on the stability of family. Sindiwe Magona (1992: 42) makes it clear that she believes in the traditional system of marriage.

The lobola was very significant in our culture, it symbolised the unity of two families in their totality, a token of trust and friendship. It also signifies that if a woman's husband dies, she will always have two families to look after her, and she and her children will never be destitute.

In most African societies, it appears that what is given by the man, or some cases demanded from him such as bride-wealth is determined by various factors. One of factors is the status of the woman herself; for example, whether or not she has a child. Sindiwe Magona lessened her chances for a good marriage and a good bride price her father would have got because she was an unwedded mother. Another factor determining the value of bride wealth is how well educated the woman is. According to Sindiwe Magona women far less educated than her in their Xhosa society "were getting lobola of two to five hundred rands from their suitors" (TCC: 108). As she was a qualified teacher, her lobola was bound to be expensive. Unfortunately for her, the man in question was a migrant labourer and he was in no position to afford it. Secondly, she herself had lowered her price as a result of her unplanned pregnancy.

To save the reputation of the family of Sindiwe Magona, the man was pressurised into paying a lobola of some sort and the marriage was then quietly legitimised at a marriage registrar's office. Soon more children arrived. As her husband was only a casual labourer, the financial pressures of suddenly having to pay out a lobola coupled with the demands of a growing family must have given him no choice but to abandon Sindiwe Magona and her children.

Sindiwe Magona shows in her reflections in the story that she is acutely aware of this disastrous effect of lobola on the stability of a family in the sense that the financial burden involved can easily

drive a man away, as happened to her. In spite of that, she and many black women do not want to see an end to the practice of bride-wealth because they feel that it is a source of disgrace for a woman to enter marriage without some relatives. She will be ridiculed by the society as not being of much value in the eyes of her family. In the long run, it is the man, who has been saved the expenditure, who will at a later date turn around and insult her as having given away for free by her relatives because they felt she was either a burden or not of much value to her family. If no bride-wealth is given, it could be construed as a denial of the woman's worth to her husband in terms of the services she expected to render so the woman could be held up for ridicule (Dolphyne, 1991: 91).

Black women's traditional status as subordinate to men, regardless of age, education, or status, was aggravated by the way black tradition was interpreted in South African law, and may affect their self esteem and the ability to take independent decisions. For the African woman, fighting for survival is the ultimate battle, because traditional cultures have betrayed women. Those structures that were supportive of women have been destroyed when we came into contact with the western civilisation. The good parts were buried and the bad parts emphasised, and now, more than ever, men have dominance over women. As a result, when women such as Sindiwe Magona are several others are abandoned by their husbands there is virtually no support provided to them either emotionally or financially by the traditional system and the modern system. As a result of the narrow western law requirements for marriage, Sindiwe Magona failed to take her husband to court for failing to maintain the children. Moreover, as in the eyes of the educational system she was not properly married, she was barred from permanent appointments.

Because I was married (I never did get a divorce), I could only be given annual contracts, temporary. Permanent posts were for real breadwinners-all men, irrespective of their marital status. I was not a breadwinner in the eye of the Department of Bantu Education, my three children and their errant father notwithstanding (FTG: 45).

In conclusion, Sindiwe Magona blames herself for not realising quickly that her unplanned pregnancies were as much to blame for her social humiliation and marginalisation as one the one hand the conduct of her husband in abandoning her and on the other hand the oppressiveness of the patriarchal society.

By the time Thokozile was a year old I was three months pregnant. Twenty-three

years old. Books on development psychology are silent about what must, surely, be the Womb Trap Stage of development (p. 163).

Hence, her message to her children's children is that "since so many women's lives are hindered, hampered, and ruined by husbands" (p. 182) they should avoid the mistakes which almost ruined the life of their 'grandmother'.

Women's disproportionate responsibility for child rearing combined with gender inequalities in the labour market result in considerable financial as well as time pressure on female-headed households, which is the focal point in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### NEGLECTED MOTHERS — *Living, Loving and Lying Awake At Night*

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, Sindiwe Magona's autobiographical novel was used in illustration to show that the theme of the abandonment of women is very real in the life of Sindiwe Magona because she herself experienced it during her formative years and it very nearly ruined her life. As mentioned earlier, the autobiographical novel, *To my Children's Children*, traces her life until about the age of twenty three when she was abandoned by her husband. In Sindiwe Magona's collection of short stories, *Living, Loving and Lying Awake At Night* (1991), she describes the experiences of a group of young women who have lost their husbands and have been forced to take up domestic service in order to take care of their children. As these stories closely mirror the life of Sindiwe Magona from where *To my Children's Children* ends off, they can conveniently be regarded as a semi-autobiographical description of those four years of her life during which she worked as a maid. To show how closely the story mirror Sindiwe Magona's own life, the discussion will highlight the autobiographical elements in the stories as it traces the experiences of the characters under the stress and trauma of abandonment by their husbands, their marginalisation in their communities, and their humiliation by their "medems".

#### 4.2 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS

In the final year of Sindiwe Magona's domestic service, her husband moved to Johannesburg, leaving her to care for their three small children. This experience is reflected in "Leaving", the opening story of the collection.

The story deals with a young mother, like Sindiwe Magona.

The woman, who wasn't quite thirty yet, slept in this hut with her five children. She had been a wife at a tender age..and each time her husband returned from the gold mines of Johannesburg, where he worked for eleven months of the year, she was soon with child (LLLAN: 5).

Once her husband was back in Johannesburg, he forgot about his family and the young woman just had to fend for herself and the five children, just as Sindiwe Magona too was left to fend for herself and her three children by the husband in the gold mines of Johannesburg.

Her husband was not one to remember his wife once he was in the gold mines of Johannesburg. As years went by the woman had to realize this about him and..accept that..her husband would never be a provider (p. 5).

In this story, the young woman, out of frustration and depression, eventually runs away from her five young children in the middle of the night to reject the traditional role of mother and provider thrust upon her!

I would not be a mother. I would not, would not, be a mother.. A find. Salvation...  
With the stealth of a cat..she moved. .. She opened the door and stepped out (pp. 6-7).

The story ends with there so the fate of the woman and her children is left to speculation. Looking at the circumstances of the woman, and the life of Sindiwe Magona as well, the main theme that comes out forcefully is the problem of child spacing and how it contributes to the further subordination of women. The young woman was not quite thirty, but she already has five children and the narrator suggests that “had none of her babies died in infancy, there would have been perhaps more than double that number” (p. 5). In the case of Sindiwe Magona, at the age of twenty-three she had already had three children. It is obvious that any young husband, let alone a mine worker or a casual labourer, would find such a large family a very heavy financial burden and would 'solve' the problem by simply abandoning them.

Another story that is clearly autobiographical is “Lulu”. Like Sindiwe Magona who moved to Cape Town from her village in the Transkei, Lulu moved to Cape Town from Queenstown.

Lulu was in Standard Four when she left Queenstown. She had come to Cape Town thinking she would continue with her schooling. But the family had younger children in primary school and a son in high school. They could not afford to send another child to school and for a while after her arrival she was sort of in an in between place: not adult, as she did not work, but, as she did not go to school she was not a child either (p. 93).

Again like Sindiwe Magona who was obviously brilliant at school, Lulu is portrayed as a girl with tremendous potentials.

She must have been about seventeen or so years old.. Light of complexion and built with the solidness of a jeep, she exuded, in both manner and form, the robust personality of a well-brought-up country girl (p. 93).

She has a lovely voice and she is beautiful and intelligent. But, like Sindiwe Magona who suddenly found her dreams of a bright future as a teacher shattered, Lulu's life suddenly crashes when she becomes pregnant.

She had been in Cape Town a little more than two years, I think, when her son was born. She had had three or four jobs in that period of time.. Lulu's becoming a mother put her definitely and irrevocably into the world of adults (p. 96).

Like Sindiwe Magona, pregnancy destroys Lulu's chances of a high dowry.

She had not only brought disgrace to her father's house but she 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. In her parents' eyes, as in the eyes of the whole community, she was damaged goods (pp. 96-97).

To salvage the family name, Lulu is given in marriage to an old man, "a widower with children older than Lulu" (p. 97). Arranged marriages are a feature of traditional African societies, and it is within this context that Lulu's experience must be understood. In many parts of the developing world, significant numbers of brides are younger than fifteen. Young brides typically have arranged marriages. Many are traumatized by adult sex and forced to bear children before their bodies are fully mature. Early marriage and child -bearing have serious implications for the health and well-being of the woman and her access to education and training.

Because of her young age, the responsibilities of being wife and provider in the home of a man with children older than herself in addition to all the harassments from the apartheid government, she disintegrated and her mind gave way.

Lulu had been one of the hundreds of people the police had arrested during the riots. She just happened to be where the police were making a swoop that day. No one knows what who did to Lulu while she was in custody. But when she came back, exactly three days after she had been taken by the police, she had become the empty-eyed woman I saw that summer day in 1975 (p. 101).

### 4.3 FRUSTRATED DOMESTIC WORKERS

The other theme of the stories is the frustration of black domestic workers as they are constantly insulted and humiliated by their 'medems'. As Sindiwe Magona herself was a domestic worker for four years, these stories can be said to closely reflect her own experiences.

One of the stories of frustration is "Atini". Unlike most of the other stories in the collection which are narrated in the third person and obviously by Sindiwe Magona, "Atini" is told in the first person by the main character.

I am Atini, though Mrs Reed calls me Tiny. I have been working for Mrs Reed for eighteen months now (p. 12).

Tiny comes from my name, Atini. I feel funny being called Tiny; I am a large woman... But Mrs Reed said: "Oh, I can't say your names, they're difficult. All those clicks and things. I'll call you Tiny" (p. 14).

Atini narrates how she arrived in Cape Town already broken and desperate.

Nombini [a maid] kept me in her room and other maids helped her with food and clothes because I came naked. Nombini burned the clothes I arrived wearing; they had been rags when I left. After the journey, some of it on foot through forests and rivers, by the time I got here they were flenters-threads hanging onto each other with nothing really keeping them together (p. 13).

Realising that her meagre wages are much better than no wages and the rags in which she arrived, Atini clings to her job: "A whole new world is opening right in front of my eyes" (p. 17).

Others, like Stella in the story "Stella" are much more discriminating. Stella complains bitterly about the insensitivity of her 'medem' and the rudeness of her children.

You know this woman has children the same ages as mine. I must send my children here to help her and her children while I am sick. My children must miss school to come and make sure their goat food is made, the beds are made, their shoes are polished, their clothes are washed (p. 21).

Virginia, in the story of her own name, is bitter:

Maybe I should go and see a witchdoctor. Really, jokes aside, maybe someone is trying to make this woman chase me away so she can get my job. Where do you hear a woman tell me I stink? Me? Five years I work for this woman. Today, she

discovers I smell (p. 34).

Frustrated and insulted though they are, the maids realise, like Atini, that life as domestic worker is a heaven as compared to where they come from.

My own children and grandchildren don't eat things as good as those dogs and cats of hers eat: "strue, I tell you. But I'm nailed here; I can't leave" (p. 48).

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... We are slaves in the white women's kitchens... I ran away from that hell of starvation, torn clothes, sick children. And I came here to work so that I would feed my children, clothe them, send them to school, and have money to take them to the doctor if they are seriously ill. Now, I find that I am in hell. And I am a slave (pp. 59-60).

The theme of entrapment is taken up again in the story of "Nosisa". Nosisa is a bright young school girl, the envy of her mates, who is the only daughter of her widowed mother. For the sake of survival, her mother has been working as a maid. Just as in the case of Sindiwe Magona herself, the mother's 'medem' was kind enough to allow Nosisa to stay with her mother in the backyard of the main house. This backyard is the only home Nosisa has ever known. She has grown up in it and watched over the years the humiliation of her mother and her mother's lack of protest at this humiliation. One day on her way back 'home' from school she suddenly begins to think aloud about 'home':

Township children are lucky, truly they are, believe me. Do they daily see their mothers treated like dirt? No, worse than dogs? By the women they work for. And by the husbands of those women. By their children, their friends and their relatives (p. 85)?

These accounts of frustration and dejection closely reflect Sindiwe Magona's own account of her life as a domestic worker. As she explains in the passage that follows, she was quite fortunate to have had very sympathetic employers. But not even that sympathy could erase the feeling of marginalisation which she must have been forced to live with:

Thus, an ordinary week wasn't bad. I worked from seven in the morning to eight-thirty at night, Monday to Friday, and seven to two-thirty in the afternoon on Saturday, and Sunday, eight to ten-thirty. No, it wasn't a bad job for a domestic servant. Moreover, I had my baby with me, luxury and a privilege. Most domestic workers are sleep-ins: they live on the premises. The law forbids members of their families including spouses, to live with them. Some employers turn a blind eye to the glaring signs indicating the frequent visits of a spouse

booming, obviously male voice, heavy footsteps in the middle of the night and the same steps, now departing, at crack of dawn, the heaped plate or indeed, two plates carried by the maid to her room at night, the maid's laundry hanging on her wash line, shirts several sizes too large for her, man's underpants, etc. The law says it is forbidden, the wise employer may choose not to see the black man walking in her very yard! That the Garlands let me keep my baby with me made me see them as kinder than most and for that favour I would tolerate many an infringement (TCC: 124)!

South Africa is described in its constitution as a non-racial and non-sexist democracy. In a setting in which racial discrimination has been the most visible and most widely discussed form of exploitation and oppression, all efforts to come to grips with other forms of exploitation and oppression must also deal with racism, both current and historical. In addition, South Africans are just beginning to implement a constitution, policies, and process that will facilitate the development of gender equality, much work remains to be done. Rural women in particular, should be supported in their struggle to survive poverty.

As long as black women lack an independent means of livelihood to back them, they are likely to respond to male domination and racial oppression with small acts of self-assertion. Yet the women are united through their shared experience and informal support networks. Some day, they could use that unity to change their lives and their children's lives.

CHAPTER FIVE  
VICIOUS CYCLE OF VIOLENCE — *Mother to Mother*

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters described the various traumas, frustrations, and humiliations that affect the young mothers saddled with many children and abandoned by their husbands. In this chapter I shall examine some of the end-results of those traumas, frustrations, and humiliations, using *Mother to Mother* (1998) as the focus of study. Sindiwe Magona decided to write this novel when she discovered that Fulbright scholar Amy Biehl, who had been killed while working to organize the nation's first ever democratic elections in 1993, died just a few yards away from her own residence in Guguletu, Cape Town. She then realised that one of the boys held responsible for killing was in fact her neighbour's son. Magona began to imagine how easily it might have been her own son caught up in the wave of violence that day.

The book is based on this real-life incident, and takes the form of an epistle to Amy Biehl's mother. The murderer's mother, Mandisa, writes about her life, the life of her child, and the colonized society that not only allowed, but perpetuated violence against women and impoverished black South Africans under the reign of apartheid. The result is not an apology for the murder, but a beautifully written exploration of the society that bred such violence. Seeking explanations to heal her sorrow, Mandisa addresses the mother of the dead girl and gives a compelling account of the life of Africans in the townships. As she probes the memory and examines the life of her family-disenfranchised, displaced, and often brutally abused by the white power elite ruling their native land-she discovers the murder is the almost inevitable outcome of apartheid legacy. Through this process of discovery and dialogue, Mandisa hopes her grief and an understanding of her son's world will ease the pain of the victim's mother.

As mentioned earlier, the novel takes the form of an epistle from the mother of the murderer to the mother of the murdered. Sindiwe Magona uses the technique of flashback to switch from the past in which the life and background of the murderer are described to the present in which the circumstances of the murder are described. As the present involves the scenes of the murder of

Amy Biehl, its thematic significance is restricted. Hence, I shall concentrate on the past which is intended to account for the present.

## 5.2 THE CURSE OF THE PAST

The section of the novel dealing with the past begins with a reflection by the mother of the murderer.

*From the beginning, this child has been nothing but trouble. But you have to understand my son. Understand the people among whom he has lived all his life. Nothing my son does surprises me any more. Not after that first unbelievable shock, his implanting himself inside me; unreasonably and totally destroying the me I was. The me I would have become (p. 88).*

Like Sindiwe Magona herself, Mandisa, the mother of the murderer, had high hopes for the future.

I was thirteen...About to start the final class of Primary School. I was going into Standard Six and, come year's end, would sit for external examinations... Mama had high hopes for me... for both of us, my brother and me. Our parents believed that education would free us from the slavery that was their lot as uneducated labourers (p. 88).

Again like Sindiwe Magona, her life changed suddenly on the realisation of a pregnancy.

But, the very next morning .. Not only did those grand plans unravel but my very life came to an abrupt halt (p. 114).

Her school boyfriend who was responsible for the pregnancy denied it when confronted with the reality: "No," he said ... "Mandisa," China hissed ... "Go and find whoever did this to you".

However, his parents who were God-fearing pressurised him into accepting responsibility.

Had Father Savage, under whom China's father served as a lay preacher, not insisted that China "do the right thing as a Christian", I doubt the marriage negotiations would have started at all (p. 136).

Soon after the baby was born and was given the name 'Mxolisi', or 'he who would bring peace'. But the name quickly turned out to be ironic because soon afterwards, China abandoned his wife and child.

China had last been seen at his job on Monday. Knocked off at seven, as usual. Then he didn't show up the next day, or the next... Nearly twenty years later, I



have not heard from him (p. 144).

In desperation, Mandisa was forced to go and find work: “I took a job. What else? As a domestic servant (p.145)”. When Mxolisi was only four years old, he had his first experience of police brutality.

One day, Mxolisi was at the big house at the back of which we lived, where I almost always left him when I went to work... Mxolisi, now four years old, could already tell the difference between the bang! of a gun firing and the Gooph! of a burning skull cracking, the brain exploding. This day, however, minutes after the onset of the firing, Mzamo, mouth frothing, ran into the house... A few minutes later, the police stormed into the house... “Where are they?” [the police] barked... “Here they are! Here they are, in the wardrobe!” screamed Mxolisi, pointing to the wardrobe... [The] police shot them then and there... We all feared for Mxolisi who, by nights, thrashed about and screamed in his sleep since that episode (pp 147-148).

As was to be expected, he grew up embittered by that experience and sought an answer in politics.

Mxolisi got himself involved in politics. Boycotts and strikes and stay-aways and what have you? Soon, he was a leader in students’ politics... These children went around the township screaming.. LIBERATION NOW, EDUCATION LATER! and ONE SETTLER, ONE BULLET! (p. 161).

To curb it all, Mxolisi and other children grew up frequently overhearing their mothers wailing about their lot and the lot of fellow blacks: “We have come thus to hunger, for white people stole our land (p. 173)”.

The end-result is described well by Mandisa:

*It's been a long, hard road, my son has travelled. Now, your daughter has paid for the sins of the fathers and mother who did not do their share of seeing that my son had a life worth living (p. 3).*

The urban displaced face huge challenges, particularly housing problems. They have to pay rent for electricity and water, which is very expensive considering they have no jobs. Poverty level is very high, a precondition for prostitution, early marriages and a tendency to get into polygamous marriages. Most of the children do not go to school and the level of employment is very low even among the educated and trained, and for illiterate, displaced children particularly girls,

opportunities are indeed very few. The preceding chapter not only identifies problem areas affecting women and children but also conveys recommendations for action.

## CHAPTER SIX

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

#### 6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study the abandoned woman as expressed in Sindiwe Magona's novels, has brought me to the following insights:

- The need for the establishment of Training and Research Centres for women that will put pressure on existing institutions catering for both men and women. Such institutions should mobilize African women, especially rural African women, to broaden their horizons and strengthen their skills.
- South Africa should be concerned with the situation of displaced persons like Lulu in *Living as representative* of the large numbers of women who suffered and are still suffering from the effects of apartheid. They went through untold dangers, hardships, abuse, and exploitation and should therefore receive some kind of assistance from the government. The appalling sight of thousands of men, women and children uprooted from their habitat, helpless and hungry, should be a challenge to the present government. It is clear that no easy solution can be found without first tackling the root causes of involuntary human displacement.
- Equality between men and women should be a guiding principle for the South African government. The new constitution of South Africa states that men and women must be given equal opportunities and treated equally but it is necessary to establish some mechanism to monitor the situation with a view to improving the status of women.
- Girls need to be encouraged to enter the fields of science and technology, so that they will gain access to the scientific professions.
- Fellow black women need to be given economic independence since millions of young

women are dependent on men and illiterate. The result of that dependence is that girls are more likely to be affected by AIDS than boys of the same age. Poverty forces many of them to earn a living through prostitution while it keeps them from seeking medical attention when it is needed. Clearly, economic empowerment would make it possible for girls and women to have a choice of the way in which to support themselves and their families.

- Government should promulgate laws to eradicate cultural practices that dehumanize and disinherit women especially in the areas of birth, education and marriage. Women=s organisations should act as pressure groups in this regard.
- Better communication in the family is essential to help keep marriages intact, and to maintain both discipline and two-way understanding with children particularly teenagers. In most communities mothers play a key role in this regard and in extended families are often they are assisted by the grandmothers, aunts and sisters. When possible, mothers must insist that fathers play a more active role in bringing up their children, especially in educating children with a view to their future roles in family life.
- In view of the shortage of affordable day-care for the children of working parents, individual women and organisations should keep on demanding the provision of better facilities by employers, organisations and government. It is to be applauded, however, that many women of all races already help to fulfil this need by providing day-care (in creches, or at home as “day mothers”) a service that is beneficial to them as well as creating jobs for themselves.
- Gender-sensitive approaches require both men and women to: recognize and revalue women’s experiences, skills, and contributions to social life, then economy, and culture; share domestic and caring responsibilities, thus promoting women’s participation in decision making in economic, social, and political institutions, and participate in society as conscious, active, and responsible citizens.

- Even without following a career in politics, many women can make a valuable contribution by helping with bridge-building efforts and community development projects essential in post-apartheid South Africa.
- Although many women have made important contributions in various spheres of life in recent years, the problems facing South Africa are such that we shall all have to work even harder at seeking solutions and improving inter-group relations. Research has shown that women tend to have a collaborative, co-operative, and consultative approach to solving problems and conflicts of interest, whereas men often tend to be authoritarian, competitive and confrontational. This could mean that South African women can play a special role as mediators in seeking solutions to accommodate the needs and aspirations of the various groups in the complex South African community.

The recommendations do not imply that their implementation would resolve all aspects of women's problems. They would, however, ameliorate the salient needs of women and instil in them hope that the world has not forgotten and abandoned them.

## 6.2 CONCLUSION

Magona, through her works, challenges women to reject the negative images of black womanhood, pointing out that racial and sexual oppression are the fundamental causes of black women's poverty. She urges black women to forge self-definition by way of self-reliance and independence while simultaneously seeing the potential of black women as educators.

This study has, hopefully contributed to conscientizing society that despite all the challenges and difficulties women are going through, some women are making an important contribution in their search for solutions to the problems facing South Africa, not only in their traditional areas of family, education, community service, and health care, but in the community and the economy as well.

It is a promising sign that women are increasingly moving into professions which were, in the

past, regarded as 'a man's world'. For instance, Sindiwe Magona, Mamphela Ramphele and many others are contributing to this positive move, formally and professionally through career activities, and informally as home-makers and parents.

Magona has in her personal life, succeeded in shaking off the heavy burden of womanhood imposed by the black male, the state and social structures. It is to this burden, shared by African women generally, that the first-person narrator of *Nervous Conditions* (1988) refers when consoled by her mother because her father would not allow her to pursue her education because she is female:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden. Aren't we the ones who bear children? And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength (p. 16).

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Throughout this dissertation, I have used the following terms: black, woman, female, feminism, tradition, and traditional; with the following meanings:

1. black referring to a dark-skinned race
2. class referring to a category of division based on economic status and members of a class are theoretically assumed to possess similar cultural, political and economic characteristics and principles
3. classism referring to discrimination based on class
4. disadvantaged referring to a group characterized by disproportionate economic, social and political disadvantages
5. discrimination referring to a biased decision on a prejudice against an individual group characterized by race, class, sexual orientation, age, disabilities, etc
6. woman referring to a fully grown human female
7. female referring to the sex that gives birth to the young
8. feminism referring to the movement advocating equal rights, status, ability, and treatment of women, based on the belief that women are not in anyway inferior to men

9. gender referring to the system of sexual classification based on the social construction of the categories 'men' and 'women', as opposed to sex which is based on biological and physical differences which form the categories 'male' and 'female'
10. class ceiling referring to the maximum position and salary some claim minorities and women are allowed to reach without any chances of further promotion or advancement within an employment scenario
11. prejudice referring to the exerting bias and bigotry based on uniformed stereotypes
12. privilege referring to power and advantages benefiting a group derived from the historical oppression and exploitation of other groups
13. race referring to classification of people based on common nationality, history, or experiences
14. racism referring to an act of discrimination based on an ideology of racial superiority
15. tradition referring to the passing down of the beliefs, practices, and customs from the past to the present
16. traditional referring to operating in accordance with tradition.

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