

## Motherhood and Childhood During Apartheid: A Study of Four Texts

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### Abstract

*Black women played numerous roles during apartheid. They were mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, political activists, to mention a few. There is scant research and literary works on experiences of ordinary people during apartheid though that is changing. This paper seeks to contribute towards this growing discourse by contradicting stereotypical depictions of black women as victims, trouble causers, among others, through foregrounding their dynamism. Shirley, Goodness and Mercy, Native Nostalgia, Born a Crime and Other Stories, hereafter, “Born a Crime” and Song for Sarah: Lessons from my mother, hereafter, “Song for Sarah” were purposively sampled. Findings indicated that women’s adoption of explicit and implicit forms resistance enabled them to take apartheid in their stride and at times means of apartheid unintentionally benefitted black people. This was revealed through the four texts’ use of techniques such as humour and multiple narratives. This paper adds to growing corpus of studies on experiences of marginalized groups during apartheid. It is hoped that the paper will: stimulate further studies on women and children’s experiences of apartheid, encourage authors, researchers and the general populace to embrace diversity as depicted in the texts.*

**Keywords:** *Black Women, Children, Apartheid, South Africa, Narratives.*

### Introduction

Apartheid, a previous system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination that ran from 1948 to 1994 (Purcell, 2020), occupies a prominent position in the annals of South African history. Apartheid and its association with colonialism posed a traumatic period for the majority of indigenous South African citizens (Ngcobo, 2024). The first decade after South Africa’s political freedom spawned a plethora of literary and history texts which were dominated by the country’s heroic figures in terms of subject and authorship; Nelson Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom, The Last Trek, by F.W de Klerk (1998), Gillian Slovo’s “Every Secret Thing” (1997), to mention a few. Ludlow (2016, p.23), however, states that biographies, especially male biographies once “became suspect” owing to the influence of nationalism and other forms of collectivism. Moolla (2017) notes that Zubeida Jaffer’s “Love in the Time of Treason: The Life Story of Ayesha Dawood” (2008), the self-titled “Fatima Meer: Memories of Love and Struggle” (2017) were some of the autobiographies written by little known people. A further shift towards inclusion of narratives of apartheid experiences from ordinary citizens was marked by Wits University’s establishment of the Apartheid Archive Project (AAP) in 2008. The AAP initiative involves researchers’ documentation of stories from ‘ordinary’ South Africans dotted around the globe (Stanley, 2018).

Patterson (2017) analyses the theme of youth and childhood in South African literary texts with child protagonists. This study goes beyond analysing child narrators by including their relationship with their mothers and to a limited extent, their maternal relatives. Chris in Shirley, Goodness and Mercy (2004) acknowledges the support that his mother gave him on his way to become an activist and a writer, Dlamini (Native Nostalgia), Trevor (Born a Crime) and Jansen (Song for Sarah) also thank their mothers for preparing them for their successful careers. The four texts fulfil Ndebele’s (1986) clarion call to include ordinary black South Africans in literature. Exposure to stories of ‘ordinary’ people enables the policymakers to frame policies which are inclusive to the country’s diverse groups (Stevens, Duncan & Sonn, 2013).

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Smith and Watson (2001) state that life writing covers several forms of non-fiction: autobiographies which are written by subjects of the stories and biographies which are authored by people other than the subjects though sometimes lines are blurred. However, memoirs locate the subject in a social environment, as either “observer or participant” (p.198). By claiming that “biographies and autobiographies are far and away the most popular genres of non-fiction in post-apartheid South Africa” (p.165), Jacobs and Bank (2019) refute Ngwenya’s (2017) argument that despite their popularity, autobiographies are not the most popular form of non-fiction. What is indisputable though, is their inclusion of experiences of ordinary black families from different backgrounds. Shirley, Goodness & Mercy and Song for Sarah are set in the coloured communities; the former traces Chris’ upbringing in Riverlea whilst the latter narrates how, at a young age Jansen and his family are forcibly relocated from the Utopian area called Montague to the Cape Flats. Born A Crime chronicles Trevor’s birth to a white man and a black woman who raises him in black townships like Soweto and Eden Park, a coloured area. In Native Nostalgia, Dlamini sentimentally narrates his childhood in Katlehong, a black township.

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions (i) what is the presentation of mothers in the four literary texts? (ii), how do the texts achieve this presentation? (ii) and (iii) to what extent does the representation of mothers in the literary texts, offer an empowering vision for South Africa?

A description of intersectionality, the theory which informs this study appears in the next section followed by scholarly works on apartheid and different narratives of apartheid and its influence on black South Africans from different backgrounds will be examined. The research process; tools and procedures that were followed and data that were collected will be disclosed in the methods section. Subsequently, recurring themes will make way for the presentation of findings, which in turn, was followed by recommendations. A synopsis of the major issues discussed concludes the study.

#### *Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality*

Intersectionality is a theory whose integration into the academia is attributed to Crenshaw (Hill-Collins, 2016). This concept is derived from the confluence of roads where vehicles come and go (Crenshaw, 1989, p.149) just as discrimination is caused by “race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p.228). Crenshaw argues that any meaningful discussion on inclusivity must have women as its “starting point” (1989, p.140). She, however, warns that overlooking differences among women’s groups can perpetuate or increase marginalization of the most marginalized groups.

Grosfoguel (2007) hails intersectionality for exposing “multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies” that facilitate “domination and exploitation where the racial/ethnic hierarchy of the European/non-European divide transversally reconfigures all of the other global power structures” (p. 217). Intersectionality “captures the fact that systems of oppression are not singular; they overlap and intersect in the same way that power does” (Crenshaw in The Equal Rights Review, 2016, p.210). Hill-Collins (2000, p.299) coined the term “matrix of domination” to show race, social class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, ethnicity, age and the bureaucratic nature of power relations within a society. The concept of an “interlocking system of oppression” was formulated by the Combahee River Collective (CRC) (Carastathis, 2016, p.161). In addition to facilitating disenfranchisement, intersectionality exposes “negative synergy of the various elements that operates to deprive a person of their rights and to submit them to domination, discrimination and oppression” (Patricia Schulz in The Equal Rights Review, 2016, p.210).

Theories are often viewed as esoteric but intersectionality has proved its praxis in interdisciplinary studies and even “as a movement” (Al-Faham, Davis & Ernst, 2019, p.248). It has transcended black feminism to become “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (McCall, 2005, p.1771). This attests to Crenshaw’s argument that “the Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides” (1989, p.149). Despite broadening the scope of classifications to feminist discourse, Crenshaw discloses that there are still more categorizations which she has not referred to.

However, like any other theory, intersectionality is not beyond reproach. McCall states that it brings “intracategorical complexity” which is caused by what he quotes Dill as saying, is due to authors’ tendency to concentrate on certain “social groups at neglected points of intersection—people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups” (McCall, 2005, p.1774). This means, whilst seeking to include minority groups, it is important to avoid what we term “marginalizing the mainstream”, the bigger, prominent group. Hill-Collins warns that, application of intersectionality must be done cautiously lest it overshadows indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). Davis (2008) notes that intersectionality is somewhat “vague” (p.69) whilst Hill-Collins and Bilge (2016) posit that the concept is only understood by “a small segment of educated, well-off people in the Global South”. To deal with this, Hill-Collins and Bilge (2016) suggest incorporating media in hip hop or digital activism to increase its inclusivity (p. 61). Though McGinley and Cooper (2013) recognize intersectionality, they suggest adoption of the term “multidimensionality” which they reckon, clarifies the interconnectedness of identities, (p. 335). Hill-Collins stresses that differences in categories within intersectionality should be viewed as its potential to cater for diverse groups.

## Literature Review

Black women feature prominently in several texts which portray experiences of black people in oppressive societies. Despite the scarcity of ordinary people in literary texts as stated earlier, depiction of black female characters often borders on victimhood. Despite her determination, Sindisiwe Zikode, a domestic worker-cum freedom fighter in Lauretta Ngcobo’s first novel, *Cross of Gold* (1981), is fatally shot in Botswana where she had fled by the South African Police leaving her sons behind. In Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), MaShingirayi tells her daughter Tambu that women suffer from double oppression “poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other” (p.16). In addition to racism and sexism, Emecheta’s *In the Ditch* (1972) highlights struggles of immigrants. Adah, a Nigerian sociology student quits her job at the British Museum to qualify for a welfare grant so that she can fend for her five children in the slums where she stays after her husband’s sudden relocation to Nigeria.

Patterson, (2017, p.28) states that differences in background between black and white writers make the genre of child autobiographies a “site of struggle”. Garman (2018) has also noted constraints placed on both black and white writers of works set during apartheid; the former are expected to project suffering of black people whilst the latter, to avoid appearing aloof due to their exposure to privileges from the system. The conflict plays itself out in the confrontation between black youth protesters and the apartheid government in Miriam Tlali’s *Amandla* (1980), the first South African novel written in English by a female black writer. Ndebele, credits works based on childhood experiences for facilitating “recovery of childhood and innocence” (1986, p.43). *Umama*, a compendium of stories about mothers and grandmothers of forty South Africans celebrities like Lucas Radebe, Sibongile Khumalo, Trevor Manuel, Antjie Krog, JM Coetzee, Pieter-Dirk Uys, Elana Meyer, Miriam Makeba, among others (Keim, 2009) offers sentimental accounts of their relationships with their relatives. However, these accounts are from adults so this study seeks to fill the lacuna by examining the four texts under study to find out experiences of children and mothers (as proxies for parents and adults) from perspectives of children who are not constrained by self-censorship. Nonetheless, *Umama* provides a sample that represents relationships between mothers and their children across the spectrum of South Africa’s multicultural population.

### *Mainstreaming the Ordinary in Storytelling*

Van der Merwe argues for the inclusion of stories which reveal strategies that ordinary people developed to effectively deal with apartheid instead of perpetuating “dominant stories” of influential people (2005, p.ii). Ngwenya (2017) argues that there are different apartheid narratives. Gordimer’s critics allege that she immerses herself too much into experiences of South Africans leaving little room for storytelling, yet politics affects everyone so Gordimer’s works rightfully indicate the “prosaic quality of everyday life” during apartheid (Pearsall, 2000, p.95). Gordimer and Coetzee regard as abrogation of duty, writers’ avoidance of such stories hence they reserve the term “fastidious” for such writers who eschew portrayal of apartheid’s oppressive effects (Pearsall, 2000, p.98). Mngxitama expresses cynicism towards whites’ studying black

townships and black experiences, accusing Harber's eponymous Diepsloot as a ploy to whitewash oppression of black people (2011, Line 17). Mngxitama somewhat contradicts himself by complimenting "cutting-edge narrative power" in *My Traitor's Heart*, a novel by Rian Malan, a white author (line 8). Gerhart (1965) noted incongruencies in speeches of two South African men, Ronald Segal, who was white and Nat Nakasa, who was black as the former tore into the apartheid government, yet the latter seemed ambivalent. With hindsight, de Kock (2005) mentions that the attempt by academics and scholars to reduce South African writings into a single form was a mistake because writers must be allowed to express themselves creatively. This resonates with White and Epston (1990) who stress the therapeutic effect of involving subjects of a story in its telling which is confirmed by Visser (2015).

### *The Role of an African Storyteller*

Storytellers have always been an important part of African people. Niane (1965, p.xxiv) elaborates that the griot (poet) "occupies the chair of history of a village...he has learnt the art of historical oratory". This means a storyteller is a repository of culture and a fountain of wisdom. The gravity of a writer's social responsibility is encapsulated in descriptors like "ruler" (P'bitek, 1986, p.1), "teacher" (Achebe, 1988, p.5) and "the sensitive point of his community" (Mphahlele cited in Achebe, 1988, p.41). To Achebe, the writer must lead the "re-education and regeneration that must be done" (1988, p.41). South African writer Lauretta Ngcobo told Worsfold in an interview that Black South African writers must simplify issues for everyone, "recover the lost history, the lost culture" and "integrate it into the new situation" (1995, p.183–184). Implicit in the foregoing analyses, is the centrality of cooperation and balance in African culture.

## **Methods**

Initially, we purposively gathered four primary texts, Shirley, Goodness and Mercy, Native Nostalgia, Born a Crime and Other Stories and Song for Sarah: Lessons from my Mother and read them several times. These works were selected because their publication stretches 13 years, with the first text published in 2004, exactly a decade into South Africa's democracy and the last, released in the second decade of freedom. After reading the texts and getting the gist, we scoured for analysis on the texts from secondary sources such as academic publications and interviews involving the respective authors on the internet. Other primary texts included literary works and autobiographies that speak to the influence of mothers on the upbringing of black South Africans during apartheid. Secondary sources on South African autobiographies, the texts under study and similar subjects were used. We then tried to synchronize similar issues to avoid having an unnecessarily large number of subheadings.

## **Findings and Discussions**

After examining the four texts under study, we noted four themes which are: Sons' proximity to mothers, The keepers/ protectors, Fighting the system in small, significant ways, and Strict discipline. We would like to disclose that these themes have been organized as subheadings, not because they are distinct from each other nor in order of importance. In fact, most of the themes are interlinked. For purposes of clarity and avoidance of monotony, we labelled the literary texts from the order in which they were published. This means that Shirley, Goodness and Mercy which was published in 2004, before the other three books is 'Text 1' and 'Song for Sarah: Lessons from my mother' which was published last (2017) is Text 4.

### *Sons' Proximity to Mothers*

Text 1 begins in 1961, at the peak of apartheid with Chris revealing that he is a four-year-old boy who lives in "a slum called Tomato Yard" in Riverlea with "Ma and Dad" (p1). Text 3 starts off in 1993 with a nine-year-old Trevor being tossed from a taxi by his mother after her altercation with the driver. This provides the reader with important context of how the relationship between the narrator and his mother influences their reactions in incidents which are to follow. The physical proximity reflects emotional attachment between the mothers and sons. The other two texts take off in Post Apartheid South Africa, with adult narrators.

Apparently as a sign of affection, in Text 1, Chris sometimes refers to his mother by her first name Shirley. In Text 4, calls his mother Sarah throughout the text just as Trevor mentions his mother's name, Patricia with similar frequency. However, there is no such thing in Text 2 where Dlamini either refers to his mother by her full name, Evelinah Papayi Dlamini (p.25) or simply "my mother". Despite mentioning their mothers' first names, the three other narrators do not directly address them as such possibly due to respect, fear or both because the mothers are very strict. Though Jansen explains that during his maternal grandparents' era, parents and their children had a "more formal relationship" (p.85) so the hardly expressed affection publicly, this applies to almost all the texts. Dlamini's mother implicitly demonstrates love by promising to buy him clothes if he passes. Trevor's mother appears to be more liberal in expressing public affection to her son because she often takes him to the park and to the shops, though she is not as generous with spoiling him. Though they often disagree, Patricia often laughs with her son and tells Trevor that she bore him so that she can have a companion.

Despite being the narrator in Text 4, Jansen avoids mentioning himself. His elder brother, Firstborn, expresses his feelings towards his mother on a few occasions. At one point, he volunteers to drop out of university to avoid straining his mother with transport costs. In turn, Sarah does not want her son to drop out so she arranges regular transport for him. Despite this incident, Firstborn regrets not telling his mother how much he loved her often enough when she is on her deathbed and is if to make up for that, thanks her for everything. Chris, in Text 1, hilariously describes his teacher as the "second prettiest woman in the whole world" after his mother (p.25).

Poems reveal strong feelings. On page 92 in Text 4, Jansen refers to Jennifer Davids' 'Poem for my mother' and Jennifer Joseph's "Moeder" and van Wyk writes "My mother is a boesman meid" (p290). Both poems express sadness at how apartheid has adversely affected their mothers. The two poems cited by Jansen lament the physical that oppressive work is causing to her mother as shown by her damaged hands. Van Wyk's poem which translates to "My mother is a bush girl" is a blunt reference to taunts that black people were subjected to by whites. The two poems demonstrate at a literary and figurative levels, the physical hurt and emotional strain that apartheid has brought to the mothers of the two boys

#### *The keepers/ protectors*

Trevor is possessive and protective of his stepfather. He is frustrated each time she remains with Abel after he assaults her and tries to fight him but is overpowered. Though he threatens not to visit his mother again when Trevor learns that Abel has shot her, he instinctively hands over his credit card to the hospital staff for them to do whatever it takes to treat her. Patricia proved to be equally protective when she literally took two bullets for Andrew after flinging herself in front of Abel as he was about to shoot their son. Chris recounts how his mother stood up for him when he was accused of stealing a comic book by the father of his friend. Similarly, in Text 4, Sarah tells police officers that she is fed up with their intrusion of her privacy.

Though, like Jansen's mother, Chris' mother avoids interfering in teachers' disciplining her child, she expresses her disappointment with Mr Kurk for whipping him a hundred times. Though his father is angered by the incident, Shirley is more emotional as she cries. Chris expresses his desire to become a writer to his mother. Similarly, Trevor's mother tells him that she wants him to escape poverty by doing well in school.

#### *Fighting the System in Small, Significant Ways*

Though they rarely express their perceptions towards the establishment (Sarah was brought up in a family where politics was not discussed), all the mothers, except Dlamini's cannot help it when emotions get the better of them. In Text 4 when Firstborn shouts at a white driver of a railway bus from Cape Town to Montagu for cramping black people on one area yet one or two whites sit on an airconditioned place next to empty seats, Sarah approves with her silence. Sarah's decision to raise her children in English was a "soft resistance" (p.97) against Afrikaans which was associated with apartheid. She also rebelled by leaving the Dutch Reformed Church, kNG Kerk where Afrikaans is the language of communication to the Brethren which was "English in more than language" (p.33). Sarah uses languages as and when she sees fit. She only

uses Afrikaans when she is angry with her children. She makes funny but thought-provoking statements like *Dink jy ek is onder 'n kalkoen uitgebroei?* (Do you think I was hatched under a turkey?) and *Moenie vir my se bokdrolletjies is rosyntjies nie* (Don't tell me buck droppings are raisins). Dlamini argues that, for black people to carry on with their lives seemingly unperturbed by the country's oppression constituted "subversive acts" which inflicted "a moral defeat" on apartheid (Shapiro 2021, p.192). Trevor's mother exploits "cracks in the system", (Text 3, p.34) by pretending to be coloured so that she can stay in Eden Park, asking Robert, her white lover to have a child with her, impersonating a helper so that she could move freely with her coloured son, among other things. Bridger (2021) describes how some female activists acted pregnant to smuggle guns to funerals, which they used for gun salute.

After Chris mentioned that the Walburgh family was mourning slain prime minister Verwoerd who is widely regarded as the architect of apartheid, because they regarded him as a hero who had interests of coloureds at heart elicits a vulgar response. Shirley, blurted, "Look here. Those white hoboes that you see in the streets, they can vote but we can't. So fuck the Walburghs and fuck Verwoerd". That Chris's mother fails to restrain herself from these vulgar utterances demonstrates the pathological debilitating effects of apartheid on her mind. Chris' father's reaction is also strong though less vulgar. When Trevor's mother is called to his school, he expected his mother to reprimand him. However, she tells the headmaster of Glenwood High School that Trevor's laughter at his beatings means he has failed to discipline him. It is a powerful way of exposing the disciplinary structures of the educational system and, by extension, the government.

### *Strict Discipline*

Robbe (2015) observes that motherhood goes beyond biologically giving birth. In an interview with Stoltenkamp (2013) discussing his memoir, *Eggs to lay, chickens to hatch: A memoir*, Chris van Wyk stated that "when my mother wasn't there Agnes was there: the minute my mother left for work, Agnes came, so I had two mothers". This supports Chris' mother's statement in Text 1 that since Agnes is almost her age, her children must respect her. From the outset, in Text 4, Jansen describes his book as a communal effort which speaks to Cape Flats mothers and "many mothers across the length and breadth of South Africa" (p.7). Like Text 4, Text 2 mentions mothers in general and only refers to the narrator's mother after citing other elderly women, Mrs Nkabinde, Mrs Ngcobo who claimed that things were better during apartheid than at the time that they spoke. It appears as though, like Jansen, Dlamini refers to Mrs Nkabinde and Mrs Ngcobo as representatives of mothers who live in Katlehong. He only mentions his mother later and she does not feature prominently in the book. When she beats him for arguing with a police officer, her mother's friends follow suit.

Trevor's mother vicariously attends church and compels him to do the same if he wants to continue staying with her in Text 3 just as Jansen's mother in Text 4 invokes "Sara-iah law", insisting that "while you are under this roof, you will do as I say" (p.8) which includes going to church. These are clearly blackmailing tactics because both mothers would know that their children would be forced into submission. Chris states in Text 3 that they do not attend church regularly because "the van Wyks are not very religious". Nonetheless, the book derives its title "Shirley, Goodness and Mercy" from young his malapropism in reciting the Biblical verse, Psalm 23:6 "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me" which his mother often asked him to repeat to different people. In Text 3, Trevor also reveals his mother's fondness for Psalms.

### **Discussion**

As findings revealed, the influence of motherly figures contributed immensely towards moulding many people into important figures through their contribution towards exposing evils of apartheid. Much as they seemed too harsh, mothers as exemplified by this study's sample, instilled discipline and life lessons on their children. Though, the novels primarily focus on relationships between mother and their children, these characters also represent relations between all children and elderly women in the society who are regarded as children and mothers, respectively. This calls for women to write childhood autobiographies to enable researchers to conduct comparative studies between male and female child narrators. As Williams and

Cultural Studies theorists call for the representation of banal, seemingly mundane aspects of life which includes ‘ordinary’ people, details and places in literary texts (Williams, 1958, p.2), different voices must be heard. In the telling of every story, “inclusion and exclusion are crucial for identity formation in which the self is contrasted with ‘the other’” (Dlamini, Tesfamichael & Mokhele, 2021, p.121). This explains how a supposedly ‘simple’ story has different versions depending on the storyteller.

## Conclusion

It is encouraging that there is a growing trend towards women and child autobiographies which reflect experiences of black South Africans during apartheid. This assists expose the contribution that they made towards freedom, a role largely associated with men. Research centers and educational institutions also contribute immensely by highlighting issues such as apartheid; therefore, everyone should participate as researchers, contributors, or in any way that helps document information. People and organizations that have a capacity to fund initiatives that promote curation of experiences of black South Africans during apartheid should do so.

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