

Sindiwe Magona's *To My Children's Children* and *Mother to Mother*. A Customised Womanist Notion of Home within Feminist Perspectives

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Abstract—In this paper I discuss the intersection of global feminism and Magona's refracted womanism in her major autobiographies *To My Children's Children* and *Mother to Mother*, utilizing the concept of home. I argue that Magona's notion of feminism has developed as she was interacting with shifting orientations of various sub-groups of feminism across the ages. This is why I analyse her two works in order to trace influences of second and third wave feminisms, in exploring the continuum of her own brand of feminism. I probe Magona's valuing of identity as a tool for liberation. I proceed to exhibit that the feminist discourse of Magona's two major works consistently identifies with a layer of 1970s third wave or new generation feminists who sought to move subjugated voices from the periphery to the centre. I use the perspectives outlined above to scrutinise Magona's two major works in a manner showing her to craft her nuanced idea of home dialectically within the development of global feminist theory even as I show how she appropriated the theory.

Index Terms—Feminism, home, Sindiwe Magona, South African, apartheid.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I analyse Sindiwe Magona's major autobiographies *To My Children's Children* [1] and *Mother to Mother* [2]. I pursue how in the discourses of her fiction Magona refines her trope of black feminism or womanism progressively. I indicate how Magona has based her theoretical project in the notion of womanism defined by world black feminists such as Alice Walker as embodied in a communal mother committed to the integrity, resilience and wellbeing of an entire people [3]. I argue that her kind of feminism is propelled by her self-defining, distinct cultural identification with a specific group. Identification with a specific group, as I explain below, joins Magona and global womanists although some global feminist schools regarded it as counterproductive to the freedom targeted by feminist agency. Magona's affinity with womanism is evident in Mehta's observation that "feminists from Africa and the African diaspora have embraced the idea of social or othermothering, whereby the use of the term mother is not restricted solely to the biological mother and her functions, but extends itself to include a community activist of feminine orientation who works toward the overall benefit of the group" [4].

I demonstrate that Magona's distinctive contributions to

the idea of black feminism or womanism takes shape within a broader theoretical mould of evolving global feminism, thus attaining what Mann and Huffman describe as a simultaneously localised and global feminism connecting local and global processes affecting women in different social locations across the world [5]. I show how in ways similar to and differing with approaches of other writers, Magona's distinct notion of home is embedded in her own feminist novelistic discourse. According to Briganti and Mezei, the tendency towards a domestically oriented feminist ideology gained ground during the new feminism of the 1920s, with the aim of improving "the situation of women in the home" [6]. This was in contrast with what Briganti and Mezei describe as the anti-home view of the modernist movement during the period between the two world wars in its rejection of what appeared to be a revival of the traditional "cult of domesticity" known for objectifying women as "domestic, mother, housewife, and wife." [6]. I analyse Magona's selected long narratives with the intention to demarcate the road she judiciously charted for herself in the midst of a maze of global feminist currents, including new feminism of the modernist period, black womanism, second wave feminism, third wave/new generation feminism as well as feminist postmodernism and poststructuralism.

As I glean evidence of Magona's gravitation towards a feminism boldly affirming association with a specific group and an empowering regard for the home, I also probe her own feminist stance towards the broader idea of identity. While some layers of third wave feminists viewed the gendered oppositional identity of women or woman subcategories in relation to dominant men or man subcategories as hostile to the liberating ideal of feminism, significantly a subgroup of third wave feminists embraced identity in "gender relations" in a more positive and nuanced manner than indiscriminate "resistance to categorization or identity," according to Mann and Huffman [5]. Such an observation has led me to scrutinise Magona's novelistic discourse within the context of an epoch of feminism beyond the 1960s and 1970s and up to the heyday of third wave/new generation feminism. I thus examine Magona's feminist discourse around identity and liberation, as she displays it in the fabric of her two autobiographies of the early and late 1990s. I exhibit that she beneficially employed some aspects of second and third wave feminisms to sustain her view of black women's differentiated motivations and objectives of feminist agency. I argue that Magona's steadfast shaping of an appropriated feminism was not marred by dominant feminist discourse's

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implementation of the political perspectives of Marxism or liberal feminism in lumping together women of all race and class in the fight against gender and class domination.

I scrutinize Magona's selected autobiographies in a fashion showing her mellowing affinity with the early 1990s feminist theory of "simultaneous and multiple oppressions" as rearticulated by Patricia Hill Collins (cited in Mann and Huffman), signalling a new feminist epistemology I conceive as a bridging of the gap between so-called essentialist tropes such as Black feminism on the one hand, and on the other hand ostensibly neutral stances actually privileging essentially white group feminisms [5]. Called intersectionality theory, Collins's late third wave/new generation inflection of global feminism mediated oversimplified feminist views by acknowledging that domination in its heterogeneous totality contains "multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives [and] situated knowledges" with not one group having "a clear angle of vision" (cited in Mann and Huffman) [5].

From the late 1990s, global feminism continues to experience convergences and divergences of earlier streams of thought, yet generally moved away from intersectionalist premising of feminism on "groups exploiting other groups" and "an analysis of oppression that was relational, oppositional and structural, despite its multiplicity" [5]. The new broad orientation of such feminist postmodernists and poststructuralists was that "identity is simply a construct of language, discourse, and cultural practices," the affirming of which "merely reproduces and sustains dominant discourses and regulatory power" (Foucault in Mann and Huffman) [5]. In this study I demonstrate how in her brand of feminism Magona congruously embraces the viewing of identities "as multiple, fluid and unstable"; and as enabling a freedom that is characterised as "resistance to categorization" [5]. I thus show how, among many other features, Magona's inflection of feminism vies for what Foucault has described as "the happy limbo of non-identity" (in Mann and Huffman) [5]. Yet, Magona's feminism is such that it satisfied also the seemingly contradictory requirement of current global feminism of recognising, as Mehta points out, "a plurality of woman-centred experiences" borne of such women of varying identities interrogating their "respective cultures and traditions" [4]. I illustrate by means of examples from the two autobiographies that such a paradoxical narrative intersection of identity and non-identity characterises Magona as a current feminist, because she displays what Mann and Huffman describe as a "celebration of contradictions" [5].

II. PERSPECTIVE OF A MORE NUCLEAR HOME: TO MY CHILDREN'S CHILDREN

A close look at Magona's *To My Children's Children* reveals, in metonymically significant ways, a cluster of ideas intertwined with her notion of home [1]. In this section, I illustrate how home for Magona cannot be divorced from place, birthplace, belonging, deprivation, womanism, community, alienation; hybridity, room, and being. Cutting through these perspectives of home in Magona's novelistic discourse contained in this

autobiography is the question of power which she agentively interrogates in relation to her culturally self-defining identity. Such a subjectivity is tied to what a writer such as Brisolaro has described as a suggestion by "feminists writing on empowerment" of the "need to place the subject's interpretation and mediation of her experiences at the centre of inquiries into the how and why of power" [7].

The narrator's declaration right at the opening of the narrative, "I was born in the Union of South Africa before Great Britain handed over our land to the Afrikaner" (1), constitutes evidence of Magona's discursive "interpretation and mediation" as she engages with her feminist project of questioning "how and why" as a black South African woman of Xhosa cultural identity she finds herself disempowered, to use Brisolaro's terms [7]. In this way, Magona, in ways I demonstrate in this paper, provides her own account of her feminist experience set during the turning point of pre-democracy South Africa. Going by Attridge's commentary on Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* [8], Magona in a sense shows parallels with the "compulsion to seek for a historical and genealogical grounding for one's sense of identity" evident in "post-apartheid South African novels" [9]. Due to the fact of varied identities both within apartheid and post-apartheid periods in South Africa, from her own self-describing identity Magona surely does contribute to what Attridge understands as post-apartheid South African writers' reflection of "a need to complicate the myths of purity, linearity, and separation on which apartheid was founded" [9]. This is why Magona opens *To My Children's Children* with a foregrounding of her existential plight as a black South African woman born under apartheid spearheaded by two successive patriarchal, racist and classist systems of government [1].

As soon as Magona has exposed the reader socio-politically to the subjectively defined notion of her birthplace home highlighted as apartheid South Africa, she asserts her own redeeming antidote of such an identically alienating home, as an empowering home "that means less a geographical locality and more a group of people" with whom she is connected and to whom she declares to belong (1-2). That such an obverse of apartheid South Africa as her home is empowering is attested to by the words, "As far back as I can remember, there has always been a place to which I belonged with a certainty that nothing has been able to take from me," and that such a notion of home "is a given, a constant in my life." (1-2). The culturally communal dimension of such a freeing home linked to identity is made clear at the point the autobiographer indicates that "Always ... there was at least one adult Sitting with us around the fire ... To keep us children awake, she would tell us *iintsomi*, the fairly-tales of amaXhosa" (5). Comparable with the way English novelistic discourse evolved in the period from the eighteenth century to the mostly modernist 1920s, according to Grant the metaphor of "houses, their interiors, and the objects found in them" represented in *To My Children's Children* by a home depicted as apartheid South Africa, is "intimately concerned with property, and with the place of the domestic interior as a place of dreams and aspirations, and their realization or thwarting" [10].

Surely the “overhanding” of Magona’s birthplace by the British to the Afrikaners symbolizes the thwarting of Magona’s feministically freeing ideals tied to home, while the other home existing in Magona’s psyche of a culturally and communally coalesced home represents striven-for freedom from multi-layered patriarchal, classist, racist and sexist oppression.

What distinguishes the treatment of home in *To My Children’s Children* [1] from the way it is interrogated in *Mother to Mother* [2] is Magona’s skilful hingeing of the notion of home on actual physical abode. While Magona’s novelistic discourse lives to historical fictive unpacking of home as “depictions of the interior ... established as an important tool in the novelists’ construction of character as well as of background” as Grant asserts, the detailing of home in *To My Children’s Children* (1990) is more a tangible portrayal of the interior of home than it is a psychic background or context to the depicted home that is apartheid South Africa [10]. Magona’s technique alternately provides the temperamentally alienating socio-political context of the incidents even as she paints in high relief the physical conditions in which she is forced to grow and live. An example is her counterpointing in the unfolding plot of her narrative of statements such as “Like comets, strange people from another world occasionally ruffled our even-keeled existence’ (10), with almost realist depictions of the interior of apartheid South Africa that is her home, as in “I had just witnessed my first liquor raid. It was a Friday night. Possession of liquor by an African was forbidden by law. To remedy the situation, the African locations sprouted shebeens. Shebeen Queens bought and sold liquor. They paid so-called ‘coloured’ men to go to the liquor stores for them” (20). On the next page Magona’s inclination remains towards the physical interior of her apartheid South African home territory, in her description of Blaauwlei Location the Gungululu black people had been forcefully removed to: “Here, each shack declared to all and sundry that it had nothing to do with any other shack” (21).

Later in the storyline, Magona’s escape into her African cultural consciousness by acknowledging a hybridity calling for consistently delicate self-description revealed by the expression “My horizon widened as I grew older” (42), is juxtaposed with a graphic portrayal of the physical interior of home apartheid South Africa, metonymically manifested in the interior of her father’s house: “As soon as a child could speak, in my father’s house, that child was taught the Lord’s Prayer. After the evening meal, evening chores and some family pleasantries, everyone was rounded up for evening prayer. Father’s booming voice would announce the hymn to be sung at the onset of prayer. Following the singing, the children standing huddled together, arms folded and eyes closed, would recite the Lord’s Prayer” (55). An identity challenge needing a carefully crafted hybrid identity on the part of the protagonist Magona is externalised from her psychic interiority through the description of live conflict in her father’s house: “This straddling of two worlds, the world of school and ‘civilization’ and the world of ancestor worship, witchdoctors, and traditional rites, often created disagreements in our home” (59).

The likening of apartheid South Africa’s colonist rulers to “comets” (10) testifies to the discourse of Magona’s

autobiography lamenting what postcolonial writers such as Baichom have aptly described as the oppressively fetishized authorization of Europe meant to normalize the “native.” [11]. It is such psychic harm Magona seeks to offset with her freeing image of a communally and culturally inflected image of home serving as a constant in her life wherever she finds herself geo-politically. Having to live with one’s self-described hybridity in today’s inevitably globalised world including one’s home, is an idea reinforced later in the testimony of *To My Children’s Children* [1]. After the village midwife Mrs Kobi has given her wise counsel for the protagonist to go and deliver her baby in hospital due to complications she could detect beforehand, the narrator-protagonist significantly explains that her “eyes began to feel at home in the strange room” of the hospital maternity ward where “There were women, some nursing infants, some asleep, some sitting up, others chatting and a few out of their bed, walking about” (113). Soon after the painting of such an allegorically extraneous metaphor of child delivery, the strangeness of ‘homes’ Magona has to go through in then colonial South Africa is sustained in the disquieting description of the apartheid circumstances of her marital home: “Throughout what turned out to be a short, if fecund, marriage we never had a house we called ours or home. We did not qualify to rent a council house. At first we, we had not even bothered to go to the administration office to apply for a house. As we were not legally married, we did not qualify for permission to rent a house” (150). Here, the patriarchal institution of marriage is used to disempower Sindiwe from owning a home.

Congruent with her technique of alternating psychic and tangible descriptions of the interior of her apartheid South Africa-wide home, from the poignant explanation of her virtual homelessness even in married life Magona shifts to the contextualizing statement that: “A white South African, given government support from cradle to grave, has to work hard to be poor. Poor is the ‘natural’ status of working blacks in South Africa. Give me any criterion for poverty and, I dare say, at least seventy-five per cent or more of the Africans in full employment qualify with flying colours” (158). This stylistic transition occurs just prior to Magona being fired from domestic work in a white family’s house where her strange home this time is the garage she “shared with the family car” (165). The autobiography closes with words that contain feminist hopefulness in the future: “By now I understood also that I was part of the stream of life – a continuous flow of those who are still alive, and the spirits, our ancestors. I knew I would never be alone. Know this too, child of the child of my child ... *you are* not alone” (183). Emphasis in the italicised words “*you are*” stresses that women of her identity are empowered, among other factors, by living in psychic proximity of other persons of the same cultural identity. Magona sees such a psychological tool of her distinctive identity as part of the feminist package needed for a more complete, rounded existential freedom that should be continue to be the aim of on-going global feminist struggle.

III. PERSPECTIVE OF A MORE EXTENDED HOME: MOTHER TO MOTHER

There is a characteristic sense in which Magona extends the notion of home to include the entire community of blacks living in squalid, crime riddled townships reserved for the oppressed blacks. The protagonist's confession that "there [was] always the possibility she might have got herself killed by another of these monsters our children have become" attests to a removal of the distinction between self and community. In order for the reader to perceive the superimposition of the mother's private home with the 'home' of all black people, especially in female headed households where all the demands of protecting the family fall on the woman, the narrator defines 'home' as, "Here in Gugulethu, or in Langa, or Nyanga or Khayelitsha. Or indeed in another far-away township in the vastness of this country" (8).

The dramatization of white apartheid police harassing the mother's family at the dead of the night conjures up a vivid image of the overall insecurity in the lives of black parents in the apartheid era: "Police! Open up! ...Is this the police? ... At this time? A new fear stabs my heart. Mxolisi! Did he return last night? Has something happened to my child? ... In the back of my mind I know that the police wouldn't come like this, in the middle of the night, to tell us about something happening to Mxolisi" (91-92). The paradoxical role of police when it comes to black citizens of apartheid South Africa comes out clear in the mother's observation that, "The police are no security to us in Gugulethu – swift come the correction as I remember people killed by the police ... including children" (93).

The bullying tactics of apartheid police who are "A whole klomp" (95) crowding the room "doing nothing except hold their torches high" (95) with the "hideous voice, quite startling" of the one policeman screaming at the scared family "raised and angry", are adequately graphically depicted to reveal the impulses and emotions in the black 'home' of the apartheid era in South Africa. The author sums up the atmosphere in her remark that there was "something not human about it" (95). The remark is proven right when the police "practically [pull] the house apart" as they tear "mattress, pillows, the doors off wardrobes and the lining off coats hanging in those wardrobes", after which "They beat up Lunga even though we told them his name was Lunga and not Mxolisi ... because, as they said, he should have known his brother's whereabouts" (96).

On the next day as the mother and an emissary of the politically supportive black liberation activists advance the hideout where Mxolisi is hidden away from the apartheid state, apprehension symbolic of a black nation-wide association with 'home' envelops both (207). As soon as the mother has entered and closed the door of the house, the car of the secret messenger "[zooms] off and away" (205). To move bewilderment accompanying the black idea of home, when the mother is re-united with her son "Wearing clothes [she does] not recognize", she looks into her son's eyes and sees "pain and terror" (207-210). Such an extended notion of 'home' is one of the tools with which Magona inflects her own distinctive notion of feminism.

IV. CONCLUSION

There are significant ways in which Magona, in her distinctly South African feminist autobiographies *To My Children's Children* [1] and *Mother to Mother* [2], refracts the notion of home through a domestication of the fundamental aspects of global feminism to resonate with the marginalised positions during apartheid of black women and black communities. According to Brisolaro, "sex and gender relations cannot be separated from race, class, sexual orientation or preference, and physical ability" [7]. As a black South African woman feminist writer, Magona brought into relief the many instances of black women and black communities as a whole being deprived of their physical ability, almost like the disabled oppressed universally in societies not yet embracing the equality of their socially constructed weakened members – including women and the subaltern. By including her inflected variable of race into the theory of feminism, Magona was bringing her idea of feminism closer to a circumspection global feminism had yet to emancipate into.

While some of her contemporaries continued with the legacy of 1960s second wave and earlier feminists to view identity politics as inimical to the liberation of exploited and oppressed women and other subalterns, which they upheld even through the 1980s up to the early 1990 as a cleavage of third wave feminism, Magona contributed to a synergy with what Mann and Huffman describe as second wave feminist women of colour's view of identity politics as key to liberation [5]. According to Mann and Huffman, despite being called disparaging names such as essentialist African or Black feminists, African American women in the latter part of third wave/new generation feminism sought to move subjugated black female voices from the periphery to the centre [5]. They sought to decentre what they perceived as dominant white feminist discourse of the time in the United States of America and other parts of the western world.

Magona's unique feminist project thus resonates with global theoretical positions on global feminism, while empoweringly domesticating the concept of feminism to account for the unique travails of the triple oppressed black South African woman during apartheid oppression.

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