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A Gaze at the Place of the Female Figure in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Case of Zukiswa Wanner's *the Madams*

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Abstract:

*The black race was severely disadvantaged in apartheid South Africa. Specifically, black women were doubly disadvantaged; first by the color of their skin, and secondly, by lack of tangible income. History has shown that many black women in South Africa ended up working as maids in the white suburbs. This paper examines how Zukiswa Wanner, in *The Madams*, imagines new life for the female figure in post-apartheid South Africa, regardless of their race. The main argument in the paper is that, literature is used as a revolutionary tool in *The Madams* to imagine new South Africa and to propose ways of revising social injustices of the past. I examine the kind of characters that Wanner creates, the conditions under which these characters work, and the way she fashions a new conducive environment for survival in post-apartheid South Africa. Wanner demonstrates that the color divide has crossed a new bridge; resulting to new opportunities, new relations and new outlooks for the female figure. This therefore provides new insights in understanding the place of the female figure in the 21st century South Africa, and in African literature in general.*

Keywords: Women empowerment, rebellious character, post-apartheid South Africa, female bonding

1. Introduction

Like any other society in Africa, the traditional social order in South Africa tended to relegate the female figure to the periphery. According to Meintjes (1996), under customary law women in South Africa were denied adult status, and were subject to male control. As minors in law, women could not own or inherit land or moveable property nor could they gain credit. Meintjes further shows that women's access to means of subsistence depended upon their subservience to a chief and attachment to a male relative or spouse (p.53). Also significant was that whilst motherhood gave women great responsibilities, it did not provide women with rights over their children. Instead, custody and guardianship over children rested, in theory, solely with men.

Naidoo and Kongolo (2004) argue that prior to 1994, women were unprotected by law as the country legal codes categorized human beings as African, Coloured, Indian or White. The non-whites were often denied jobs and educational opportunities on the basis of their race. They also had limited access to housing, health services, transport and economic opportunities (p. 126). According to Naidoo and M. Kongo, (2004), black women were the most disadvantaged group in apartheid South Africa often occupying positions as cleaners and tea-ladies in office buildings, although their most common employment opportunity was in the domestic sphere. Black female domestic workers in white women's houses worked under extremely exploitative conditions. This means that patriarchy limited the opportunities for all South African women, but apartheid and poverty worsened the conditions of black women, while elevating the status of white women. Black women were subjected to humiliation of all kinds, denied access to education and housing (Msimang, 2001). Race was therefore inter-twined with poverty. This situation is clear in the text under study, where the narrator tells us that while her maternal and paternal grandmothers were black, she is coloured because the two older women were raped while working as domestic servants for white aristocracy, giving birth to her father and mother.

McCallum (2005) argues that South Africa embarked on a journey of transformation since 1994, whereby the ruling ANC introduced many policies aimed at achieving equality, known as "black empowerment". She notes that the 'empowerment' of black women professionals was especially critical in the transformation era (iv). Quoting Kreisberg (1992:19), McCallum defines empowerment as a process, which "involves individuals gaining control of their lives and fulfilling their needs, ...as a result of developing the competencies, skills, and abilities necessary to effectively participate in their social and political worlds" (iv). From this perspective, empowerment is the essential expression of individualism and self-determination since it embodies the belief that the individual has the ability to effect changes and improve their lives. This individually oriented definition presupposes the importance of constructing one's 'self' as unitary and independent.

It is this empowerment that Wanner seems to be narrating in *The Madams*, where she imagines new life for the female figure in post-apartheid South Africa. This new life is made possible because of the empowerment of the female figure which comes through acquiring education. The main argument in the paper is that, literature is a revolutionary tool which can be used to imagine new and better life for disadvantaged individuals, and also propose how to revise injustices of the past. The paper looks at the place of the female figure in post-apartheid South Africa by examining female bonding and female empowerment, which is made possible by ability to acquire education and modern white color jobs. I argue that

bonds formed between females are crucial for modern women in new South Africa because they work together to liberate themselves from poverty, subordination and gender based violence. Towards the end, the paper examines impediments to female empowerment and further concludes that literature has the ability to propose coping mechanisms for the female figure regardless of the prevailing situations.

1.1. *Theory and Method*

This paper relies on feminist theories, which focus on gender, sexual relations and empowerment discourse – more specifically, radical feminism. This choice is based on the fact that the “feminist theory” is a broad church with a number of competing approaches, to use Eagleton’s words (1991). According to Flax (1990), feminist theory helps, first, in understanding the power differences between men and women, second, understanding women’s oppression—how it evolved, how it changes over time, how it is related to other forms of oppression, and third, how to overcome oppression. Within feminist theory therefore, there is a commitment to change oppressive structures and a commitment to do something about the situation of women, which is what Wanner attempts to propose in *The Madams*. This is done by not just creating bonds between women that help them support each other, but also bringing into the narrative the voice of the rebellious woman who attempts to search for space within a subordinating environment, created by history. Vukoičić (2017) argues that feminism is based on the claim that a society is founded on “patriarchal principles, according to which men are privileged over women, which results in discrimination against women in public and private life” (33). Broadly speaking therefore, feminism is a theory that seeks to arrive at gender equality, and more specifically looking at the individual and collective experiences of women. According to Lewis (2019), radical feminism is a philosophy emphasizing the patriarchal roots of inequality between men and women, or, more specifically, the social domination of women by men. This strand of feminism views patriarchy as dividing societal rights, privileges, and power primarily along the lines of sex, and as a result, oppressing women and privileging men. This means that radical feminists seek to dismantle patriarchy and create better experiences for women. Later radical feminists sometimes added a focus on sexuality, including some moving to radical political lesbianism (Lewis, 2019). Radical feminism therefore proposes ways in which women can find routes of living more fulfilling lives without political, sexual or any other kind of discrimination. Quoting Rich (1979), Aboudaif, (2012) posits that a radical feminist literary criticism would take the text as a clue to “how we have been living” ... and “how we can begin to see--and therefore live--afresh” (6) and that is why this paper argues that literary narratives are avenues through which writers propose liberative ways for women even in contemporary set ups. The narrative in *The Madams* demonstrate the need to re-position the study of African literature and advocate for the need to re-read and re-define the realities that women face in the society (Amadiume, 1992; Ogudipe-Leslie, 1994) and therefore propose coping mechanisms. Close textual analysis will be employed in this study to help bring out the issues under discussion in this paper.

1.2. *The Place of the Female Figure in Post-Apartheid South Africa*

In *The Madams*, the author creates female characters that work together to be able to survive the demands of the changing post-apartheid South Africa. The relationship between these female characters is examined in this paper through the bonds that they form between themselves. These characters are also empowered by the fact that they are educated and have decent modern jobs, which helps to disavow black women’s condition in apartheid South Africa. The condition of black women in South Africa as argued earlier, was made worse by the fact that women were double oppressed; by patriarchy and racial discrimination. The narrative in *The Madams* shows that the important move in modern South Africa is “not to pass on a [patriarchal] tradition but to break its hold over ... over women” (Aboudaif, 2012).

1.3. *Female Bonding in Post Apartheid South Africa as Represented in The Madams*

Female Bonding is the formation of close personal relationships between women. Often, women are urged to form bonds by their common experience of oppression in order to fight back the impact of culture, class and gender, which are often the causes of oppression. Female friendship not only helps women counteract the effects of patriarchy but it also provides them with comfort, security and even healing. Allan (1989) argues that friendship is not just a matter of free choice and selection but that availability of friends is a consequence of people’s location within a social structure (10). Examining friendship amongst the Americans, Reohr (1991) states that “there are no social sanctions for friendship” and that there is no education for it...” (13). This presupposes the spontaneity of friendship; meaning that it comes about because of the purpose it serves. The friendship structure in *The Madams* is based on long acquaintances, need and proximity to each other’s households.

The Term “Madams” supposes a position of seniority in the history of South Africa. It is a name that was used to refer to the woman of the house, mainly a white woman who was the boss around the house. In post-apartheid South Africa, the term is still in use in South Africa, but in the context the text under discussion, and probably in contemporary contexts, the fear and reverence that this name carried has been watered down due to the fact that “Madamship” is no longer exclusively for the white woman as it previously was. Again, in the new South Africa there is a fight for equality and fairness for all races which means there is a fight against the undertones of superiority that the name carried in apartheid South Africa.

In *The Madams*, Wanner creates a situation where the three main female characters are friends; and it is this friendship that keeps them together, despite their skin color differences which was abhorred in apartheid South Africa. In the prologue Thandile, (shortened as Thandi) counts what she loves and values, her female friends are part of this list of the “things” she adores:

I love my life.

I love my ...five-year-old son, Hintsá

I love his witty ... father and my significant other, Mandla.

I love my supportive, though sometimes misguided girlfriends, Nosizwe and Lauren (ix).

From the first page of the text, we notice that despite each of the three women (Nosizwe, Lauren and Thandi) having their own close relatives, the bond between them plays the biggest role in the women empowerment agenda proposed in the text. They all have good jobs and are neighbours because as Thandi argues, they need each other in their dramatic life (p. 4). Nosizwe, also referred to as Siz, works with a French multinational company in Johannesburg and is married to Vuyo. She has no children of her own because she is barren. However, Vuyo has two boys (Vuyo2 and 3) from other women. These two live under the care of Siz. Siz's father died when she was five. Presently she has a sister, Lizwe and a mother (Ma) who all the characters hold in awe. Siz has a maid called Pertunia. Lauren is white and a lecturer in the English department at the university of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, but her dignity is watered down by continuous battering by her husband Michael who has given her four children. Eventually they divorce. She has a black maid called MaRosie. Thandi's life is even more complicated. She is a coloured and her maternal and paternal grandmothers who were both washer women in white suburbs during the apartheid regime were raped by whites – which resulted to the birth of her father and mother, as hinted earlier. Thandi is the epitome of the forced sexual relations between blacks and whites in the apartheid system. These past experiences in her lineage certainly trigger a feeling of revenge towards the white people in South Africa. She employs a white maid called Marita, who is an ex-convict for pure revenge purposes. Like Lauren, Marita does not mind mingling with blacks; probably projecting Wanner's proposal of the ideal relationship that blacks and whites should have in post-apartheid South Africa.

In this text, we also know that despite the fact that the modern learned South African woman has a white color job which is self-sustaining, she faces a lot of challenges for being a mother and a wife just like any other woman in societies where women are ideally home makers. That is why Thandi decides to employ a maid, against her earlier thinking that "having a maid is about playing Madam" (x). Thandi's maid comes as a rebellion towards the treatment of black people by whites during apartheid. Her racist attitude is visible when she says "I am not going to hire a black woman. This is not so much because I do not believe in "sister power".... I would feel less guilty lashing out to a white person than a black person" (xiii). This racist attitude is accentuated by Thandi's father who when she tells him she was going to hire a white maid, he says: "Make sure she does the toilets" (xiv). Lauren is not happy about Thandi's white maid, and in her defense of Marita, a fight ensues between Siz and Laureen. Clearly, the airs of apartheid are still present in independent South Africa and despite the friendship evident between the three women, Wanner is hinting that the superiority complex of the whites in South Africa will take a long time to be erased. These persistent airs are emphasized by Thandi in the letter she writes Laureen and Nosizwe where she asserts:

I know the demographics of our country are such that, Laureen, you still cannot go with Siz and I to Soweto without people referring to you as "Nosizwe and Thandile's white friend", and we cannot go with you to some of your colleagues' parties without being referred to as "Laureen's black friends". Our country may be one nation but we are still different hues and shades and have our political biases laid on us by many years of apartheid but I truly feel, though we may not be able to change the country, we can change those who we come into contact with through our friendships and what we have learnt from each other [Italics in the original] (72).

From this quotation, it is clear that Wanner creates conscious characters who she uses to present the reality of post-apartheid South Africa. She further shows that if women have to win their battles against racism and patriarchal discrimination, which seem to affect both white and black women, they must maintain the bond of friendship. The narrator says: My high school headmaster was right after all when he said there was power in number three – three sides to a triangle, a very solid structure; Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and now Thandi, Laureen and Nosizwe – except our trinity was far from holy (p. 81-82).

Theirs was a trinity of fighting for each other, comforting each other, standing in for each other when need arises, and more importantly, fighting patriarchal tendencies from their husbands. One of the key issues and tactics of radical feminism according Lewis (2019) is evaluating and then breaking down traditional gender roles in private relationships as well as in public policies. The friendship between the three women in *The Madams* is an impetus for them to break the said traditional gender roles. For instance, these bonds prove vital when in her moment of isolation by Siz and Laureen, Thandi discovers that Siz's Husband, Vuyo, is having an affair with their maid Pertunia. This information is communicated to Thandi by her white maid, Marita, further showing that Wanner is proposing for female bonds that do not know class; Madamhood takes a break when women have to help each other. It therefore becomes urgent that Siz should be helped out of Vuyo's disrespect. Friendship or bonds here become more important than colour because, despite the fact that the friction between the three women was caused by an issue emanating from color differences, the girls had to come together to help a sister; black or white. Thandi says:

Technically it was none of my business as Mandla had already stated. But hell, Siz is my sister. We have been through thick and thin together. I also knew that, should the same thing ever happen to me, Siz would tell me. That's what sisterhood is all about, no? We had been through too much to keep something of this import from each other (69).

Allan (1989) argues that "not only do our friends help to provide us with our sense of identity but they also confirm our social worth" (p. 1). In the case quoted above, it becomes urgent that the girls needed to affirm Siz's worth which was being emasculated by Vuyo through his infidelity. The women form strong bonds, which the men cannot penetrate. The fact that the maids also come in to help in Siz's infidelity crisis demonstrates that Wanner's proposal that the relationship between the Madams and maids in the new dispensation is more relaxed as opposed to the apartheid era.

The girls also gang together to defend Lauren when Michael beats her up after he discovers that she had lied to him. Nosizwe says she was not going to let Lauren go back to her house, "even if I have to keep her chained in this house for her own good. I know she has been taking this abuse for a long time but what would we do if he kills her next time?" (P. 125). Nosizwe's assertion represents a female resolve to fight gender-based violence which is read as an attempt to break instructions that are historically centered in patriarchal power (Lewis 2019). The three christen themselves "the independent married women" (127) and they treat each other like family whenever any of them gets into trouble.

Radical feminist theory is based on the fact that gender inequality is the foundation of all other inequalities and oppression against women, one of its characteristics being violence against women (Vukoičić, 2013). Vukoičić further supposes that "in order to end oppression of women, the patriarchy has to be abolished" (36). In *The Madams*, Wanner demonstrates that women should stand together in order to end oppression and overcome other challenges of modern times. The bonds created between Nosizwe, Thandi and Lauren tag their whole families and the house helps. Wanner therefore revises the old order of black women who were often domestic workers and empowers them to take charge of their lives, jobs and their homes. This new order shows that the color divide has crossed a new bridge in modern South Africa; resulting to new relations, new opportunities and new outlooks for the female figure.

1.4. *The Empowered Woman in Post-Apartheid South Africa*

In *The Madams*, the writer suggests that having a decent job for the modern South African woman makes life more rewarding and enjoyable. In fact, a decent education and job is often a recipe for women empowerment all over the world. Thandi is the Executive director of Soweto office for the provincial Department of Tourism (41). Nosizwe and Lauren have decent jobs too, although all three women have to work extra hard to balance between work and home. Thandi complains that the modern woman is challenged by having to be both a traditional wife and a professional; one has to be a superwoman.

In their study on women empowerment in India, Shunmuga, S. M. et al. (2014) note that Education is the key factor for women empowerment, prosperity, development and welfare. According to Medel-Anonuevo, C. and Bochynek, B. (1995), empowerment at the woman's individual level and household is seen through:

participation in crucial decision-making processes, extent of sharing of domestic work by men, extent to which a woman takes control of her reproductive functions and decides on family size, extent to which a woman is able to decide where the income she has earned will be channeled to, feeling and expression of pride and value in her work, self-confidence and self-esteem, and ability to prevent violence (p.9)

The ability of women to go to school, get an education and get a decent job gives them an upper hand in the empowerment ladder. Because they have money, Thandi, Siz and Lauren can afford to employ maids and be madams; they can take a weekend out to pamper and enjoy themselves in the spa (pp.85-89). This however does not mean that their husbands are not working and they cannot provide. The point raised here is that the empowered post-apartheid South African woman does not need to solely depend on her husband to live her life to the fullest. The outing to the spa gives the three women space to talk about their "girl things" away from the men. They do a sleepover and come home refreshed to play the role that Thandi calls superwoman; mother, wife and working woman. Frank (1987) argues that many African novels which until recently have all been male authored define women characters by their relation to figures "who hover on the fringes of the plot suckling infants, cooking, plaiting their hair. Or ... falling in specific categories of female stereotypes of girlfriends, goodtime girls, workers, prostitutes and so on" (p. 15). Frank posits that women must spurn patriarchy in all its guises and create a safe, sane, supportive world for women, which is what Wanner does through her women characters. These characters refuse to fit [read rebellious] into the traditional jackets designed for women because their education and earnings have empowered them.

The rebellious nature of modern South African woman is also seen through women's control of their sexuality. Marita who was jailed for killing her husband for being violent on her, comes out of jail having become a lesbian. She freely expresses her love to "his" girlfriend who comes visiting. Apparently Thandi, does not seem to worry about Marita's sexual orientation which points to Wanner's leaning towards radical feminism and postmodern feminism. These theorists view gender through a variety of lenses, integrating the complexities of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age and other differences (Lewis, 2019). The concept of what gender and sexuality are, are seen as social constructions. Wanner therefore takes cognizance of the changing nature of gender divide and sex orientation and through Marita, she shows that in Post-apartheid South Africa, sexual orientations are not fixed. There is a visible acceptance of the same amongst these female characters, which I read as a form of rebellion.

Empowerment seems to beget rebellion, especially when a woman discovers that she can break the ties that bind her to a man. The empowered woman in *The Madams* has confidence to lie with a straight face because she has power in her hands: money. For instance, Lauren lies to Michael that she had a retreat with her Wiits colleagues over the weekend and does not feel guilty about it. Unfortunately for Lauren, Michael, in a calculated patriarchal tendency calls Lauren's colleagues and ascertains that there was no retreat after all, which brings friction. However, Wanner is determined to create a new plan of action for the South African post-apartheid woman. Despite Michael's tough "husband rules" and constant scare on Lauren through beatings, he ends up being served with a divorce, thanks to the combined girlfriends effort. The power of women and money is further demonstrated when Thandi decides to revenge on Mandla after he cheats on her with Norma. She takes a flight to Victoria Falls where she spends her weekend with her phone switched off. When she comes back, she forces Mandla into a separation. In this text, the characters seem to agree with Lewis (2019) that the advocates of radical feminism aim to dismantle patriarchy.

It looks like Thandi, Nosizwe and Lauren can only stand on their feet, without their cheating and violent husbands. For Wanner therefore, the modern South African woman [whether white or black] must be educated and be in a decent job in order to beat the patriarchal tendencies that worked hand in hand with apartheid in the previous era to disadvantage many black women. However, from another angle, the timidity with which Vuyo and Mandla act can be read as the reader's way of emasculating men, which somehow reads like revenge. At some point the reader feels like Wanner is using her characters to speak out something that burdens her heart, or for the characters to rebel on her behalf. The ease with which the male characters are ignored and punished points to this. Wanner therefore uses fiction to resist specific acts of patriarchal-apartheid system and consequently put forward a revenge for the hurts that women go through.

1.5. Drawbacks for the Empowered Modern South African Woman

Naturally, the male figure in most patriarchal societies all over the world had power over his wife and all women in the society because patriarchy dictated that men be treated as such. Schipper (1987) argues that in any given cultural context male and female behavior patterns are fixed by norms and anyone who tries to break the rules can meet with serious problems in a community in which the ruling group produces images and conceptions of the others to legitimize the status quo. Patriarchy ensures that it is the male who is in control and therefore in such societies women are expected to venture only in territories that men endorse. In the traditional set up, having affairs (infidelity) or marrying more than one wife was accepted culturally. However, women in many modern societies cannot accept infidelity, leave alone a co-wife. In *The Madams*, men's affinity for more than one woman seem to be an impediment to the modern empowered woman and to a peaceful family in general. The husbands of the three main ladies in *The Madams* are all shown to have specific faults of infidelity and violence which cause friction in the marriages – tending towards breaking. In the absence of these two negative attributes, the three marriages were perfect matches. By introducing infidelity and gender based violence, the writer is making a critique of modern marriages where empowerment has made women more knowledgeable and therefore rebellious to patriarchal tendencies. Infidelity in the text under discussion is accentuated by either, the presence of another woman in the house, or an old girlfriend in the vicinity, while insecurity on the part of the husband breeds gender based violence. Wanner therefore shows that frictions in marriage become a real drawback for the modern progressive woman. For instance, we learn that when Mandla cheats on Thandi with Norma, Thandi turns hysterical. She is emotionally unstable and cannot even be productive at work. She has to get away and revenge, which does not help either, because it sets the family further apart. Vuyo's affair with Pertunia also destabilizes Siz's family. But Michael's violence on Lauren presents the worst impediment to happy marriages for the working woman as it eventually ends in divorce. When Lauren's son calls Thandi to go and intervene for the mother, she describes the scene thus:

There I came across a spectacle that I hope to high heavens I never live to see again. A drunk Michael was kicking Lauren and bending down now and again to hit her with the empty whisky bottle in his hand while yelling, between blows, 'Bitch! You sleeping around with your slutty friends? You don't lie to me you dumb, fat slut. I will kill you.'... I do not know whether it was a case of violence begets violence, but I grabbed the nearest thing a Piki Tup trash can lid... and bashed Mike on the head with all the strength I could muster. As soon as he was down, I started kicking him with what I now believe may have been the same fury that he had been using to kick Lauren a minute earlier except mine was sober fury and therefore blows landed better (120).

Michael had apparently overheard his maid, Ma Rosie and Thandi's Maid, Marita talking about the three girlfriends' escapades at the spa. He therefore feels rather insecure and bitter and visits violence on his wife. It is this incidence that makes the reader understand that Lauren had been living through violence. Unlike Lauren, Nosizwe and Thandi seem to have grown up knowing that education was supposed to liberate them from such patriarchal tendencies like gender based violence. After Lauren's beating by Michael, Thandi says:

It had been ingrained in Siz and I as we grew up that a man who beats up his wife is only a half a man. We had also been taught that education contributed to 'civilization' (whatever that is). We did not expect an educated middle class teacher, an imparter of knowledge to the impressionable youth to be beating up his wife (124).

The implication in this quotation is that modern educated men are expected to be liberated to cope with their empowered wives, which unfortunately does not seem to happen. I agree with Ogudipe-Leslie (1994) when she says that women must relook at the realities surrounding them in order to reposition themselves to be able to cope with such social realities. The questions that the reader ends up asking are: Will men live peacefully with the modern empowered woman? Is sex and violence the strongest weapons for men to hit back on an empowered woman?

2. Conclusion

In this discussion, we have seen that women in post-apartheid South Africa are more empowered than in apartheid South Africa; they have certainly crossed the bridge of discrimination and subordination. The black woman, is especially more empowered as she has received an education which she uses to resist both patriarchy and racism. Zukiswa Wanner demonstrates that women must come together and form bonds that will help them cope with realities of new South Africa; like patriarchy and insecurity within modern men. Wanner however seems to be bitter with men. She suggests that men often hurt women unfairly, and as a writer, she resolves to lock out men who trouble women from their own marriages. She also creates rebellious women characters who certainly represent her idea of how the battle on gender discrimination, gender based violence and patriarchy shall be won in modern Africa.

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