

**FEMALE SUBVERSION IN ZAKES MDA'S NOVEL, *THE
MADONNA OF EXCELSIOR***

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation titled **FEMALE SUBVERSION IN ZAKES MDA'S NOVEL, *THE MADONNA OF EXCELSIOR*** hereby submitted to the University of Limpopo for the degree of Master of Arts in English has not been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other university; that it is my own work in design and execution, and that all secondary material contained herein has been duly acknowledged.

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DEDICATION

To my dearest late father, Ezekiel Machoene, Sister Dennies Phuti and Brother Mathews Tlou Kgoshiadira, I wish you were here to celebrate this achievement with me, but unfortunately you are no more. Your death was for me to live, I am proud of you, Rest in peace.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines different modes of female subversion in the novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) by Zakes Mda. Using feminist theory, the study explores how women in the novel transgress apartheid laws and how they use existing discriminatory laws to their own advantage. In addition, it illustrates how these women rise above those existing laws to establish their own subjectivity and independence.

The Madonna of Excelsior is a novel set in apartheid South Africa where laws prohibiting sexual relationships between whites and blacks were in effect. Niki, the main character in the novel, transgresses these laws by having sexual intercourse with white men, one of whom eventually fathers her baby. Niki gives birth to Popi who is ostracised by the Mahlatswetsa community because of her mixed racial identity. In spite of growing up in a prejudiced community, Popi works hard and becomes an important member of the town council later on when apartheid gives way to black rule. Popi subverts apartheid and the prejudice of her community by accepting herself as a coloured person, by being active in the political affairs of the Mahlatswetsa community, by engaging with the community through her service at the library and during funerals, and by reconciling with Tjaart Cronje, her half-brother.

Popi's mother, Niki, also subverts apartheid's discriminatory laws by having sexual relationships with Afrikaner men such as Johannes Smit and Stephanus Cronje. Through these affairs, she exposes the hypocrisy of the Afrikaners and the unfairness of their laws. However, Niki's subversion goes beyond the use of sex and the body. In her marriage with Pule, she suffers wife battering and marital infidelity. In this instance, Niki subverts traditional expectations of women by leaving Pule and establishing an independent life for herself and her children. In giving birth to Popi and raising her as a coloured child, Niki exposes the double standards of Afrikaner morality. She subverts

the judgmental attitude of the Mahlatswetsa community by withdrawing from the community and resorting to bee-keeping. In this isolated space, she finds healing.

Other female characters in the novel, such as Maria, Mampe and The Seller of Songs, also subvert the apartheid system and their communities through their sexual escapades with white men and their service to the community. On her part, Cecilia Mapeta subverts apartheid by her direct rejection of illicit sex with white men and her pursuit of education. In contrast to her, Maria and Mampe use mainly sex and the body to ensure their survival in a racist South Africa. The Seller of Songs, like Popi, uses her service to the community to subvert its prejudice.

In their different circumstances, the women characters in this novel employ different subversive strategies, all of which work ultimately to their advantage. On the whole, this study argues that female subversion in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* is effected through various media, including sex and the body, racial differentiation, education, silence, community engagement, political activity, and family reconciliation.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

The prevalence of patriarchy in many societies has resulted in social constructions of gender which has led to men being viewed as superior to women. The assumed superiority of men over women comprises, among other things, power and control over their bodies, their finances as well as their mobility. Women are subordinated as sexual objects. The Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust (2002:27) defines patriarchy as: “A system of domination and control that promotes the rule of men. It expresses the values, beliefs, stereotyped myths, practices, and tendencies that support the power and interests of men.” The system is supported by institutions such as social institutions, religious institutions and educational systems which “condition men and women to accept and behave in accordance with the relations of ruling in their societies” (Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust 2002:27). Under the patriarchal system, women are not seen as persons entitled to independence or the will to act for their own benefit. Their lives rotate around men and as such men think that they have the right to control women physically, emotionally and sexually.

The sexual abuse of women is a phenomenon that is common in patriarchal societies where men assume that women are there for their pleasure. As such, they extort sex from women forcefully by beating them, raping them and sometimes even killing them. Abraham and Jeykes (2002:2) define ‘sexual abuse’ as “the use of force and coercion to jeopardize the life, body or emotional integrity of women in order to perpetuate male power and control.” The practice of sexual violence against women works on the assumption that women are sexual objects to be used by men for their benefit. This research study investigates how women subvert the

cultural stereotypes of what a 'woman' is through an analysis of the novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), by Zakes Mda. The novel depicts the historical events in apartheid South Africa in the early seventies in which white farmers in a small farming community were arrested, alongside nineteen black women, for contravening the Immorality Act.

The Immorality Act was instituted in 1927 to make the already existing illicit sex between blacks and whites a criminal offence. By establishing the Act, the apartheid government created not only racial oppression but also gender oppression as women with white male sexual partners were prosecuted under this law.

Although set in apartheid South Africa, the novel reflects social realities in contemporary South Africa where many women suffer sexual abuse from their husbands, parents, family members or friends. Since patriarchy empowers men to dominate women physically and sexually, many men expect women to behave in a particular way. Women are expected to be silent, submissive and obedient to men no matter the circumstances. Victims of sexual abuse may respond differently to their circumstances, but a common attitude is that they hate to be sexually abused. There is a direct relationship between sexual abuse and gender. Swift and Ryan-Finn (1995:14) point out that:

Sexual abuse is not a modern phenomenon. It crosses historical eras, geographic boundaries, and demographics of race, class and education. One factor that sexual abuse rarely crosses is that of the gender of the abuser. Over 90% of sexual abusers are males.

This quotation indicates that sexual abuse affects women of all races, classes, and educational backgrounds and that in most cases the sexual offenders are men. This

means that women are often vulnerable to male sexual exploitation. Such is the reality that Zakes Mda portrays in his novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*.

Zakes Mda was born in the Eastern Cape in 1948. He attended school in Johannesburg before leaving South Africa with his politically conscious family for Lesotho where he worked as a teacher and then a lecturer in drama at the University of Lesotho. Mda is a prolific writer who has won several awards such as the Sunday Times Fiction Award in 2001, The Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2001 and the M-Net Prize Award in 1997. In 2004, The Library Association of South Africa (LIASA) chose *The Madonna of Excelsior* as one of the top ten books of the decade of democracy because, in this novel, Mda highlights the negative effects of dichotomizing whites as good and blacks as bad. The novel depicts racial violence during the apartheid days and is, therefore, read as a historical text. According to Chidi Amuta (1995:186), “any valid discussion of the phenomenon of violence in the literary imagination must be concretely predicated on the historical contexts in which the bulk of literature has been created.”

Though apartheid is in the past, Zakes Mda’s novel is still relevant because it gives us a deeper understanding of South Africa’s political history. The history that is referred to in this instance is that of racial discrimination, which characterised apartheid South Africa. During the apartheid years in South Africa, there was a great deal of instability and political unrests that saw many people losing their lives and homes. Violence was the order of the day, used as a tool by the white minority to advance racial segregation, social inequality and class oppression. Apartheid was introduced in 1948 in which four racial groups were classified: blacks, white, coloureds and Indians. Everything was, thereafter, segregated as the education, medical care and other public services for non-whites were inferior to those of white people. People were living in separate places defined by race and the Group Areas Act of 1950. *The Madonna of Excelsior* chronicles the happenings in the Free State,

where white Afrikaners resided in the town of Excelsior and the blacks in Mahlatswetsa location. Another piece of legislature which enforced racial segregation was the Immorality Act which made sexual relations with a person of different race a criminal offence. *The Madonna of Excelsior* shows how apartheid criminalised inter-racial sex and how black women in particular suffered as a result of the Immorality Act.

Economic imbalances and inequality between black and white people had a huge impact on the way people made a living. Black people were poor because they were oppressed and treated as second class citizens. Black men constituted the majority of cheap labour at mines while women were relegated to a position where they were expected to remain behind and support their families without the help of men-folk and that contributed to the disruption of the family, the cruelest aspect of apartheid. Women worked as domestic workers who have to carry the double burden of their own and their employer's household, leaving their children at home. The fact that they were female and black put them in the worst situation of discrimination and that is the reason why they were treated badly by white bosses. Apartheid left indelible marks and scars in the lives of blacks which will take time to vanish. *The Madonna of Excelsior* illustrates some of these scars and the various modes of subversion that women resorted to in order to deal with apartheid.

1.2 Research problem

This research investigates problems of power imbalances between women and men that emanate from the novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*. It also looks at issues of female survival in an environment characterised by racial oppression, class oppression and gender oppression. As noted earlier, the novel is built around significant events in South Africa's history, the most notable of which was the Immorality Act. In 1948, the National Party won the national elections and gained

power to rule South Africa. As a result, apartheid was introduced as a system of government.

Among the new legislature that the party postulated was the Immorality Act No. 23 of 1950 which prohibited any sexual relationship between whites and blacks. According to Ross (1999), the Act was specifically meant to preserve the purity of whites from being contaminated by blacks. In addition, the apartheid regime contributed to the patriarchal system by legitimising racism and sexism to promote white men's power of oppressing and exploiting both black women and men. Black women who were white men's employees were sexually abused with the full knowledge that the victims would be afraid to report their victimisers to dominating white police as they may be labeled as perpetrators of such acts. In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, when Niki is raped by Smit, her friends dissuade her from reporting it because they know that not a single white person is going to believe her story but instead she can be charged with defamation of character. It is this kind of imbalance in gender power relations that Zakes Mda sees as a problem in *The Madonna of Excelsior*.

Economic imbalances between blacks and white during the apartheid age had a huge impact on how blacks made their living; one of the ways was for black women to succumb to sexual advances of white men. In order to have their next meal they submitted and became subservient to a white man. The females remained docile and submissive while abused physically, mentally and emotionally. Eilersen (1995:119) makes the point by stating that: "Men have become so used to being superior in the eyes of the law that they have become morally degenerate."

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda presents morally degenerate men who abuse women physically, emotionally and sexually. On the one hand, patriarchy empowers these men, both white and black, to dominate, control and exploit women for their

own self-satisfaction. On the other hand, apartheid empowered white men to abuse black women and frustrate black men who as a result cannot protect black women. Women, therefore, found themselves in a difficult situation where they had to contend with both traditional patriarchy and colonial patriarchy. This study looks at the various ways in which the female characters in the novel challenge the apartheid system by their acts of defiance.

1.3 The purpose of the study

1.3.1 Aim of the study

The study seeks to investigate different modes of female subversion in Zakes Mda's novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*.

1.3.2 Objectives of the study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To find out how women in the novel transgress apartheid laws.
2. To investigate how they use existing discriminatory laws to their own advantage.
3. To explore how they rise above these existing laws to establish their own subjectivity and independence.

1.3.3 Research questions

The following questions will guide this study:

1. How do women in the novel transgress apartheid laws?
2. How do they use existing discriminatory laws to their own advantage?
3. And, ultimately, how do they rise above these laws to establish their own subjectivity and independence?

1.4 Rationale of the study

South Africa achieved democracy in 1994 with the election of Nelson Mandela as the first black president. With the advent of democratic principles, it was envisaged that the cases of sexual abuse against women would decrease. However, statistics show that they have escalated. According to People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA, 2008), “at least one in every three women will be beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her life time and one in four women is in an abusive relationship.” Zakes Mda’s novel portrays sexual coercion during the apartheid times as a major means by which women were subjected to male oppression.

The reason why the researcher intends to study female subversion in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is to find out how women were objectified and treated in South Africa during the apartheid era by both the apartheid system and the community at large and how they rose up despite these odds and established their worthiness.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (2000), subversion means destroying the authority or power of a system by attacking it secretly or indirectly. Subversion is a deliberate and underhanded effort to defeat, sabotage and undermine a person or system knowingly or unknowingly. Most of the time women are victimised, exploited and oppressed by those people who are next to them, where in some instances it even resulted in death. Women are subjugated in their families, communities and places of employment and as such many of them subvert their oppressors in many ways to try and take a positive stand in their lives.

It is very important to understand female subversion because most of the time women are not taken seriously as humans who have full control of their lives; instead they are taken for granted by the systems that want to break them down. By understanding female subversion, women will have the empowering mechanisms

which will help them to counter abuse so that they can protect themselves and other women instead of being recipients of abuse. By subverting the systems that women find themselves in, they will be validating what William Keenan (2001:13) says: "Women need to tell us who they are, what they have been and what they are becoming." What he is saying is that women are under socio-political and cultural pressures that subordinate and oppress them. Women from different social levels need to change their oppression and sufferings by rebelling against these forces.

Women need freedom in all spheres of life, namely; socially, morally, educationally, politically and emotionally. They need an opportunity to do what is best for them instead of being dictated to about their lives. In Uganda, for example, there were "laws instituted during Amin's regime banning women from wearing miniskirts, wigs and trousers" (Ogden 1996:174), this was regarded as internalisation of, and capitulation to Western norms, the same thing that is happening to some African women under patriarchal structures. In this instance, women have to stand for their rights and incorporate changes by choosing their bodily appearance, including the adoption of dress code. Dress code is defined by Eicher and Higgins (1992:15) as "both direct 'body modification' and 'body supplement'". Dress code may result in challenging not only traditional cultural codes, but also the authority of men, which tends to regulate women's physical appearance.

Sex and work are two important areas where women need to define their own needs. *The Madonna of Excelsior* shows that gender plays an important role in the way society assigns roles in relation to sex and work. This study is, therefore, warranted as it addresses issues of sex and women's employment under a system that perpetuates gender and racial oppression of women.

1.5 Research methodology

This study is a qualitative study that looks at the representation of women in literature. Goldman (1977:83) asserts: "Literature is holistic; it is a social reality that should be seen as a totality because a work of art is composed of parts in a particular relationship to each other to form a larger whole." Goldman's point here is that whenever a work of art is analyzed, it must not be forgotten that the writer is writing from a certain point of view. Culture, social norms and customs play a role in informing that perspective. A literary study follows a qualitative approach to research because it looks at a text holistically.

Walliman (2001:227) asserts that "in the field of literature, the researcher uses a qualitative paradigm that does not involve statistical analysis, but comparison, content analysis and interpretation." According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005:133), qualitative research is a research in which "the researcher's ability to interpret and make sense of what he or she observes is critical for understanding any social phenomenon."

The research design of this study is content analysis. Content analysis, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), is a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns and themes and how the researcher understands the information given in the text. The content analysis design fits this study because it is a literary study in which a novel is analysed for patterns and themes around the phenomenon of female subversion.

The primary text for the analysis is Zakes Mda's novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, which is a South African novel set in the apartheid era. Only one text is sampled for the analysis so as to focus on a single writer's perspective in a single text. As this is a mini-dissertation, it is necessary to limit the analysis to a single text. Secondary

texts used in this study include books, and journals articles sourced from libraries and internet. The analysis and interpretation of the texts is done in relation to its construction of female power within the apartheid context.

1.6 Theoretical framework

Literary theorists point out that the initial act of reading, like all observation, is theory-dependent. The study of literature requires much more than common sense to approach the texts. Literary study like any other fields of enquiry, needs a theoretical foundation, that is, an articulation of its basic paradigms, methods, assumptions and the like (Ryan & Van Zyl, 1982).

Literary theory cannot be separated from literary appreciation and analysis. Literary theory questions what the nature of literature is and how it is to be effectively evaluated. It tests the quality of literature, its literariness and its social significance. Literary theory clarifies the relationship between text and reality. Every field of study is “theory dependent”, meaning that it should be based on a certain theory and method. This study is, therefore, guided by feminist theory.

Feminism is a movement and theory that supports the rights of women. It started in the late 1960s, with the aim of analysing and examining women’s status by exposing the dynamics of male domination and female subordination throughout history. MacDonald (1989) defines feminism as that which encompasses both political activism and a theoretical stance, both stressing the lived experience and actions of women’s lives as crucial to any understanding of the social aspects of humanity and offering a critique of and a remedy for the prevailing male ideology, which influences the lives, ideas, and the physical, emotional, or financial well-being of women.

As a movement, feminism was a method or a way in which women came together (united) to address the problems they were facing as women. Women wanted freedom from oppression, to have choice, and to have power and full control over their own lives within and outside their homes. Having control of their lives and bodies is essential to ensure a sense of dignity and autonomy. The patriarchal systems provided some degrees of security for women and that was another means of oppressing the very same women. According to Mbuende (1990:19), “the fact that women are conditioned to do only specific duties has put limitations on self-development.”

Lack of capital is one of the contributory factors towards women’s oppression. Women are always trapped indoors by house-hold chores, which limit them to social contact in the outside world. Domestic work has presented itself as a form of exploitation, for their lives rotate around children, husbands and in-laws. Unemployed women depend on their husbands for financial support. The struggle is needed right within the family that will free them from the ghetto of their existence. Social power is the only tool that can free women from this dilemma. Housework must be refused as women’s work because it is work imposed upon women, which they never invented and get no payment for.

The man as a wage worker and the head of the family serves as a specific instrument of exploitation of woman. In the South African context, patriarchy and the apartheid system have denied women exposure to the world because a woman is a commodity of the father from the childhood stage. The father is the one who dictates to her what is to be done and not to be done. Women are silenced in the households, trapped within the walls, with nothing to empower themselves.

Women have been denied opportunities in life with the mentality that they will get married and the husband concerned will cater for them and their children. Women have no say over their own lives; which is why in many cultures women are forced into arranged marriages. That is the reason why even if men discard their families for other ones, no one questions their decisions. When such husbands pass on, the wife is left with nothing or the brother to the husband takes over so that the family can grow. All the above mentioned issues are some of the issues that feminists challenge. Feminism empower women to fight these forms of oppression.

The study will employ feminist theory to interpret the actions and reactions of the female characters in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Chapter Two provides a more detailed discussion on feminism and feminist literary criticism.

1.7 Significance of the study

The importance of this study is to make the readers aware of the traumatic experiences that can be suffered if a woman is mentally, spiritually and sexually abused. Since it has been shown in many instances that abuse of women is perpetrated by patriarchy and other systems associated to it, it is imperative that men be educated to view women as their equals and to value them rather than use them as their property.

The significance of this study also lies in its literary appreciation of a text that illuminates the ways in which women regain power over their lives and succeed in overcoming their challenges. Even when women in South Africa fight for their independence alongside men, little is done to acknowledge their political contribution in the struggle. There is still a lower women representation in the government as compared to men, but the government is trying positively to ameliorate this situation. Establishing the Ministry of Women, Children and Persons with Disability (now

known as the Department of Women) was the government's initiative to address gender inequity. In spite of what has been achieved, women are still forging for their political, economic and social rights. Literature shows another side of reality in which writers show the significance of women challenging patriarchal values, customs and norms. At the Beijing World Conference for Women, under the section on 'Women, Culture and Traditional Practices', the importance of de-constructing culture for positive gains was stressed as the primary plan of action to achieve gender equality. Hann (1998:2) reports the following:

The International Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw) proceeds from the assumption that all practices that harm women, no matter how deeply they are imbedded in culture, must be eradicated. Cedaw calls upon governments to work towards transforming not only law, but also culture, in order to achieve gender equity. For any gender equity to succeed, cultural beliefs and norms have to be revised and deconstructed.

This quotation highlights the importance of women joining hands to fight against all forms of oppression, whether they are cultural, religious, political or social. This study is, therefore, significant because it highlights some of the strategies used by women in *The Madonna of Excelsior* to overcome racial and patriarchal oppression.

1.8 Chapter outline

Chapter one of the dissertation has outlined the background of the study and the methodology employed to examine Mda's writing. Chapter two synthesises the theoretical framework used in the analysis of the novel. Feminist theory is adopted as the theoretical framework for the analysis. Chapters three, four and five constitute the core analysis and presents arguments on the ways in which women in the novel subvert the discriminatory laws in their respective ways and establish their own subjectivity and

independence. Chapter six provides a summary of the major arguments, the conclusion drawn from these arguments and recommendations in relation to further research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This study is a feminist analysis of *The Madonna of Excelsior*. As most of Mda's characters in the novel are female, this approach gives a better understanding of the novel, by looking at the ways in which female characters in the novel subvert social constructions of what a woman is. This chapter, therefore, presents a review of literature about feminism and feminist literary criticism. It explains what feminism is and outlines the various issues that feminists address in society as well as in literature. Feminist theory covers a wide field of research and different disciplines including women's studies, literature and anthropology. Feminism consists of Western feminism, African feminism and Islamic feminism and each of these feminisms has multiple brands employing different methods of practice.

2.2 Feminism: origins, causes and objectives

Feminism is the idea that women should have political, social, sexual, intellectual and economic rights equal to those of men. It includes various movements, theories and philosophies, all concerned with issues of gender difference that advocate equality for women and campaign for women's rights and interest. According to Humm and Walker (2009), the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second wave in the nineteen sixties and seventies, and the third wave extends from the 1990s to the present.

Feminism is politics that is directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. The power structures are experienced in all walks of life, which are at home, in work places and around the communities that people find themselves. According to Sinclair (1979), the movement started in the 1960s as the Women's Liberation Movement which was active to bring change and included a number of factors. The movement, firstly, included the question of what it is to be a woman and how women's femininity and sexuality are defined and, secondly, the objectification of women as sexual objects for male satisfaction, the crisis of rape, pornography and other forms of violence against women within and outside the family.

The aims of the liberation movement were to eliminate all forms of oppression based on gender and to gain for women equal economic and social status and rights to determine their own lives. Its participants wanted girls and women to be given an opportunity to education, women to have a choice to conceive and abortion or contraception to be options they can take. Division of labour was also one of the aims because women wanted a balancing act of raising children together rather than women taking care of them alone. Women were tired of men who sit on the couch, reading newspapers or watching games while women were busy doing the cooking and cleaning up.

The Women's Liberation Movement was formed for women to gain a clear understanding of their lives as women by using their feelings and experiences as proof. Their purpose was not to give therapy to any individual women after having listened to their experiences and feelings but to analyse their conditions as women and come up with strategies for combating their oppression. There are different types of feminism, each with its own objectives.

2.3 Western feminism

Western feminism, like any other feminism, employs its own brands and each brand has its own aims. Jaggar (1994:2) explains feminism as “different social movements dedicated to ending the subordination of women.” It can be said that Jaggar sees theories as tools that can help the researcher to understand women’s subordination so that means can be made for their oppression to come to an end. Under western feminism, there are several brands such as liberal feminism, Marxist/socialist feminism and radical feminism.

2.3.1 Liberal feminism

According to liberal theories that developed from the 17th century onwards, every person has the right to own property, to work for financial gain, and to live their lives legally protected from any interference that is either from the government or people that are related or unrelated to them. Bryson (1999:10) states: “Individuals have a right to choose their own representatives to govern them.” From the beginning of liberalism, women argued that they were as intelligent and capable as men and that, if they are seen as inferior, this was because from their childhood stage, girls were not groomed the same as boys. Most of their lives were spent indoors and they were denied education, which closed many doors for them. In the 20th century, feminists further fought for their participation in politics and to be paid a salary as people who take care of the family rather than be exploited as wageless workers in the family. This notion is clearly illustrated by Friedan in his book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

2.3.2 Socialist/Marxist feminism

The socialist/Marxist feminists argue that there is no way in which gender equality can be separated from the status of people in society. Bryson (1999:16) asserts that “Socialism covers a wide range of political theories and practices, from reformist

socialist democracy to revolutionary communism. They also see collective class interests rather than individual rights as the proper primary focus of political concern.” Socialism, like liberalism, believes that individuals should be accorded equal rights and opportunities. Socialism takes into account the less privileged individuals who have been denied the opportunities to acquire economic equality to be empowered rather than a certain group of women benefitting alone. The division of labour is one aspect that socialists are against as it hinders the capability of women. Their work ranges from domestic work, teaching and nursing and their potential cannot clearly unfold while engaged in these types of work, and as such they need more stimulating work which can give them exposure.

Bryson (1999:17) argues that “workers should be permitted to express themselves in a whole range of ways, so that their work becomes a form of satisfaction and fulfillment rather than alienation and degradation.” Feminist thought that women should exercise their potential in engaging in men’s work as there is no specific work for men and women. Men as parents are as entitled to child rearing as women are and sexual orientation need not be a divide, but must be a breakthrough towards how men and women view each other. Women should be allowed to do hard labour like building and driving trains, as is already happening around the world. Men in South Africa have been accorded a chance for paternity leave in order to help in taking care of babies immediately after birth, a good step towards equality.

2.3.3 Radical feminism

Radical feminism is a liberation movement for social change formed by working class women who were substantively concerned with the problems they discovered at work places. Radical feminists’ main concern is sex war and they see separatism as the ultimate solution to gender oppression. The major proponents of radical feminism, to name a few, are Andrea Dworkin, Audre Lorde, Cathrine McKinnon and Simone de Beauvoir. Radical feminism is divided into sub-types which are anti-

pornography, separatism and cultural feminism. Radical feminism aims to challenge and overthrow patriarchy by opposing the standard gender roles and oppression of women and calling for the radical reordering of society.

Unlike, Marxism, the radical feminists see the undermining of women as the most cruel form of oppression and gender as the root of male domination in all social spheres. 'Patriarchy' is the word used to validate this women's subjugation. Ashton and Whitting (1987:9) define patriarchy as a "system of domination that has dominated all aspects of culture throughout history." Walby (1990:20) posits another perspective

I shall define patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women...the use of the term social structures is important here, since it clearly implies rejection of both biological determinism, and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman is a subordinate one. Patriarchy is composed of six structures: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions.

Patriarchy in radical feminist discourse refers to the common oppression of women without regard to history, culture, class, or racial difference. As such, radical feminism believes that patriarchy can be avoided through a total break from men.

Separatism advocates a total break from men by posing sisterhood as a tool to fight patriarchy. A separatist does not support heterosexual relationships and does not

feel that men can make positive contributions to the feminist movement. That remains the reason why many radical feminists are lesbians. Women choose to be lesbians because most cultures denigrate women and as such lesbians reject male sexual domination. Lesbianism puts women at the center of everything even if the society sees it as doomed, and it remains a significant way the oppressed seize power. In addition, it threatens the ideology of male supremacy by destroying the lie about female inferiority, weakness and passivity. Hence, women become free from submission and personal oppression.

Cultural feminism is the ideology that female nature is different to male nature and takes into account what are underestimated female attributes. The differences between men and women depend upon how culture mediates that difference which is not biologically constructed but culturally constructed.

With regards to pornography, Dworkin (2000) takes the position that pornography is a tool by which men control, objectify and subjugate women because it supports sexual violence against women. A noted radical feminist, Russell (1993:3), makes a distinction between pornography and eroticism:

I define pornography as a material that combines sex and/or the exposure of genitals with abuse or degradation in a manner that appears to endorse, condone or encourage such behaviour. Erotica refers to sexually suggestive or arousing material that is free of sexism, racism, and homophobia, and respectful of all human beings and animals.

Pornography is an offshoot of patriarchy and it must not be forgotten that pornography reinforces an unequal view of sexuality and the relationship between the sexes. It gives the impression that all women are 'good-for-nothing whores'

because of their exposed bodies. Pornography might not be a reality, but the actors and actresses are real people doing real things that will sow real results as well. For still growing young people, pornography is a direct source of information that they consider real and useful, because it teaches them about sex and its fantasies. Men integrate what they learn from pornography into their sexual practices and thus the degradation of women becomes a norm in their bedrooms. Dworkin (2000:26) describes the patriarchal power of pornography thus:

It is the power men have over women turned into sexual acts men do to women, because pornography is the power and the act. It is the conditioning of erection and orgasm in men to the powerlessness of women; inferiority, humiliation, pain, torment, to use as objects, things, or commodities for use in sex as servants. It sexualises inequality and in doing so creates discrimination as a sex based practice.

According to Dworkin (2000), discrimination by society is found in pornography as women's freedom is increased in other arenas of life, like in labour market, while patriarchy tightens it in public arenas, through mass media and pornography. When Dworkin says pornography objectifies women, it is true because in films the camera is directed to specific body parts of a woman, either the breasts or genitals, and thus reduces the woman to more of an object than a human being. As such a woman is seen only as body parts. This is a sign of disrespect towards women. This humiliation is unbearable as women are called names such as 'bitch', 'whore' or 'slut'. These are all the issues that radical feminism challenges.

2.4 Feminism in an African context

This is the type of feminism that is non-western, and does not have anything to do with Western values. To speak of an "African context" means anything that is meaningful to an African, such as culture, religion, norms and values. As such, this

section explores the different theories that African women have advanced in order to redefine their roles in the struggle against gender inequality. Cooper (1992:77) makes the following observation: “Many Western feminists believe that they have a bond of sisterhood with black women, yet black women’s oppression of class, race and gender places them in a far worse position than the situation experienced by white women.” Arndt (2001:12) maintains: “There is, and must be, a diversity of feminism responsive to different needs and concerns of different women and defined by them.” African feminists are rooted in the importance of the family or the well-being of the society. However, they are against male dominance and abuse in family relationships.

Clenora Hudson-Weems (2001:24), an Afro-American and Nobel Prize winning author from Columbia, emphasises the power to define oneself as thus: “Definitions belong to the definers, not to the defined, historically. So it is up to us to define ourselves. If we don’t, someone else will and they will do it miserably.” Hudson-Weems contends that the African woman must not agree to be named and defined by those who do not have anything to do with the African culture and what they are going through. Alice Walker (2002:37) states:

Feminism is the political theory that struggles to face all women; women of colour, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women as well as whites, economically privileged and heterosexual women; anything less than the vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.

Walker proposed the term “womanism”, as black women’s concern about gender issues. In her book, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden* (1983), Walker says womanism is to feminism “as purple is to lavender.” Nigerian feminist, Kolawole (1997:21), argues that this difference is not that perfect because someone can easily

confuse the two colours, purple and lavender. In her own definition of womanism, Kolawole says that a womanist's dedication and attachment lies in the survival and the integrity of entire people, male and female. What she implies is that womanists are concerned with overcoming sexist discrimination based on people's racial or socio-economic identity. On the other hand, Ogunyemi, a Nigerian literary critic, came up with the term 'Womanism' without being influenced by Walker. Ogunyemi (1996:71) describes an African womanist as follows: "A womanist will recognize that along her consciousness of sexual issues, she must additionally incorporate racial, national and economic political considerations into her philosophy". She makes a distinction between African womanism and radical western feminism:

Unlike radical feminism, it [African womanism] strives for meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and sees to it that black men begin to change from their sexist stand-point. It also has interest in communal well-being, a step towards Marxist ideology.

The difference between Walker's womanism and African womanism is that Walker supports lesbian love while Kolawole and Ogunyemi are totally against lesbian relationships. Ogunyemi (1996: 15) asserts that "to the majority of Africans, lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their world-view. It is not even an option to millions of African women and can, therefore, not be the solution." Ogunyemi explains that what is acceptable practice in other countries is not the same in Africa as many African women shy away from lesbianism.

Whites and Afro-American women are not included in Ogunyemi's feminist ideology and her brand of womanism is totally not associated with Walker's womanism. She asserts: "It is necessary to reiterate that the womanist praxis in Africa has never

totally identified with all the Walkerian percepts. An important point of departure is the African obsession to have children.” (Ogunyemi, 1996)

For Hudson-Weems, neither African feminism nor Black feminism is appropriate. She proposes a new term, Africana womanism, which is not Black feminism, African feminism or Walker’s womanism, that other women have come to embrace. Regarding the term ‘Africana’, Hudson-Weems (2001) argues that Africana identifies the ethnicity of the woman being considered, and this reference to her ethnicity, establishing her cultural identity, relates directly to her ancestry and land base, Africa. Hudson-Weems (2001:186) describes her brand of womanism as follows:

Grounded in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women. It critically addresses the dynamics of conflict between the mainstream feminist, and the Africana womanist. The conclusion is that Africana womanism and its agenda are unique and separate from both white feminism and black feminism; moreover, to the extent of naming in particular, Africana womanism differs from Africana feminism.

According to Hudson-Weems’ description of Africana womanism, Africana womanism is deeply rooted in African culture which reminds an African woman of her roots and the struggles that she has encountered.

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:10), a Nigerian Marxist literary critic, proposes another concept which she refers to as Stiwanism:

“Stiwa” is my acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. This new term describes my agenda for women in Africa without having to answer charges of imitateness or having to constantly define our agenda on the African continent in relation to other feminism which are unfortunately, under siege by everyone. This new term “STIWA” allows me to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women. “STIWA” is about inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa. I am sure there will be African men in social transformation of Africa, which is really the issue. Women have to participate as co-partners in social transformation. I think that feminism is the business of men and women everywhere in Africa.

Ogundipe-Leslie’s Stiwanism and Kolawole’s womanism are similar because they both advocate a partnership between women and men, but they are different from Walker’s womanism and radical feminism. Kolawole (1997:26), like Ogunyemi and Ogundipe-Leslie, maintains that “Womanists are African women, and any women who have the consciousness to situate the struggle within African cultural realities by working for a total, robust-self retrieval of African woman as an African or Africana womanist.” Like African and African-American alternative conceptualisations of feminism, Kolawole’s womanism is clearly separated from white, Western feminism.

Acholonu’s brand of “Motherism” cannot be left out of the discussion as it is also significant. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:22) states that Acholonu’s work is to “empower African women as mothers.” According to Acholonu (1991), motherism signifies motherhood, nature and nurture. Acholonu (1991:16) argues that both men and women can be motherists because they have similar concerns:

Motherists are concerned about the menace of war around the globe, racism, malnutrition, political and economic exploitation, hunger and starvation, child abuse and morality, drug addiction, proliferation and broken homes and homelessness around the world, degradation of the environment and depletion of the ozone layer through pollution.

To Achonolu, difference in gender does not pose any problem because both men and women are parents. As such, they can be motherists in one way or another. She maintains that in African societies where tradition is still fully practiced, women still maintain sound relationships with men and do not see anything wrong with that. According to her, the idea that women are oppressed and subjugated as compared to men was imported to Africa through Western and Arabian colonialism and as a result of Christianity and Islam (Achonolu, 1991).

Obioma Nnaemeka is responsible for the emergence of the feminist theory known as Nego-feminism, which means the theory of negotiation and no-ego feminism. Nego-feminism, like Stiwanism and African womanism, is a “feminism of co-operation, of accommodation, of collaboration, of complementarity, of inclusion, which could make all of us, men and women, feminists on the one hand while being sympathetic to the issues of gender oppression that men also experience on the other hand” (Nnaemeka 1998:2). In nego-feminism, men and women should work together for the betterment of their relationships. Nnaemeka (1998) contends that African women are to negotiate with men even in bad times. She does not see anything wrong in negotiating with men because the cause of all the differences between men and women is gender which is socially constructed and not biological.

Like many African women theorists, Nnaemeka (1998:183) agrees that feminism should be redefined in Africa to meet the needs of African women:

To meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to Western feminism but rather to the African environment that one must refer. African feminism is not reactive, it is proactive. It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment. Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance.

Nnaemeka is of the opinion that only African women are conscious of their unique challenges within their specific cultures. Nego-feminism has little resemblance to Western feminism. It is passionate about African cultures and is, therefore, rooted within the cultural specificity of African women.

The various brands in African feminism target African women, yet they embrace different ideologies, aspirations and beliefs. In the light of this, it is important to note that although Western feminism plays a pivotal role in the framing of gender discourses, it cannot be the framework to analyse African women's experiences. This is because African women's experiences in relation to colonialism, racism and patriarchy are distinct from white women's experiences as white women did not have to contend with colonialism and racism. As Arndt (2002:69) notes, "there is and must be diversity in feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women". The South African response to feminism illustrates this diversity.

2.5 South African feminism

South African feminism challenges entrenched and oppressive mechanisms in power relations including patriarchy, heterosexism as well as colonial practices. In a speech she made as the ANC Women's League President (April 1991), Getrude Shope stated the following:

Women bring life to the world and they have a duty to make sure that life is preserved and protected. There is a need for us to come together regardless of our colour to look at the situation in the country and respond as mothers and women.

These words have a strong message and call to women of all races within South Africa to converge together for the same course of claiming their freedom. On 9 August 1957, South African women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The main issue was the carrying of an identity document (by then called Dompas) wherever they were going. The reason why 9 August is declared Women's Day is because the women's successful march yielded results and both black women and men were freed from the pass law. Yet, despite all these contributions, the status of women in South Africa today is still lower than that of their male counterparts. Thus, South African women continue to fight for their rights, socially, politically and economically.

The 1957 women's march to the Union buildings against pass laws was located within the national liberation struggle and that is the reason why women are not key political actors but alienated from the political processes. Issues that are important to women's reproductive rights, their right to control their bodies, their concerns about children and child care, have been regarded in South Africa as less crucial political issues and lead to the marginalisation of women in the political sphere.

In South Africa, women's struggles have always been tied with national women's political union structures rather than women's constituencies. As such, it becomes hard for women to confront male dominance, because it is not seen as a struggle between women and men but as political struggle against an oppressive system. Fatton (1989) argues that in such situations of political alienation, marginal groups

adopt a strategy of 'exit' i.e. withdrawing from the political realm as a means of expressing discontent.

Race and gender are still issues that assume greater visibility in South African feminist writings and debates. Feminist theorists reject the fact of gender – the idea that women and men are different and all women have shared the experience of gender in one way or another. In their statement on the Emancipation of Women in South Africa, issued by the ANC National Executive Committee on 2 May 1990, women agreed on the following:

Gender oppression is everywhere rooted in material base and is expressed in socio-cultural tradition and attitudes, all of which are supported and perpetuated by an ideology which subordinates women. Patriarchal rights, especially, but not only with regard to family, land and economy, need serious re-examination so that they are not reinforced. (ANC Manifesto, 2009).

Women in South Africa have a different focus on feminism since their experiences are different. Black feminists in South Africa are focused on oppression based on gender, race and class. There is no way these three can be separated from each other. Any South African feminism that ignores the centrality of these three runs the risk of making itself irrelevant. Black feminists believe that power relations are embedded in patriarchy and the chains of patriarchy need to be broken, as socialist feminists would refuse to separate the struggle against patriarchy from struggles against apartheid and capitalism. Kgositsile asserts that “men are so comfortable with being waited on, that most of them are keen to discuss women’s emancipation even if they are supposed to be revolutionaries. Women on the other hand are so used to ‘catering’ for others that they tend to forget their roles and that retards their

development” (Kgositsile, 1990:119). To add to what Kgositsile is saying, Nompikazi (1989:8) states:

As a black woman in South Africa, I've had my fair share of suffering and fighting. One of the most serious and difficult of those fights has always been with myself. Centuries of women's oppression, African traditions and prejudices against women too have left an indelible mark on me, resulting in the inferiority complex that needed a bulldozer to move.

The situation that South African women face in the hands of patriarchy and apartheid is so terrible. Both of them demean women's self-esteem because the ways in which women and men work in society is not neutral but culturally and historically constructed.

Miriam Tlali, the black South African woman writer, grapples with the issues of apartheid and racism in her writings. She is the first to write novels which were banned immediately after publication by the apartheid government. Her first novel, *Muriel at the Metropolitan* (1978), chronicles the experiences and concerns of being a woman, mainly black, in apartheid, racist South Africa. The second novel, *Amandla* (1980), which means power, captures the 1979 Soweto uprisings in which black students were killed while protesting against using the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction. Tlali is one of the founders of the Women's National Coalition Movement and assisted in drafting the Preamble to the South African Women's Charter.

In her writing, Tlali mirrors the oppression and exploitation of black women and how apartheid maintains and applies race laws. Therefore, her writing is 'protest literature' which has as its main aim the exposure of the evils of apartheid and

raising political consciousness and confidence in the black women of South Africa who are disadvantaged by patriarchy and apartheid. In a paper delivered in Amsterdam before the Committee against Censorship, she defends her work and the works of fellow writers by defiantly saying:

To the Phillistines, banners of books, the critics of black South African writers who are faced with the task of conscientising our people and ourselves, are writing for those whom we know are the relevant audience. We are not going to write in order to qualify into your definition of what you describe as 'true art'. Our main objective is not to receive ballyhoo comment of your works. What is important is that we must be allowed to reach our audience. Our duty is to write for our people and about them". (Tlali 1988:199)

What Tlali is saying is that only the black women of South African have the right to write their own literature because they have experiences of their own country. As Hudson-Weems (2001:24) has said, there is no one who can define a person besides the person herself. The same point is supported by Lockett (1990:21) when she distinguishes between different types of feminism in South Africa to indicate that feminist ideologies can be adapted to suit the cultural needs of different groups of women. Her view is supported by Marsden (1994:8) who argues that critics should take context into account when evaluating black writing and adopt a critical ideology that suits the intention of the writer.

According to Tlali, feminism in South Africa still lags behind because of lack of co-operation between black and white women. White women cannot fully join hands with blacks because their men were perpetrators of apartheid. Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (1991) argues: "Women theorised the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary black women that provide a unique angle of vision of self,

community and society. They struggled for recognition, not only from men in their culture, but also from Western feminism.” Black women are positioned within different structures of power in different ways from white women. Hollis argues that black women, unlike white women, are marginalised along the lines of race, class, gender and sexuality.

Like Tlali, Sindiwe Magona is a prolific South African woman writer who has won awards because of her writing. On 27 April 2011, President Jacob Zuma awarded her the Order of Ikhamanga in bronze for her lifelong writing about the experiences of South African peoples. Her work is informed by her experience of impoverishment, femininity, resistance to subjugation and being a domestic worker. She is recognised for her work in women’s issues, the plight of children and the fight against racism, HIV and patriarchy.

Magona is one of the founder members of Women’s Peace Movement in 1976. As a teacher, mainly a black woman teacher in the apartheid South Africa, she grappled with lack of teaching resources, large classes and white government’s lack of commitment to black education. After falling pregnant with her first child without being married, she could not stay in the education system. For her to find any work was to succumb to domestic work, an experience that led to her first real contact with white people and her introduction to the fundamentals of racism. At the same time, the restrictions of the apartheid system, motherhood, patriarchy and her husband’s growing irresponsibility when she eventually got married reduced her to a servant. In her novels, *To my Children’s Children* (1990) and *Mother to Mother* (1998), Magona gives a very painful picture of life in South Africa in which mothers do not live up to the task of easily triumphing over diversity. For Magona, motherhood embodies anxieties brought on by transition and tradition. In her narratives, she employs history to uncover the imperatives of life for South African

women. In the beginning of her autobiography, *To my Children's Children* (1990, Preface), Magona writes:

When I am old, and wrinkled, and grey, what shall I tell you my great grandchildren? What memories will stay with me of days of yesteryear? Of my childhood, what shall I remember? Work has been a big part of my life. Of that what memories will linger, what nightmares haunt me forever? How will you know who you are if I do not or cannot tell you the story of your past?

In the same autobiography (1990: 118), she says:

I worked as a domestic servant for four years, during which time I did housework for four households; first, a British family. The husband was in the navy and had been passed Youngsfield, Cape Town. Then there was an elderly Jewish couple who lived in the prestigious suburb of Oranjezicht. This was the most fastidious family and the madam here is the stingiest and most suspicious human being I have ever had the misfortune to encounter. She is the epitome of the white South Africa depicted in Township lore: one who looks at Africans in the knowing manner that warns she is not fooled by an outward semblance of respectability; is gifted with ability to smell a thief under any guise.

Magona's heartrending story is that she was trained as a teacher but could not secure herself the job of her profession and took domestic work as the last resort. As a domestic worker, she was forced to leave her children and go fend for them,

because her husband also left her. Racism and capitalism render black children motherless and Magona's novels and autobiography testify to how black mothers endured hardships caused by apartheid. Magona does not define black South African women as victims but rather represents them as the thatch that covers her society and elevates them to cultural reservoirs and social builders. Gcina Mhlophe (1996:31) shares Magona's view of black South African women when she states: "African women have been the pillars of the struggle in South Africa and don't have to shout about it. They have to work. They have to make sure their children are taken care of, that their families don't break down."

Motherhood is one role that has been of much significance in how South African women have resisted and negotiated colonialism and apartheid, and in how they continue to struggle against current inequalities (Gaidzanwa, 1992; Lewis, 1992 & Meintjies, 2003). Meintjies (2003:7) situates the issue of motherhood within South African feminism as follows:

One of the challenges that South African women in particular face is to turn away from our traditional views that women have no place in the public sphere, or that when they are there, they are there as 'mothers'. Appealing to and constructing the identity of women through their motherhood does two things. It mobilises women for a broader political struggle, but it also puts women in a traditional acceptance role. Women's citizenship becomes structured around their identity as home-markers, mothers and sexual beings.

Meintjies's point is that women have to speak outside their roles as mothers, resisting motherhood, rather than giving most of their time to mothering and having

little or no time for paying work that may contribute to changing the social mentality and power roles within the society.

Meintjies's argument resonates with that of Desiree Lewis (2005:22) who criticises motherhood as "skewed perceptions of women's sexuality both through male centered nationalism (which defines African motherhood as social and personal duty) and through racist and colonialist views that African women's 'agency' revolves solely around their social and biological mothering." A lot of work has been written by Lewis on African literature showing how women in the struggle fought for their children's rights to a free and just society. In her critique to Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography *Call Me Woman* (1985), Lewis speaks about "the image of strong black woman in the autobiography subsumed by the gender ideology of its subtext, a set of restrictive conventions about motherhood that shapes Kuzwayo's experiences and her interpretations of that experience."

Kuzwayo figures herself as a strong black mother since she overcame the challenges of protecting her children against the terrible state of apartheid. Like Achonolu, Kuzwayo and Magona embrace motherhood as a strong factor that binds women to their children to ensure their survival. However, Kuzwayo takes her selfhood out of motherhood as unimportant, forgetting that she is a mother in the struggle against apartheid. In her book, Kuzwayo (1985:44) states:

Hundreds of black mothers can now tell the tales of woe, each with unique emphasis. Yet in the end, in every story, there will be an underlying bitterness and fury at the injustices, expressing their emotional torture, and in some cases, these feelings lead to a sense of total helplessness. Amazingly, though, some mothers have emerged as heroines, championing the cause of the national struggle for liberation of the

people, even if this means the sacrifice of their own well-being and freedom, and that of their children and families too.

Pumla Dineo Gqola, a prolific South African feminist critic, is concerned with the ways in which African women's creativity informs African feminist theory. Like Hudson-Weems, she has theorised the need for feminists to name themselves and embrace diversity. She states: "There is no shortage of academic writing by Black women which addresses itself to the manner in which race and difference complicate inter-racial sisterhood. This corpus is as varied in its approaches and tones as it is in the labels those Black women adorn" (Gqola 2001:13). However, Gqola gives a warning that women should not be caught up in labels, but be able to label themselves; they must make sure that they do not miss each other on the way. Her approach to feminism is to analyse the creative work that incorporates African women and women of African descent everywhere to see how their writing theorises African women's experiences. She explains her approach thus:

Reciprocity marks the connection between experience and theory, so that representation in creative text is seen as enriching the variety of possibilities of Black women's theories in Africa. This is an active deviation from the binary opposition which sees theory and praxis posited against each other, engaged in an exercise of polarity. Instead of filling a position between this two poles, Black women redefine the terrain altogether, so that theory is constructed in sites which are traditionally under white, supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal logic assumed to be outside terrain of knowledge-making. Similarly, activism is able to find expression on academe. (Gqola 2001:14)

According to Gqola, theory and creative work go together because from creative work, African feminism theorises experiences of how African women were treated as slaves and how their beliefs and hopes played a tremendous role in their lives for survival; and how specific cultural practices helped or impeded women's growth when faced with multiple tasks of being a mother, a professional, domestic worker and an artist.

Apartheid and colonialism may be over but the suffering of South African women continues. Although these women are no longer bound by the race and class restrictions of whites, they remain conflicted by the gendered oppression of patriarchy. In addition, religion further compounds the problem of gender oppression. This has led to the rise of Islamic feminism in South Africa and other countries where Islam is the dominant religion.

2.6 Islamic feminism

Margot Badran (2004:16) defines Islamic feminism as follows:

A concise definition of Islamic feminism gleaned from the writings and works of Muslim protagonists as a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the quran, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the quranic notion of equality of all human beings and call for the implementation of gender equality in the State, civil institutions, and everyday life. It rejects the notion of public\private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early

Islamic jurisprudence, or fiqh) conceptualizing a holistic umma in which quranic ideals are operative in all space.

According to this definition, Islamic feminism is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam. It aims for the full equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender, in public and private life. Islamic feminists advocate women's rights, gender equality and social justice grounded in an Islamic framework. Islamic feminism is integrated to other forms of feminisms, although rooted in Islam, and highlights the teaching of equality in religion while questioning the patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings through the quran (holy book), hadith (sayings of Mohammad) and Sharia (law) towards the creation of more equal society. According to Islamic feminism, women's liberation is attained through Islam.

In Islam, women have the right to marriage, divorce and inheritance as men, unlike most cultures that do not give women such status. Under Islamic law, marriage is not seen as status, but as a contract where both men and women engage in and woman's consent is imperative. The lobola (dowry) which comes from the man's side is a gift to the woman concerned which she retains as part of her personal property, unlike where the lobola goes to the woman's father as if he is selling her daughter.

In spite of what has been said, Islam subjugates women further in agreeing that men can practice polygamous lives. The quran transforms women into children who do not have a say in important matters, which can be clearly seen when coming to divorce, custody and polygamy which all favour men. The quran and Hadith are at all times interpreted by men, which results in men exercising power and making meaning to women. As such, patriarchy is deeply rooted in the quran, as Hassan (1999: 48) notes: "Men have taken the task of defining the ontological, theoretical, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women." Hassan raises an

important point that as long as women are still not allowed to interpret themselves because religion is a manly thing, women will always be interpreted as scripturally inferior.

Mernissi (1975:16) points out why it is important for Muslim women to define their own feminism. She states:

In Western culture, sexual inequality is based on belief in the biological inferiority of woman. In Islam, it is the contrary; the whole system is based on the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being. All social institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation, etc) can be perceived as a strategy for constraining her power.

Mernissi's point here is that Islam has a different outlook on women's sexuality which is contrary to that of the West. It is therefore significant that Muslim women have defined their own feminism which takes into account Islam's treatment of women.

Islam sees feminism as a product of colonialism. Toure, Cellou and Diallo (2003:2) argue that African intellectual feminism is a means to sell out to the West because it "becomes an intellectual profit-seeking feminism, which is not really concerned about women's condition in general". From an Islamic point, therefore, to be a feminist is to sell out to the West.

In South Africa, as in many countries that practice Islam, women have advocated a brand of feminism that caters to their specific needs as Muslim women. Islamic feminism has come to be recognized as an important part of African feminisms.

2.7 Conclusion

The discussion in Chapter Two has shown how feminists attempt different theories to deal with problems of female subjugation. Western, African, South African and Islamic feminisms have been reviewed to highlight their relevance to this study. As noted in Chapter One, this study employs feminist theory to analyse *The Madonna of Excelsior* in terms of its construction of female subversion. Although this study has shown that there are different brands of feminism, each with its own aims and objectives, it does not use any one specific brand in the analytical endeavour. Rather, it draws insights from all the different brands to critique the chosen text. However, it privileges feminist brands which take into consideration the links between gender, race and class. The next chapter presents a feminist reading of the female subversion of the protagonist of the novel.

CHAPTER THREE

NIKI'S SUBVERSION

3.1 Introduction

From the literature review in Chapter Two, it is clear that women have had to defy traditions, cultures and social norms in order to protect their own individuality and to gain recognition in their societies. Female subversion, therefore, becomes a means of self-preservation for women. This chapter shows different forms of female subversion adopted by Niki, the main protagonist in the novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*.

Niki is a young, beautiful black woman who resides in Mahlatswetsa Location in the Free State. She is left with her father after the death of her mother and the father is unable to support the family as he spends all his money on alcohol. Niki's father is an alcoholic who does not take the well-being of his family into cognizance and Niki is exposed to the pressures of the world at a young age, without proper education, denied to her by the apartheid government. Even when she gets married to Pule later on in the novel, her life does not improve materially.

Like most people in the community of Mahlatswetsa, Niki's life is marked by poverty. She stays in a corrugated shack, with no electricity and the floor is made of cow-dung. She uses the same cow-dung to prepare food and warm the shack during cold and rainy weather. Due to poverty, Niki has to fend for herself. As a young married woman with a family to feed, she seeks employment from the white people in Excelsior. She suffers all kinds of abuse from whites, from verbal abuse to sexual abuse. In the end, however, Niki finds peace in herself and in her community. She employs different strategies to survive, and her survival is the result of her subversion.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda shows how women who find themselves in situations the same as Niki's situation can defy law and stand up against sexual oppression. They are able to pull away from the community and stand on their own strength, irrespective of their conditions. They realise that it is not a coincidence to be alive. Like Niki in the novel, South African women have had to fight for their independence and recognition as worthy citizens. The next sections discuss the different forms of Niki's subversion.

3.2 Subversion through sex and the body: Niki's affair with Stephanus Cronje

Trapped in an apartheid system that oppresses women not only on the basis of their gender but also on the basis of their race and social class, Niki finds ways of ensuring her own survival. According to Kesler (2002), using the body in exchange for money is a distinctive form of violence against women and a manifestation of patriarchy. However, the liberal feminist McNeil (2008) supports the rights of women to engage in sex work as it subverts the notion of sexual inequality. The liberals see autonomy over one's body as including the right to offer sexual service in exchange for money and as such view sex trade as work and view the radical feminist's opposition to sex trade as contrary to the feminist's ideals of female self-determination and sexual liberation. Niki employs sex and the body as a means to ensure her economic survival and independence.

Niki subverts white female oppression by engaging in sex with white men. While Niki works at Excelsior Butchery owned by Madam Cornelia and her husband Stephanus Cronje, she is asked to do menial work just for her employers to show their power over her. One afternoon, Madam Cornelia forces Niki to undress in front of the other employees to ensure that she has not stolen meat. This is just after Madam Cornelia has introduced a new system of weighing her workers twice a day, to be sure that they have not stolen her meat. The rule is that the weight in the morning must be the same as the afternoon weight. Any difference in weight is to Madam Cornelia an

indication that the worker has stolen meat from the butchery. Niki's morning weight is 61 kilograms and in the afternoon is 62 kilograms.

Having eaten her lunch late at four, an hour before the knock-off time, has caused this difference. Niki could not have her lunch at the usual time because it is month end: people got paid and business was busy. The difference in weight makes Madam Cornelia to suspect that Niki has hidden meat under her clothes and as such madam orders Niki to undress in front of the workers and customers. When she seems reluctant to carry out the order, madam threatens to lock her inside the cold refrigerator. Eventually Niki succumbs to madam's threats. Madam is forcing Niki to strip naked in front of her colleagues as a warning to them to avoid stealing her meat. This unreasonable request and humiliating order by Madam Cornelia clearly shows the abuse of power by whites who see black people as non-humans. The novel reports:

She [Niki] stood there like the day she was born. Except that when she was born, there was no shame in her. No hurt. No embarrassment. She raised her eyes and saw that among the oglers was Stephanus Cronje in his safari suit and brown sandals. And little Tjaart in his neat uniform of grey shorts and white shirt, green tie and a grey blazer with green stripes, green knee-length socks and black shoes (Little Tjaart of the horsey-horsey game). His father has just fetched him from school. And here he was. Here they were. Raping her with their own eyes. (*Madonna*: 42)

Madam Cornelia succeeds in degrading Niki and inadvertently subjects her to white male sexual abuse, because her husband Stephanus Cronje and her son Tjaart are among the spectators who gaze intently at Niki's private parts. Amir (1982:113) calls this type of sexual abuse "the rape of the mind", meaning that it is more psychological than physical. Niki, however, accepts to be degraded in order to retain

her job. In this instance, although her body is degraded publicly, her sexuality attracts Stephanus Cronje who begins to desire Niki just by gazing at her naked body. Niki's sexuality becomes a mockery of the Immorality Act which prohibits sexual encounters between whites and blacks. Thus, in a paradoxical twist, Madam Cornelia transgresses the Immorality Act by proxy when she exposes Niki's naked body to the lustful eyes of her husband and son.

Although this is a humiliating experience for Niki and she feels hurt and angry, she, however, exploits it to her advantage. Niki uses her sexuality to inflict a more humiliating hurt on Cornelia Cronje. Farrar (2004:2) states that "the acts of shame and disrespect sow the seeds of the affair between Niki and Cornelia's husband." This is because once he has seen Niki's naked body; Stephanus Cronje cannot keep his mind off Niki. He has an urgent lust for her, until he finds a chance during the cherry festival at the Free State town of Ficksburg. When Johannes Smit tells him that Niki is his "padkos" (*Madonna*: 49), which literally means his "lunch" and figuratively his mistress, Cronje becomes troubled that Smit will take her and he becomes jealous. He later tells Niki that it is him she should be having an affair with, not Smit. The fact that Niki works for the Cronjes makes Stephanus feel that he is in a better position to have a sexual affair with her.

Stephanus persists in pursuing Niki, but Niki resists his advances. At last she agrees to Cronje's sexual advances with the intention of punishing his wife, Cornelia. Niki and Stephanus have their sexual intercourse in the outskirts of the town and for Niki it becomes an act of revenge against the humiliation she suffered in the butchery when Cornelia stripped her naked. At the same time it is her means of neutralising Stephanus's power over her because once he has sex with her, then she has a weapon against him.

When Niki begins sleeping with the butcher, she acquires a certain power over Cronje's wife and she rejoices in that power. After being the victim for so long, she relishes her chance to have some measure of control. Her silent acceptance of Cornelia's humiliation does not suggest weakness on her part to verbally challenge white female oppression. On the contrary, her silence seems to protest against the injustices meted out against her, especially as she responds to Cornelia's ill-treatment with dignity. Her lack of instant retaliation is a sign that something huge is brewing inside her mind. The following quotation is informative:

Anger was slowly simmering in Niki. A storm was brewing; quietly and calmly. Behind her serene demeanor she hid dark motives of vengeance. Woman to woman; we wondered why she did not resign from Excelsior Slaghuis after being humiliated like that. She was nursing an ungodly grudge. (*Madonna: 42*).

Her "ungodly grudge" eventually leads her to sleep with Madam Cornelia's husband. Stephanus thinks that Niki is "ready and willing" (*Madonna: 50*), instead Niki is exacting revenge. In this way, Niki is seen as a woman who has agency as an individual because she intentionally uses sex to subvert white, male power.

According to Ibinga (2005:2), "silence can be adopted by people in a repressive, political/patriarchal system to reject reprisal." Niki's silence when confronted with her humiliation is a form of feminist practice that rejects oppression of one woman by another. Niki's silence eventually cedes to action when she sleeps with Cornelia's husband. Mda's description of this sexual encounter shows the shift in power:

He was deep inside her. Under the stars. She looked into his eyes in the light of the moon. She did not see Stephanus Cronje, the owner of Excelsior Slaghuis. She did not see a boss or a lover. She saw Madam

Cornelia's husband. And he inside her. She was gobbling up Madam Cornelia's husband, with emphasis on Madam. And she had him entirely in her power. Chewing him into pieces. She felt him inside her, pumping in and out. Raising a sweat. Squealing like a pig being slaughtered. Heaving like a pig. (*Madonna*: 50)

This sexual encounter is a victory for Niki, considering that this is happening in a South Africa that is ruled by apartheid, divided by a context of race. It is impressive that she, as a black woman, has such a hold over a white man like Stephanus Cronje. Within the sexual space, therefore, power has shifted from the hands of the white male to those of a black woman. Cronje's power as a white farmer becomes subverted as the sexual contact reduces him to a pig that is helpless when faced with death. Mda uses the image of a pig to show helplessness because he is squealing and heaving. Niki reduces him to powerlessness now because "she is gobbling him up and chewing him to pieces" (*Madonna*: 50). Breaking him into pieces shows that he is powerless on top of her, even though Stephanus thinks that he is the better man because he has beaten Smit to sleep with Niki.

Taitz (2002) points out that Mda portrays sexuality as a powerful force by which black women like Niki use their bodies to resist victimisation by men and women alike. Niki's subjugation of Cronje, and by extension Cornelia, is evident in the following quote:

"Ag, shame. Madam Cornelia's husband. She who had the power of life and death over her. He became a whimpering fool on top of her, babbling insanities that she could not make out. Then there was the final long scream, "Eina-naa!" A dog's at the moon. And

two sharp jerks. It was over. His body vomited inside her. (*Madonna*: 50)

Both Niki and Stephanus have transgressed the Immorality Act, albeit for different reasons; she in order to exact revenge on Cornelia Cronje and he to satisfy his lust. As noted earlier, the Immorality Act prohibited any sexual intercourse between black and white people. Goodman (2004:63) states that “the whites believed that such sexual encounters would diminish and pollute the purity of the white race” because whites saw blacks as inferior human beings. Stephanus’s sleeping with Niki is not love but infatuation since he hates black people. His condescension towards her, however, gives her a weapon to use against him. Niki is no longer afraid of Stephanus Cronje, to the point that she goes into his bedroom and has sexual intercourse with him on his marital bed.

In the absence of Cornelia, Niki becomes the madam of the house, and by so doing she destroys the bond that once prevailed in their marriage. Niki’s actions do not only rob Stephanus Cronje of his supposed supremacy but subverts the whole system that protects him.

It is important to reiterate that Niki makes love to Stephanus Cronje on Madam Cornelia’s own antique bed and under her own “dowry duvet” (*Madonna*: 53). This is significant because it indicates that Niki has been able to penetrate Cornelia’s most intimate space. With her tempting body, she has been able to dislodge not only the sexual bond between a man and his wife but also the racial ties between Stephanus and Cornelia. As the narrative puts it: “the whole, white led government was under threat because of her body parts” (*Madonna*: 103). Thus, Niki succeeds in using her body and sexuality not only to secure a measure of power for herself as a black woman contending with white oppression but also to debunk the apartheid

myth that blacks and whites cannot interact sexually. Whipple (2004:1) confirms Niki's sexual power when she states: "Niki is determined to cling to her pride, while using the only power she has, her sexual power over the men who want to control her." For Niki, therefore, sexual power is a valuable tool in subverting apartheid's discriminatory laws.

Niki's use of sexual power over Stephanus Cronje also brings her economic rewards. When the shame of bedding a black woman becomes unbearable to him, Stephanus persuades Niki to stop working at the butchery. In a desperate attempt to disguise his illicit affair, he gives Niki more money than he used to do while she was still labouring at the butchery. Madam Cornelia becomes a loser because some of the money that her husband gives to Niki is from his daily checking from her till. Thus, Niki subverts the apartheid system not only by gaining sexual power over Stephanus but also by gaining economic power through the same man. In the context of South African women's experience of apartheid, this is quite significant as sexual power was the easiest instrument of women's economic empowerment (Steyn, 1998). For Niki, the use of sex and the body is a mode of survival because she is able to support her family.

Out of this forbidden relationship, forbidden by a system which strives to protect white blood from contamination by black blood, between Niki and Stephanus, a child is born. The child serves as an indelible mark on white consciousness, a living evidence of black-white sexual intercourse which neither the black community nor the white apartheid system can erase.

Out of shame and embarrassment, Stephanus shoots himself in disgrace and this act serves as a confirmation that Niki wields not only sexual power over Stephanus

but also the power of life and death. In addition, Stephanus's death symbolises the beginning of the collapse of apartheid.

The birth of Popi, Niki's daughter, becomes a tool to dismantle the apartheid discriminatory laws and its practice of dividing people on the basis of their race. Niki's relationship with Stephanus serves as an affirmation that laws are postulated by humans and thus can be violated by the same humans. Niki's physical beauty and sexual attraction enables her to wield power over Stephanus Cronje, and in this way she gains not only better treatment from him but also economic benefits. The novel shows that Niki uses sex and the body to her own advantage exacting revenge on Madam Cornelia, thereby, regaining her dignity and self-worth, and reaping financial rewards from Stephanus. Her sexual affair with Stephanus is a deliberate act she engages in and this moves her from being the victim of white oppression to being a survivor of racial discrimination. Thus, sex and the body become Niki's major tools of subversion. This is also seen in her sexual escapades with Johannes Smit.

3.3 Subversion through sex and the body: Niki's sexual escapades with Johannes Smit

Since the apartheid system has disadvantaged Niki because she is black, Niki resorts to using her body, her feminine charm, as a means of survival. Holmes, quoted in Steyn (1998:49), asserts that women who use their bodies for economic sustenance have acted "with ingenuity in the face of intolerable conditions, and have, despite rigorous attempts at social control, fought to create a culture of survival." Niki's use of the body marks an ironic shift in terms of gendered relations between men and women, in the novel. This is because Niki is able to subvert the paradigm of domination and exploitation to which racism exposes her by using her body to stage her defiance of man-made laws. The female body, which marks a woman as the other, is her preferred tool for liberation. Niki demonstrates that she is unwilling to fit into the roles predetermined for her by her male-dominated society.

Rather than helplessly succumbing to sexual exploitation by men, she uses sex to empower herself materially. This is what she does with Johannes Smit.

Johannes Smit is an Afrikaner who uses his power as a white man to sexually abuse black women. He is portrayed as an Afrikaner who waylays black women of Mahlatswetsa to gratify his sexual desires. He uses his money to seduce black women into having sex with him and one of them is Niki. Niki is young enough to be his daughter, but because of her poor background, he takes advantage of her. Lawyeraau (2004:10) states: "Niki is under-educated, lives life that apartheid regulates, and lives in a substandard house." Her poverty makes her an easy prey for Afrikaner men who seem to have a pretentious interest in poor, black women.

The apartheid government with its discriminatory laws puts Niki in this disadvantaged position. The government denies her an opportunity to get education because she is black. Her mother passes away, leaving her with a perpetual drunk father who is unable to provide for the family. They live in a single corrugated-iron shack, with a cow dung floor without electricity. She, together with other Mahlatswetsa girls, collects cow dung to prepare food and also use it to warm their shacks during rainy and cold days. The type of life she leads makes her a prey to white men, who in their lust for illicit sex would condescend with the black women.

On one occasion Niki decides to go to the fields with two of her friends, Maria and Mmampe and this is when Smit pounces on them. He cracks a whip to scare them. Niki is scared while her friends remain adamant, as they are used to this type of game. Their laughter shows that this is not the first time Smit is playing this trick on them. His action of cracking a whip does not scare them. A whip serves as a symbol of authority, because whoever has a whip in his hand has power over those that are fearful of him. At the same time, a whip in his hand shows that he is powerless and

he uses violence in order to attain his goals. A whip is also a symbol of a penis, but in the case of Smit it is a substitute for a penis, because we learn that he suffers premature ejaculation, hence, he is given nicknames such as Limp Stick, Sleeping Horn, Lamé Horn and Horn of Sorrow as a mockery of his sexual impotence (*Madonna*: 17).

While Niki is still terrified, Smit pops out money from his pocket and starts distributing it amongst them. Smit gives Niki more money as a sign of interest in her and with the belief that his request will be accepted. Niki accepts the money without knowledge of what will transpire next, but thinks that he is doing it out of goodwill. Amir (1982:115) asserts that “Niki has put herself in a vulnerable situation by accepting his money.” Money is a control mechanism that limits the woman from becoming independent and thus becomes a vulnerable victim of her circumstances, poverty, but to Niki the opposite is the answer because she uses the money to support her family.

After Niki’s marriage to her husband Pule she finds herself a job at Excelsior Butchery as a labourer to supplement the income her husband gives her. Smit continues waving bank notes at her and even attempting sexual advances even when Niki is pregnant with her first born child. This shows that Smit uses his money to exploit black women who live in poverty, while these women gain from him and are able to support their poverty stricken families through his money.

Smit is powerless when faced with the sexual appeal of black women, and his only way to gain some resemblance of power during his encounters with them is to give them money. From a socio-economic point of view, these black women are aware that they can make a lot of money from foolish white men. Thus, they exploit such

sex-obsessed men for their own financial gain. When Niki's father comes back home drunk, Niki uses Smit's money to buy him food.

Smit's manhood fails him most of the time as it is said that "his desire is only in the heart" since "his manhood always fails him" (*Madonna*: 17). When he tries to sleep with Niki after offering her money, Niki receives assurance from her friends that Smit's manhood fails him and as such he will never penetrate her. She lets him masturbate on her thighs in order to receive more cash to support her family:

His pants were at his ankles Niki wept softly as his hardness touched her thighs. Intense heat sucked out his slimy seed before he could penetrate her. He cursed his pipe as it leaked all over her. He damned its sudden limpness. He just lay there like a plastic bag full of decaying tripe on top of her. (*Madonna*: 16)

Niki weeps for stooping so low as to sleep with a white man who is sexually impotent just to get money. Smit is seen as useless when coming to his sexual performance. Even though he, on different occasions, managed to consummate his desires, Smit has earned a reputation of being ineffectual as a man. The difference between the sexually attractive Niki and sexually dysfunctional Smit is a reflection of the shift of power balance between women and men and blacks and whites in the novel.

After his first sexual encounter with Niki, Smit continues to pursue her. Niki resists his advances, still repulsed by his violence and the filthiness of the whole experience. Eventually she succumbs, out of pressure from her friends and a need to get out of poverty:

A full stomach at bedtime and new leather shoes under the bed would be worth the filth on her thighs. She relented. On every occasion in the yellow fields, she just lay there and became a masturbation gadget. (*Madonna*: 18)

Smit's sexuality continues to fail him until on one occasion he manages to penetrate Niki, "rupturing and haemorrhaging her maidenhead" (*Madonna*: 19). Keyser and Purdon (1995:2) assert that "it is rape when the man penetrates a woman without her permission" and as such, Smit has finally raped Niki. The impact of rape is so unbearable to her because "for many days she tried to vomit him out but only the last meal and bitter bile came out" (*Madonna*: 19). Her actions here clearly illustrate how traumatic the rape is to her and that she needs counselling to stop punishing herself. Smit rapes Niki to prove that he is a real man and as such the power that Niki once had over him shift back to Smit. By raping her, he imposes his sexual power on her. Niki is depressed and bitter for many days, but eventually she forces herself to put the experience behind her and move on with her life.

Smit is an elder of a church that condones the Immorality Act, yet the community of Mahlatswetsa recognizes him as a man who seduces girls with "bank notes" (*Madonna*: 15) to get them for his past-time. Thus the hypocrisy in the apartheid laws of racial segregation is exposed. Niki takes advantage of this to procure her own economic empowerment and develops a habit of giving Smit unlawful sex and getting money in return. Her action is justified as it sustains her against the uncaring laws of apartheid. By entertaining Smit in exchange for money, Niki subverts the very same laws that denied her education.

Bathing herself after a sexual encounter with Smit shows revulsion against him. In addition, the action becomes a cleansing ritual by which she washes away the vestiges of her pollution with the white race. Niki's sexual escapades with Smit involve the use of her body to extort money from him, money which she uses to provide for her family. Through the same service, she reduces white male sexuality to nothingness as she exposes Smit's sexual weakness and religious hypocrisy.

3.4 Subversion within marriage: Niki's relationship with Pule

According to Acka and Gunes (2009), a woman's sexuality and reproductive function are placed under male control through the institution of marriage and the cult of motherhood, both of which confine her to the home. The society expects women to fulfil conventional roles since they are socialised to place others' needs first and suppress theirs. Although men and women are both involved in sexual transgression in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, they do not suffer the same fate when caught by the law. Similarly, society does not judge them with the same moral code: women are judged more harshly than men. De Beauvoir (1988:455) states: "through marriage, woman's erotic life is suppressed; she becomes nothing but her husband's other half." Marriage represents the death of the independent self, whereby a woman is controlled by the husband.

Pule is Niki's husband, but he is forever away from his family. Pule works at the gold mines of Welkom. Niki is deprived of Pule's company and feels that his financial support of his family does not make up for his absence. However, Pule thinks that his absence does not matter because he sends money home. Sending Niki money becomes his licence to abuse her emotionally.

From the community's point of view, Niki is a transgressor and Pule is a good man, because he is able to provide for his family even in his long absence: "unlike other

men, Pule supported his family” (*Madonna*: 39). This means that the society considers financial support more important than emotional support. Gender power is converted to economic power and men exercise social control over their wives and households even in their absence. Pule believes that the money he is sending to his family, even when he is not coming home will secure him a place in his home. He is sure that supporting his family still gives him an opportunity to oppress Niki, whereas, the money he sends home is hardly enough to take care of Niki and her son. Gubar and Gilbert (1979:120) note “the way in which patriarchal socialisation literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally” as Niki is abused in the marriage she thought would make her complete. Like Niki, most women find themselves trapped in marriage and, therefore, have to tolerate this type of treatment in their households, recognising that they need their husbands as providers of their needs and the needs of their children. The fear of withdrawal of economic support is rife among women and it makes them vulnerable to spousal abuse, as is the case with Niki.

Pule’s behaviour after marriage is domineering and possessive. This becomes apparent when he begins restricting and dominating Niki, dictating to her what she is supposed to cook and how she must behave and asking her not to work for the whites. This behaviour can only be the result of patriarchal socialization which moves him to demand obedience from Niki even though they live in dire poverty. When he marries Niki he takes her to his “brand new shack built of shimmering corrugated-iron sheets a few streets from the old shack she had shared with her drunken father” (*Madonna*: 21). His first sexual experience with Niki is on “a moseme grass mat” covered with “layers of blankets” (*Madonna*: 21-22). Even in this poverty stricken circumstance, Pule dictates to Niki and tries to coerce her to bow to his will.

Pule is not only a domineering husband but an absent one. The day after he takes his bride home and sleeps with her, “Pule boarded the red railway bus back to

Welkom. There to be drained by the gold that he extracted from the dust of the depths of the earth" (*Madonna*: 22). Pule's labour seems to suck the life-force out of him. The source of his deficiencies as a man derives from his subordinate status as an unskilled miner in a racist and capitalist society. He spends extended periods in the mines of Welkom and away from his marital home in Mahlatswetse.

Pule's absence engenders Niki's developing sense of independence as she increasingly feels no need to behave according to the traditionally defined roles of a woman. Pule, for his part, holds no actual male authority over Niki beyond the occasional threat of physical beatings.

On few occasions that he is at home, he, like other migrant labourers, constitutes a ghostly presence in the house. His insecurities push him to have suspicions that Niki sleeps with her white masters: "Pule decides there and then that she was late because she had been sleeping with white men" (*Madonna*: 34). By accusing her of sleeping with her white masters, Pule is not aware that he is pushing her away. The fact that Pule is no match for affluent white men such as Stephanus Cronje and Johannes Smit tears him apart with jealousy and makes him react in a violent manner. Thus he becomes physically abusive to Niki.

Ramphele and Richter (2006) studied family life and migrant practices in South Africa between 1970 and 1990, which show that males who become migrant labourers kept two women: one for sexual gratification in the mining commercial town and the other who remained at the rural home to keep the home and who is sexually starved. The two women who live apart are separately violated and moments of sexual infidelity, especially on the women's part, spark violence and physical abuse. Niki is tired of suffering the oppression inflicted on her by someone who claims to love her. She feels threatened by his insecurities which make him

want to control her. Pule wants to restrict and dominate her life most of the time. He dictates to Niki how he expects her to behave by giving her instructions. Pule is insensitive to Niki's feelings. Thus, "tears swelled in her eyes as she packed her clothes and Viliki's into a plastic bag. She then left with her son to live with relatives in Thaba Nchu" (*Madonna*: 35). In this instance, Niki abandons her marriage in order to escape emotional abuse from her husband. Despite her once respectable marriage, Niki leaves because it is a loveless union into which she has sold herself.

She is wounded by Pule's sexual jealousy and leaves the house. Niki rejects the traditional role of mother and wife, refusing to conform to the social expectations that women's lives are restricted to, as a result of marriage. Niki does not allow herself to become a caged bird inside her marriage. She decides instead to gain her independence from Pule. In this way, she subverts the society's expectations of a married woman. The society expects a married woman to suffer in silence and endure the hardships that marriage brings to her, hence, the Sepedi proverb that says "Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi", meaning once a woman gets married, she does not have a place at her father's house anymore, but to live and die in her marriage.

When Niki returns to her marital home without Pule's knowledge, she has the right to reoccupy her shack without anyone's consent. Unaware that Niki is back home, Pule arrives home with his concubine, prepared to sleep with her in Niki's bed. To Pule's way of thinking, Niki's infidelity, which is imaginary, is a gross outrage while his own real infidelity is just a minor offense that the society overlooks.

Returning home with another woman shows how patriarchy gives authority to men to do as they wish when it comes to sex. Patriarchy allows men to have as many women as they like and when a wife questions the behaviour, she is seen as disrespectful. In this world characterised by incurable diseases, Pule is not mindful

of the danger he is posing to both their lives because he might bring an HIV infection into the family, since both him and the concubine are drunk, they might not think of using protection.

When he opens the door he finds Niki waiting for him. Niki is very angry and tells him bluntly: "I am leaving you, Pule, and this time it is going to be forever" (*Madonna*: 35). When Pule pleads with her not to leave, Niki urges him to beat his concubine to prove his loyalty to her, but he is reluctant to do so. Eventually he slaps the woman and she runs away. Although Pule always beats Niki, he cannot do so this time. Niki's outspokenness seems to drain him of strength for physical violence. Thus, speaking out enables her to resist victimisation this time, and she is able to usurp Pule's power and use it to her own advantage. African culture does not allow women to confront men vocally. As such Niki is transgressing boundaries by silencing Pule's voice, thus subverting the patriarchal voice. From this moment, Niki's marriage to Pule dies a figurative death. Although she remains married to him traditionally, she is now independent of him and he has no influence on her life. Niki subverts social expectations of a married woman by abandoning a marriage that brings her nothing but unhappiness, misery and an unfaithful husband.

Niki later gives birth to a coloured baby outside of her marriage with Pule. The child is fathered by the same Afrikaner whom Pule always accused her of sleeping with. One can say that in a way Pule pushed Niki to have a relationship with Stephanus Cronje. The very act itself indicates Niki's defiance of Pule's authority over her life.

Pule does not know how to respond emotionally to the presence of a child in his house, who is not his. He is disgusted with the baby and decides to drink his sorrows away. It is a painful move but he does not resort to violent behaviour as is always the case when involved in an argument with Niki. This suggests that Niki has

succeeded in curtailing his abusiveness through an act of sexual defiance. Niki makes no attempt to explain to Pule how she got a coloured child or who the father is. Her silence is a sign of her rejection of his role as her husband and her independence from him.

Silence is a weapon of eluding male power and giving women agency over their lives and subverting patriarchy. What Niki is doing is subverting Pule's voice as Popi is her daughter and nothing more. Pule realizes that he will be unable to do anything to the white man who impregnated his wife, and has to find peace somewhere for his troubled mind. As a result, Pule abandons the family and seeks refuge in religion by becoming a born-again Christian (mzawlwane). He also indulges in excessive drinking which shows that he was drowning his sorrows away. Instead of fighting, he takes and accepts the blame for abandoning his family and leaving his wife to fend for herself. Running away from his home shows that he is unable to face the challenges of marital life.

Pule's reactions portray him as a weak man who cannot display fortitude when faced with life's dilemmas. By contrast, Niki emerges as a strong woman who faces her marital problems and endures the hardships of life. She resists spousal abuse by walking out of her marriage with Pule. In the end, she leads a satisfactory life.

This reversal of roles in which Pule is depicted as a coward and Niki as a strong woman is itself subversive, as it imbues femininity with strength, resilience and rationality while associating masculinity with cowardice, weakness and confusion.

Niki complicates traditional expectations of female behaviour by walking out of her marital home. By so doing, Niki enables herself to transcend her limitations as a

person and to make a turn-around of her life. Even when Pule becomes sick and returns home to die peacefully next to his family, Niki does not upset her life just because she has to take care of him; at this point, her own happiness comes first.

In essence, Niki's subversion in her relationship with Pule takes two forms: she resorts to outspokenness when necessary to stop his emotional and physical abuse of her and she uses silence as a weapon to keep him out of her life. In addition, she subverts patriarchy by regaining control of her life while Pule dies in shame.

3.5 Subversion through domestic work: Niki's relationship with the Cronjes

Under the apartheid system, women were restricted to domestic work because of lack of education which the system denied them. While their husbands were working at the mines, most of them forgot their families and co-habited with other women. Women were forced to seek employment in order to take care of their children. The conditions they faced at work were not conducive, because of the relationships with their employers, in whose hands they experienced race, class and gender oppression.

Domestic work was the most easily available work for black women in apartheid times. Magona (quoted in Koyana 2004:173) asserts:

The mother who abandons her children is a story that has not been told in South Africa. The majority of the women we saw in the urban areas during the era of passes' wearing overalls, aprons, caps and wide smiles that labeled them as domestic workers were in the cities without children. These are the mothers who were busy being mothers to white babies and children

and being servants to white families so that their children back in the village could barely survive.

Cock (1980) sees domestic work as having two implications: firstly, it generates a sense of power and superiority in the employer, and secondly, it confines the worker to a dependent powerless position. Domestic workers depend on not only wages from their employers, but also for basic needs such as food and accommodation. This dependence both reflects and reinforces the structural location of black women in South African society. By being black and female, the domestic worker finds herself at the verge of two structures of dominance, namely, race and gender. Such oppression of being black and a woman makes her vulnerable to exploitation in low wages, long working hours, deprivation of social and family life, and even sexual abuse.

Labour force in big cities and mining drives men away from their homes for months and women have to guarantee the day to day survival of their families and to carry out financial transactions traditionally reserved for men. Where Niki lives, all the power rests upon the whites, while blacks are regarded as servants, supposed to raise white children, while being paid meager salary in order to raise their own children. They are always mistrusted and humiliated by employers, harassed by white madams and bedded by white bosses. Niki secures a job as a domestic worker for the Cronje household, looking after their son Tjaart. Niki looks after Tjaart as if he is her own child and as such, there grows a bond between them. Even though he is a white child, she takes good care of him because she knows that it is through taking care of him that she is able to put bread on the table. Thus, Niki subverts the apartheid system through domestic work because it is through the money she earns from the Cronjes that she is able to feed her family. The same system that denies her education and equality with whites becomes the source of her financial security.

In times of hardship, Niki thinks of the young supportive Tjaart, “a generous giver of cakes” (*Madonna*: 112), who shares the food of his white household with Niki, because he is still too young to understand racial discrimination. During apartheid, there was often a bond between the nanny and the white children she had to take care of, but once they grew up they become initiated into apartheid laws. The same happens to Tjaart. As a child, Tjaart sees Niki as his second mother, but as an older person he shuns her because she is black.

The close bond between Niki and Tjaart develops when Niki works for the Cronjes as Tjaart’s nanny and carries Tjaart around all day “in a shawl on her back” (*Madonna*: 9), while her son Viliki has to walk on his feet. During their game where Niki plays horse to the boy, it soon becomes evident that little Tjaart is sexually aroused by his closeness to Niki’s body and often he “induced an erection and worked himself up with unseemly rhythmic movements” (*Madonna*: 9). The closeness of Niki’s body to that of Tjaart initiates him to sexual awareness. As such, Niki becomes Tjaart’s primary desire for sex. At the same time, Tjaart’s father, Stephanus Cronje, has an eye for Niki to fulfil his sexual fantasy. Thus, Niki’s black body has the power to hold in captivity both father and the son.

Niki’s reaction when she hears from Popi that Tjaart has been sent to fight wars in ‘Suidwes’ and in Soweto suggests that her bond with Tjaart is quite strong. She tells her children: “I care about all my children, Viliki, not only those from my womb” (*Madonna*: 133). The feeling of closeness between Niki and Tjaart suggest that Niki sees herself as Tjaart’s surrogate mother. Ironically, during apartheid the close bond between the black nanny and the white child was often destroyed by the state machinery of racial segregation. Tjaart forgets about the close interaction with Niki once he becomes a soldier for the apartheid government. Thus, Viliki tells his mother that “it is possible that this Tjaart Cronje you seem to care so much about does not

even know that you exist” (*Madonna: 133*). Niki knows that Tjaart is Stephanus’s son, who is also Popi’s father, something that Tjaart acknowledges only on his sick bed. The closeness between Tjaart and Niki is the weapon Niki uses to subvert the apartheid discriminatory laws which prohibits any kind of closeness between whites and blacks. Niki’s relationship with Tjaart complicates traditional definitions of motherhood. Niki takes Tjaart as her own son, although she is not his biological mother.

It is obvious that the affection that Niki has for Tjaart stems from her understanding that Tjaart is a mere child born into a racially divided world which he has no control over. Although Tjaart grows up and gets inducted into the racism of the apartheid system, in his heart he knows that there is an unbreakable bond between himself and Niki. Thus, from his birth to his death, Tjaart and Niki maintain a special relationship that not even apartheid can destroy. There is subversion here as Niki defies apartheid’s policy of separatism through her inseparable bond with Tjaart. Moreover, Niki’s adoption of Tjaart can be seen as an act of subversion in which a black woman dispossesses a white woman of her child and becomes the mother, friend and confidant of her child.

3.6 Subversion through childbirth: Niki’s relationship with Popi

Niki’s sexual relationship with Stephanus Cronje results in the birth of her daughter Popi who is neither white nor black. She is not white enough to be embraced by the white community and is not black enough to be accepted by the black community. Popi’s situation is similar to that of Bessie Head, a South African woman writer who suffered oppression as a result of her mixed race since her father was black and her mother white (Eilersen, 1995). Like Head, Popi feels alienated from her family and community as a result of her different skin colour. She is embarrassed by her whiteness when she is among people in the black community. Her whiteness is evidence that her mother contravened the Immorality Act, which condemns sexual

relationships between whites and blacks. However, her mixed heritage embodies a statement on difference and the possibility for multiple perspectives on history. By giving birth to a coloured child, Niki subverts the system that deters her from having an inter-racial relationship.

According to Flockemann (2004:253), Popi “embodies the structural violence and violations of apartheid, as well as its own transgressive desires.” This means that Popi is a living proof that the Afrikaners cannot keep their own laws, that they found their own laws inordinately restrictive and inhumane. Niki’s giving birth to Popi, therefore, exposes the cruelty of the Immorality Act and makes a mockery of the entire apartheid system with its separatist laws.

When Niki hears that her friends have been incarcerated for having children with white men, she smokes her child over fire. For Niki, roasting Popi over the fire will make her skin look browner, thereby, dispelling suspicions that she is coloured. This is a sign that oppression is horrific. The fact that a coloured child is treated like a curse rather than a blessing explains why Niki never divulges to Popi information about her paternity. Instead, Niki treats Popi like an object of art that needs painting just to disguise her colouredness:

Niki took the smoking brazier into the shack and placed it on the floor. She held a naked Popi above the fire, smoking the pinkness out of her. Both heat and smoke would surely brown her and no one would say she was a light-skinned child again. (*Madonna: 66*)

Faced with the possibility of incarceration, Niki attempts to re-write history by making her daughter appear darker than she is and this action, though futile, is of central importance in terms of Niki’s growth, as it marks another instance in which Niki tries

to exercise agency over her life. Rather than being a victim of apartheid's unfair laws, she chooses to be creative to escape incarceration.

Niki's creativity is also seen in her attempt to conceal her infant daughter's parentage by shaving the child's smooth light hair. The novel reveals that "day after day, the mother sings lullabies and dangles her daughter over the heat of the brazier, assuring the baby, who turns more red than brown that "it was for her own good" (*Madonna*: 66).

Having smoked Popi on fire, Niki uses her to subvert the apartheid system. She questions whether the supposed scientific examinations carried out by a Bloemfontein doctor on coloured children are true. She mocks the doctor as she wonders how it could be possible for the doctor to say the blood is mixed: "Mixed with what? Was it not red?" (*Madonna*: 64). The apartheid government has come up with its own criteria called science to punish and discipline those who transgress apartheid laws and as such Niki uses her child to dismantle the apartheid government's claims to scientificity.

In a subtle manner, Niki shows her oppressors that race is a socially constructed thing. She observes that no matter the skin colour, the blood that is within that colour is red and unmixed. Thus, Niki claims agency by using Popi to subvert apartheid claims to science.

Niki sees in the end that it was useless to smoke her child because all blood is red. Her failure to erase Popi's skin colour shows that one's racial heritage need not be changed to suit irrational, political practices. Niki thus accepts her child as she is.

This is an act of defiance against apartheid which forces the system to see its own ugly side.

Moreover, Niki gains a friend and comforter in Popi, which suggests that her contravening of the Immorality Act results in a gain for herself and a loss for the apartheid government which loses its credibility.

3.7 Subversion through withdrawal: Niki's relationship with the Mahlatswetsa community

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda writes about the oppression of women not only at the hands of white Afrikaners but also at the hands of their fellow blacks. He shows how women suffer at the hands of the communities that are supposed to protect them. Niki's innocence is exploited because of her husband's unavailability at home, and yet she is persecuted by society which misjudges her because she does not conform to its accepted standards of female behaviour. Society sees her as a temptress who lures innocent men, both white and black, to their downfall. The isolation she feels symbolises how unsupportive her community is to her; instead, they aggravate her situation by gossiping about her infidelity and her coloured child.

Niki suffers isolation and alienation from her community not only because she rejects her miserable marriage to Pule but also because she gives birth to a coloured child. With Popi as the evidence of her cross-racial 'misdeeds', the community of Mahlatswetsa treats her as an outcast. Niki's situation is worsened by the fact that the black society views her as an immoral, human being who defies patriarchal roles as a black woman while the white community sees her as a temptress who tempts white men to commit sin. She is seen as an outsider by the community that is supposed to protect and support her. As a result, Niki struggles to understand the world that is not of her making and not of her liking. She steadily and gradually cuts

off the ties that bind her to others in Mahlatswetsa and retreats inside herself. After being the victim for so long, she relishes this chance to have some measure of control over her life.

It is quite sad that the community does not show any support to Niki when she faces problems in her marriage, and even sadder that it is not supportive of her when she has Popi. Niki does not see any need to lean on her fellow blacks, but rather withdraws herself from the entire community. This withdrawal is an act of subversion as it allows Niki to focus on herself, to establish her own individuality. Moreover, this withdrawal enables her to purge herself of inappropriate thoughts and to steer clear of any form of misconduct. She does not join the community in practicing nepotism as a means of self-enrichment. She sees this as evidence of the people's greed and hatred for their fellow countrymen. Thus, she loses faith in her community and resorts to bee-keeping. She finds peace in her day to day activity of visiting the bees, looking after them and distributing their honey amongst those who visit her.

By so doing, Niki is busy with her healing therapy because bees are seen as a mode of healing. Sometimes she goes for days without communicating even with her own children, because she was heavily burdened by the sorrows of this world. Through Niki's agency, one sees how women can assert their right to self-preservation and find their own voice.

The trial that Niki undergoes as a result of being charged with transgressions of the Immorality Act speeds up Niki's progress towards self-definition. She and her friends are jailed for sleeping with white men and bearing children for them. The unfairness of the apartheid system is seen when their male partners in crime are released while they continue in custody because of financial difficulties in getting their bail paid. Even though the charges are dropped before the trial ends, Niki has already

embarked on a journey towards excluding herself from society. Her growing sense of loneliness and isolation is seen even in the cells of the jail house where “she saw things happening to her as if she had another life outside the body” (*Madonna*: 70).

Even though the court verdict says she is not guilty, she begins to withdraw spiritually from the community, a process highlighted by the anger she feels for “everyone but herself” (*Madonna*: 105). Niki resorts to silence which, according to Van Schalkwyk (1999), is adopted by women who are dispossessed to speak by the patriarchal forces in the society. Niki does not see any need to associate with the communities that oppress her further. Neither black nor white people are prepared to uplift her spirit which has been crushed by racism and patriarchy.

Silence can arise not only out of the inability to speak but also out of the unwillingness to speak. In South Africa, the historical context of apartheid and patriarchy leave women with few choices and one of them is silence, which is seen as significant site of agency and resistance. Trinh Minh-ha (1989:83) puts it this way:

Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with the means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right. Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, or more point given to the silencers.

Thus, Niki’s silence is a voice, a voice that forces her community to hear her, and silence becomes a tool by which she subverts not only the black community’s influence on her life but also the entire apartheid system’s control over her humanity.

By the end of the novel, Niki's withdrawal from her community is no longer silence but expression in another language, a language not easily understood by anyone who follows a traditional way of perception. Withdrawal is no longer seen as silence but rather as victory because Niki comes to terms with her life as a black woman in a male-dominated and white-dominated society. Her withdrawal is victory because it gives her the space to commune with her inner self. Niki's transformation into a bee-keeper is ultimately her victory over a society that tries to take her away from her natural self and make her as inhuman as possible.

It is only when Niki adopts bees and seeks fellowship with them that she experiences a process of healing. By the end of the novel, Niki is basically avoiding all human contact. She spends most of her time in the forests around Mahlatswetsa Location, keeping beehives and communing with bees which she regards as emissaries sent by her ancestors to accomplish a mission. The bees give her spiritual sustenance as well as physical nourishment of honey.

By choosing the company of a colony of bees over the black community of people, Niki subverts conventional constructions of communalism. She relates better to the bees she keeps than to the humans in her society. The life of a colony revolves around keeping the queen bee happy enough to continue the process of reproduction of the colony. The centrality of the queen bee in the colony is an allegory to the rise to the female subject. Goodman (2004:69) asserts: "Identity is in fact complex, unpredictable, and not as, the practice of apartheid suggested, related to mere surface appearances." Niki proves in her individual story her substantial worth as a human being not as a subject inferior to the community. Her withdrawal from the community is a survivalist strategy as it becomes a move from an oppressive world, to a world of tranquility, inner peace and self-fulfillment.

3.8 Conclusion

The analysis above has shown that Niki resorts to different forms of subversion in order to ensure her survival in a patriarchal and racially segregated society. Sex and the body are her primary instruments of securing financial gain with which to take care of herself and her family. In other instances, she resorts to silence in order to stage her resistance to patriarchy. Still in other cases, she voices out her rejection of male dominance or exploitation. Through her relationship with Tjaart, she displaces the white mother and emerges as the embodiment of maternal affection. By giving birth to Popi, she exposes the hypocrisy of apartheid laws and reclaims her sense of individuality. In addition, she demonstrates that racial difference is not necessarily a negative quality. It is through differences that society is able to regenerate itself and grow because differences show us what is possible. The relationship between Niki and her coloured daughter Popi illustrates the traumas of black people under the apartheid system. Yet, Niki survives the hardships and finds self-fulfillment in keeping bees. Her withdrawal from the black community is also an act of subversion as it allows her to engage in a process of self-reflection and healing. Niki becomes a stronger woman by the end of the novel.

This analysis has provided an alternative reading of Niki's character as it has illustrated that Niki is far from being a helpless, exploited woman. It has shown rather that Niki is a clever black woman who uses the discriminatory laws of apartheid to her own advantage. She finds ways of making the best out of her bad situation. In the end she succeeds in reclaiming her lost self.

CHAPTER FOUR

POPI'S SUBVERSION

4.1 Introduction

Female subversion is all about women transgressing existing man-made laws to achieve their own aims. The analysis in Chapter Three has demonstrated that Niki is a subversive character by what she does and does not do. Skeggs (1993:67) defines a subversive woman as follows:

She is not so constrained by the gender boundaries that control most of her audience. She is able to use her power as a star to articulate the sexualities and fantasies that other women would be condemned for.

Female subversion is an attempt by female subjects to transform the established social order and its structures of power, authority, and hierarchy. It is a tool used to achieve political and social goals, which may imply the use of direct or indirect methods to bring about change. Female subversion can take many forms as morals and institutions can be subverted. The dominant cultural forces that women find themselves trapped in mostly patriarchy and apartheid.

The focus of this chapter is on Popi's subversion in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. This chapter shows how Popi rises above all odds and validates her existence. Like Niki, Popi's subversion takes many forms. The analysis below will unveil some of those forms and show their effectiveness in helping Popi acquire subjectivity.

Popi is the product of Niki's sexual encounter with Stephanus Cronje. She is a mixed-race child who is not only a threat to white supremacy because of being partly

white, but also a torment to the black community of Mahlatswetsa because of being half-black. She does not belong to either of the two races because of her skin colour. In addition, she belongs to a poor class, since her mother Niki is a domestic worker and they live in a corrugated iron room.

Popi is in the middle of both races and as such suffers as an alien worse than anyone else, but she also guards her heritage, protects it and makes it part of her identity. Erasmus (2001:17) says the following about coloured identities:

Coloured identity has been seen as an identity 'in its own right.' It has been negatively defined in terms of 'lack' or 'taint' or in terms of a 'remainder' or excess which does not fit a classificatory scheme. These identities have been spoken about in ways that associate them with immorality, sexual promiscuity, illegitimacy, impurity and untrustworthiness. For coloured people these associations have meant that identifying as coloured is linked to feelings of shame.

What Erasmus is saying is that coloureds have a painful experience of survival, because they are treated in an inhumane way as if they do not have a right to life. The treatment they encounter denigrates them and becomes unbearable to some .

Berger (1996:410) has a point when he writes: "Such traumatic experiences can be both destructive and productive by creating new thoughts and new worlds." Berger, thus, suggests that the birth of coloured children such as Popi even if sometimes they have a difficult upbringing, is also a blessing in disguise because they are there to close the existing racial gap between black and white people.

The narrative voice in *The Madonna of Excelsior* echoes the sentiment of racial encounter when it states: “from the outrage of rape, our mothers gave birth to beautiful human beings” (*Madonna*: 234). According to Courau (2004:101), the comment by the narrative voice “provides a sentimental sense of redemption for the reader and offers, a gentle tone, inhumane social and political conditions that gives affirmation of humanity.” This means that it is through the experiences of hardships that people encounter as they traverse through life that they become better people and remain with memories of what transpired on their way. Popi is a character that derives strength from the hardships she faces as a coloured child.

As a racially mixed child, Popi makes Madam Cornelia and her fellow whites in Excelsior restless. Zulu (2006:11) notes that Cornelia “hates black people in general as if they took away her husband and she infected her son, Tjaart, with her resentment of blacks.” However, Madam Cornelia cannot deny the truth that stares her in the face, namely, that Popi is, and will always be, Tjaart’s sister because they share a father, Stephanus Cronje.

As a coloured child, Popi is also rejected by the blacks in her community. She is given insulting names such as ‘Boesman’, ‘bald-headed’, ‘hotnot girl’, ‘bushman girl’ and ‘coloured girl’ and these names capture her alienation and hybridity. Popi’s light skin becomes a racial ground on which there is an exploration of power relations and political, social evils.

Popi is called the bald-headed girl because her mother always shaves her head to hide the straight texture of her hair which prompt other children to name her “Cheesekop tamati lerago la misis” which in English means “the one whose head looks like a white woman’s buttocks” (*Madonna*: 111). The mother is clearly troubled by her community’s reaction towards her child. The community has adopted colonial

discourses by using terms such as “boesman” to refer to Popi. This means that the community is not willing to accommodate Popi because of her racial difference. The word “boesman” is demeaning to Popi and those like her. In her documentary, Barry (2006) notes the trauma of being branded coloured in a racist South Africa:

‘Coloured’. That was the name apartheid baptised us with, us that didn’t fit quite so easily into neat categories of ‘white’ or ‘black’. ‘Coloured’. That tiny word that states our home, gleaned too much of our pride. If only I could erase it.

Popi grows up with her half-brother, Viliki, in their parent’s shack, knowing very little of the details surrounding her coming into being. She accepts that she is Popi Pule, though the provocation of the children of her age set her apart. Popi wonders at her features, particularly her hair and her main weapon is wearing a doek on her head to hide the hair.

Children are children and if they hear elders saying something, even if it is hideous talk, they will say it the way they heard it, without caring that it might hurt the person being spoken about. One can imagine the confusion the child feels as she is rejected by children of her age. She feels that she does not deserve to play with other children on the street and she tells herself she will confine herself to her mother’s yard. These are traumatic experiences for Popi.

As a mixed-race child, Popi is rejected by her black community, because to them she represents the evil of whiteness. On the other hand, she is marginalised by apartheid which sees her as a threat to the purity of the white race. In spite of these challenges, she survives and makes herself relevant to the new democracy. To do this, she resorts to several subversive acts.

4.2 Subversion through change of mindset

Popi carries with her the baggage of racism and oppression that manifests in her physical appearance and it becomes hard for her to find her place in life. Popi is a girl of extra-ordinary beauty and her features increasingly reveal her parentage to everybody around her. In the new democratic South Africa, she can play an important role in the community despite continuing suspicions against mixed race people who are 'not black enough.' However, her physical appearance poses a great challenge to this prospect.

Popi hates her hair because it is an instant marker of who she is: a child who does not fit into a black community, has nowhere to escape to, and is forced to grow up in isolation. Popi is seen most of the time with a doek on her head in order to hide her long, brown hair.

Popi suffers emotional and psychological pain as a child because of the circumstances of her birth. Unlike other children, she becomes a victim of an inhumane environment which deprives children of nurturing. Niki, her mother, compounds her isolation by totally withdrawing from the community of Mahlatswetsa (*Madonna*: 119). Unlike her mother, Popi does not withdraw from the community but engages herself in community services. Thus, Popi confronts her identity, with unexpected results. She, however, does confront her mother about her paternity, and the mother seems to maintain a stony silence on the issue because she does not want to aggravate the situation.

Popi is looking almost like a white woman's baby, but then she is burdened with a discoloured skin caused by Niki's desperate attempt to brown the infant over the fire to protect her from racist insults. As she grows up, she becomes the target of

endless taunts and she cannot fit in anywhere. Popi wishes that she had been born black skinned and dark haired, but she has to suffer through life looking different, while the difference is not her own choice. Lack of choice is one of the major themes in this novel because Popi suffers as a result of other people's choices. Her only choice seems to be how she responds to her predicament.

The people of Mahlatswetsa are guilty of mistreating Popi and Popi is deeply affected by the community's response to her unusual appearance. Popi develops a lifelong sense of shame of who she is and how she looks. The narrator admits the responsibility that the community has for the way Popi grows up by stating:

Her beauty had even erased the thought that used to nag us about being a boesman. Well, not quite erased them. They have just shifted to the back of our minds. (*Madonna*: 168)

The way she is treated generates shame and anger and in her as she grows up. She attempts to hide those things that mark her as coloured, especially her straight fair hair.

Popi's transformation from shame to acceptance is due in large measure to the paintings of Father Claerhout which, as a child, she spent most of the time watching. It is her journey to Father Claerhout that heals her of her inferiority complex. When she looks at the pictures on the wall, firstly, she cannot understand them as the pictures are distorted but it is the distortion that Popi comes to love. The distortion of the pictures shows that what she sees is the opposite of what she really is. The pictures do not show the world as the eye sees it, but the difference from the ordinary world is what matters. It was when she made the final visit to the priest's studio that she wanders about his works:

The works exuded an energy that enveloped her, draining her of all the negative feelings. She felt weak at the knees. Tears ran down her cheeks. She did not know why she was crying. She had to go. She walked out of the living room, and out of the mission station, without even saying goodbye. She had not uttered a word to the trinity throughout her visit. Yet, she felt she had been healed of a deadly ailment she could not really describe. (*Madonna*: 229)

When Popi at last draws the connection between the beauty of Father Claerhout's figures and her unusual looks, she realises that beauty lies in those that are seen as unusual and as such finds peace in her physical appearance at last and starts to see herself in a new way. By accepting that she is beautiful, she subverts the apartheid system that compounded her isolation and defies the Immorality Act that produced such a beautiful thing like her.

Besides Father Claerhout and his paintings, Lizzette de Vries also contributes to Popi's mental transformation as she encourages her to love herself and be proud because she is beautiful. Popi starts blossoming and immerses herself into community development and educates herself in the local library. De Vries draws Popi out of her self-imposed exile which she resorted to out of frustration and isolation. As she comes out of herself, she starts to accept herself. This change of mindset about who she is and what she stands for is her means of subverting apartheid's imposition of racial difference on non-white people.

4.3 Subversion through political activity

Popi is not aware of the Excelsior 19 events and people are always murmuring in her presence, which makes her wonder if they know something about her which she

does not know. It is only when she becomes a councillor and takes care of the library that she starts to learn many things about herself.

Popi joins the liberation movement with the aim of relieving the downtrodden from their oppression. She fights very hard to set people free and by so doing she is freeing herself as well. She grows to have a positive effect on the community through her involvement in the movement and her role on the town council. Although rejected as a child by her community, she works hard for the community. As Popi was canvassing for the elections, she came across people who had problems with their employers and she became their spokesperson as evident in the following quotation:

She had told the farmers to go to hell when they fired their workers for being cheeky. She had staged fiery confrontations with those farm owners who had sent their workers packing with the message: 'Go ask Mandela to give you a job.' (*Madonna*: 169)

Popi's success in establishing her relevance in the community is seen when she starts working as a councillor, a position she is rewarded with for her hard work in the liberation struggle. Her ascension to the position of councillor also symbolises a significant defeat to patriarchy and racism; as a councillor, she carries out her duties with a great deal of enthusiasm, campaigning for the Movement amongst farm workers, while her brother Viliki becomes the first black mayor.

Popi works together with Tjaart who time and again refers to her as "boesman", a word that hurts Popi and reminds her of her racial difference to both black and white people. Tjaart calls her "boesman" deliberately to hurt her by pointing out that she is the product of a sexual scandal. However, his insult seems more like a denial of their

shared parentage. Working with Tjaart who suspects who she is but prefers to taunt her about her looks is a major challenge for Popi. Their vicious fights in the town council illuminate issues around black-white relations in the early days of democracy in South Africa.

Popi is forced to face Tjaart Cronje, her half-brother, who is not prepared to accept that blacks are capable of leadership. As a councillor, Popi reasons that since the Afrikaans language is not understandable to all the people in the council, why can't they write in English as an international language? Tjaart opposes this idea and but his opinion does not stop it; the council adopts English as the official language of communication. Tjaart's response is to state sarcastically: "From then onwards, I knew that things will go downhill" (*Madonna: 188*). What Tjaart implies is that black leadership will not succeed because it is introducing change in the language of communication. Popi responds to him with equal sarcasm:

His problem with English is a problem with the English. He would have no problem if we said the proceedings in this chamber should be in Sesotho. Indeed, Tjaart Cronje has even said that the only two languages that people speak here are Afrikaans and Sesotho. He is prepared to accept Sesotho even though it is a black language and he hates black people. (*Madonna: 188*)

Popi is doing everything in her power to protect her people and her language. She knows very well that English is a language of communication. What she is doing is subverting the language of the oppressor knowing that they will not communicate in Sesotho since they hate the language users. She is protecting her language as well as her community of black people.

Popi attacks Tjaart in a way that suggests self-assertion even though his party is the ruling party, and she is so fearless that at the end Tjaart says: "I do not hate black people. The chair must protect me from this vicious woman" (*Madonna: 188*). The power that Tjaart once had over blacks has shifted to a black young girl, to an extent that he seeks protection from the chair of the council. Tjaart's anger reveals the bitter personality, influenced and corrupted by the ideology of apartheid. He is more angry and bitter because he has been encouraged, coached and praised by patriarchy, in terms of promotion and power, to unleash legalised power on blacks. In that process, evil destroys his conscience. That is why he refuses to accept the new order as a reality. By exposing Tjaart's racist tendencies in a public forum, Popi subverts apartheid, seizing power from the whites through language.

Popi feels that it is not only whites who are corrupt, but even blacks can be corrupt if they have the opportunity to enrich themselves. Popi is prepared to uproot corruption even if practiced by those close to her. She feels that it is immoral for blacks to allocate themselves houses, when the poor people do not have any. She feels that the interest of the people must come first since they are the ones who put them in power. When Viliki wants to allocate himself a second RDP house, she condemns him and reminds him that he is there to serve the disadvantaged people, not himself. The fact that Popi differs with what her brother Viliki is doing, is a form of subversion because she is fighting for the same people who rejected her as a child. It is ironical that she fights for people who never wanted anything to do with her as a coloured child.

Popi serves in the council but she still stays in a corrugated iron shack and this shows that she is not voted into power to enrich herself but to serve the less fortunate Mahlatswetsa residents. She sees it even being immoral for the councillors to allocate themselves houses first. Popi together with her brother Viliki are at last kicked out of the council and each finds a measure of peace. Popi takes it as a

blessing that she is no longer a member of the movement (*Madonna: 212*) and she feels free to pursue her other dreams.

Her new freedom and confidence affect the way the community of Mahlatswetsa looks at her as the community were not able to decide how to react to her, a child with brown skin and blonde hair, but as she grows up she has a greater effect on her community through her involvement in the movement and the roles she plays at the town Council. Her political activities force the community to accept that they had wronged her:

Whenever we saw Popi, we praised her beauty and forgot our old gibes that she was a boesman. We lamented the fact that we never saw her smile. That a permanent frown marred her otherwise beautiful face; that her dimples were wasted without a smile. Perhaps we had forgotten that we had stolen her smiles. (*Madonna: 162*)

The community accepts and confesses their evils that they are the ones who denied Popi support not knowing that she will be the one who will forge unity between whites and blacks. By engaging fully in the services of the community, Popi subverts the community that once disregarded her well-being, by fighting for them to enjoy the fruits that come with a democratic South Africa.

4.4 Subversion through community engagement

Community engagement is one means by which Popi subverts the community. Since she is no longer in the movement, she immerses herself in books at the library and attending funerals. Popi is aware that the community of Mahlatswetsa gossips about her beauty. However, she no longer pays attention to their resentment against her for being coloured but keeps herself busy working for the very same people who rejected her.

When Popi overcomes her marginalisation, she becomes the centre of consciousness. Popi is indirectly attacking the community of Mahlatswetsa by rendering services to them. This is the same child they rejected but here she is serving them. She never chooses which church to sing in. She sings at the Dutch Reformed Church funerals, Zionist Independent Christian Churches, Roman Catholics and Methodist Churches. Ironically, the Dutch Reformed Church belongs to the same people who oppress her, but she does not retaliate. Instead she does good to them which is a form of subversion. Her graduation into the Young Women's Union of the Methodist Church is the community's acceptance of her as their own.

Popi is active in church where she comes into contact with the community frequently. Her activities centre on attending the funerals of HIV/Aids victims and singing in the church choir. These activities force community members to recognise her as a part of them. Popi is not ready to withdraw from the community the way her mother does. Instead she is prepared to serve the community through engagement in projects that benefit them. As a councilor, she helps people to own RDP houses and this is a form of subversion, because the very same people who talk behind her back are benefitting from these projects. Popi is attacking the values of the community by her actions.

She immerses herself in church services where she is promoted to Young Women's Union and is blessed with a melodious voice that comforts those who are burdened by life's problems. The celebration of Popi's passage into the Young Women's Union of the Methodist Church is attended not only by church members but Niki's relatives from Thaba Nchu also make the long trip to Excelsior to celebrate with the family. Popi sings in church and at funerals and Mda says this about her voice: "Popi's voice rose above all voices. Its undulations carried from the cemetery to the houses of Mahlatswetsa Location a kilometer away, sending tremors to comfort even those

who had not bothered to attend the funeral” (*Madonna*: 210). Singing becomes a source of healing and comfort to Popi, for singing is extended from a lone voice to a choir of solidarity as people sing in church and at funerals.

From the onset, Popi was a lonely girl but immediately she engages herself in community projects, she starts socialising with people around her. Within the community, celebration involves performance activities such as singing and dancing which demonstrates community values. The community that sings together embraces each other, signifying a mutual relationship between the physical and social environment. It is through community engagement that the people of Mahlatswetsa start seeing Popi in another way. Thus, Popi succeeds in getting the community to accept her in spite of her different skin colour. This is subversion in the sense that she indirectly destroys the community’s prejudice against her.

The HIV/Aids scourge affect the people of Mahlatswetsa like any other place, which results in many death cases. It is believed that most of the people affected are those working at the mines who spend a long time there and start living loose lives. Popi sings at the funerals of those Aids victims, thereby making the community feel her presence. Lizette de Vries, who since becoming mayor had been working closely with Popi, takes her to another funeral. The funeral is attended by mostly white people. Like other days, Popi sings during the funeral even though she is an outsider:

All eyes were on the coloured ‘girl’ who sang Afrikaans hymns with such a heavenly voice. Reverend Francois Bornman, who conducted the funeral service, stared at her and remembered Stephanus Cronje. What would he have made of this sweet-voiced creature? (*Madonna*: 212)

By singing in Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor, Popi is indirectly usurping white power. She subverts the apartheid system by using its own language.

Popi subverts the community's perceptions of her by actively engaging in community projects that help the people. In this way, she finds acceptance within the black community.

4.5 Subversion through self-acceptance and reconciliation

Popi has succeeded in finding acceptance within the community but she also needs to find acceptance within herself, which is another significant means by which she subverts the community and apartheid values. Popi is a sign that beauty comes out and shines even on the darkest of oppressions and she is aware that joy cannot be given as a present but she needs to do away with what is inside her and create a comfortable world for herself.

Popi is fighting to remain compassionate and patient, while asserting her own value, in opposition to apartheid values. She starts realising that her anger towards Tjaart stems from their being so alike and that their anger is a "deflected one" (*Madonna*: 231). Tjaart spends most of his life as a bitter racist because he never expected the changes taking place before him. He grew up in a culture that groomed him in the beliefs of apartheid and suddenly things take a turn before his eyes with blacks having rights to vote. His beliefs have been shaped by other people's choices who betray him, as Gys Uys laments:

We all know that we used these children to fight our wars. And then we discarded them. All of a sudden they find that they live in a new world in which they do not belong. (*Madonna*: 248)

The effect that parents' choices have on their children yields sour repercussions because Tjaart and Popi do not see eye to eye but instead become enemies.

Popi is now able to accept herself and say "my shame went away with my anger" (*Madonna*: 260) while Tjaart is unable to say that and liberate himself and his bitterness enveloped and starts tearing him apart. By accepting herself, she undermines the power that apartheid's racist policies had over her.

Popi's quest for liberation is triggered by her obsession with the paintings that seem to capture something about her history as a coloured and she is not aware of the events of the Excelsior 19 case. People are always whispering in her presence and that raises doubts that there is something they know about her that she was never told. Her mother and relatives kept it a secret from her. She knows nothing about her history of being and that becomes a torture. It is only after visiting Father Claerhout in Thaba Nchu that she found closure of her history. Popi comes to terms with what has happened as she learns it from Father Clearhout's paintings. It is only when she sees her pictures together with her mother being naked and these portraits remain in her mind and shapes her beauty. What she loves most about the paintings is the distortion. The pictures are not captured, but their version of reality can show the truth of the world in a non-literal way. Popi comes to have a connection with this manner of looking at the world. Father Clearhout uses distorted images to highlight that life is not just a smooth ride; it has its ups and downs. When Popi at last draws the connection between the beauty of Claerhout's pictures and her unusual looks, she finds some measure of peace in herself.

Her visit to Thaba Nchu is said to have cleared her mind and drained her of "all her negative feelings" (*Madonna*: 238) and "she felt she had been healed of a deadly ailment she could not really describe" (*Madonna*: 238). Her anger dissipates and is

replaced by “a great feeling of exhilaration” (*Madonna*: 238). Popi starts to confront her body and what meaning it has to her and her identity. The community has accepted her and her beauty and derogatory names are no more heard around. She becomes very much obsessed with her beauty, she becomes “very busy admiring herself in the mirror” (*Madonna*: 66) but her mother feels she is overdoing it. Niki is happy at the same time that her daughter has made peace with herself and she is liberated from the shame and secret she hid from her for so long.

Popi’s positive character change makes her celebrate and acknowledge that being coloured is part of the nation. Her liberation together with acceptance makes her embrace herself and realize that being a product of miscegenation is not a sin but acceptable. By accepting herself, Popi is subverting the apartheid government for persecuting her parents for miscegenation. She is indicating that miscegenation is not a crime but a blessing. Her acceptance of her beauty gives miscegenation a new meaning, because if it is able to produce something so beautiful, then it is not a bad thing. The blame can be rested on apartheid that it is evil because it denies beautiful people an opportunity to enjoy their beauty.

Popi is set free and it is only when Tjaart becomes terminally ill that he sent Johannes Smit to request Popi and Niki for a visit. On his deathbed, Tjaart tells Popi “You are a beautiful woman, Popi. Very beautiful” (*Madonna*: 263). Here, the coloured person, despised by whites as a product of miscegenation, is finally liberated from the burden of white anger. From Tjaart’s declaration of her beauty, Popi realises that being a product of miscegenation is acceptable. Initially Popi is not eager to go and see Tjaart but Niki says: “His ancestors are telling him to make peace with you. You can’t go against the wishes of the ancestors” (*Madonna*: 261). The attention that Niki has for Tjaart suggests that he is also her son since Popi and Tjaart are from the same father, something that Tjaart acknowledges from his sickbed. Reconciliation is declared and both accept that the damage is already done and

acknowledge that Stephanus is their father, even if it is a new song in Popi's ears. The acceptance by these two characters that Stephanus Cronje is their father is a reconciliatory gesture. Reconciliation between Popi and Tjaart shows power shift, because it is never expected that an all-powerful white person can ever ask forgiveness from a black person. The power that Tjaart once had has shifted to Popi and his acceptance that Popi is his blood sister shows racial equality. Popi has subverted the apartheid system that sees black people as inferior to white people.

It is only through reconciliation that people's souls are healed and they find closure, which comes as a form of therapy. Reconciliation heals people spiritually, emotionally and psychologically. Popi and Tjaart promote the idea and attitude of unity in diversity in the new democratic South Africa. Towards the end of Tjaart's life, Popi accepts a shaving cream as a present from Tjaart. However, she tells him: "my culture sees it being rude to refuse a present. I will never use it. I love my body the way it is" (*Madonna*: 263). Popi's words show total acceptance of who she is and exposes the fact that for so long people felt tormented by her beauty that they failed to appreciate her for who she is.

At the end, Popi is seen in mini-skirts, with long hair which makes her look like the most beautiful doll, as her name implies. Popi starts realising the beauty of her legs and hair that she exposes herself all the time. Her beauty shows the possibilities of a future South Africa after all the people have reconciled. The reconciliation between Popi and Tjaart is a subversion of the apartheid discriminatory laws which were crafted on racial assumptions that black people could never be equal to white people.

By accepting that she is different, Popi subverts apartheid ideologies of blackness as a marker of racial inferiority. In this novel, Mda suggests that the coloured children,

such as Popi conceived through interracial sex, can close the gap of hatred between black and white people and forge a strong bond between white and black people.

4.6 Conclusion

The analysis above revealed that Popi resorts to different subversive acts in order to ensure her relevance in a racially segregated society of Mahlatswetsa and Excelsior. Through community engagement, which serves as her primary weapon, she asserts herself. At times she resorts to singing at funerals and celebrations in order to resist racial discrimination. She defies the community which sees her to be too white to be black and too black to be white by engaging in community projects. By accepting herself in a racially segregated community, she exposes the evils of the Immorality Act which prohibited any sexual relationship between white men and black women. Her very existence serves as a contravention of that act. She exposes the evils of the white men who claimed to be pure yet slept with black women.

It is through her singing that she survives the atrocities of apartheid system and finds peace in music. Her engagement with the community serves as a subversive move as it gives her an opportunity to interact fully with the community which once despised her. Singing serves as a source of self-renewal, because the more she sings the more she comes closer to her people. This experience opens a new chapter of her life as she regains self-worth. Out of her hopeless situation in the face of apartheid, she succeeds in establishing herself.

Children like Popi are the ones who can forge reconciliation among different races, as we see that after the dawn of democracy we experienced mixed marriages in South Africa, something which was seen as a disgrace in the beginning. Through Popi, Mda shows the limitlessness of the potential a person has as an individual.

Popi is able to defy the socio-political realities of apartheid and the society that views her as an outcast.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SUBVERSION OF OTHER FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *THE MADONNA OF EXCELSIOR*

5.1 Introduction

Zakes Mda shows in *The Madonna of Excelsior* that sexual abuse of women is a crime against humanity. It harms women's self-perception and they start to feel powerless. The victims of sexual abuse in the novel show different approaches and responses towards their sexual abuse, but what is common is that they hate to be sexually abused. As shown in Chapter Three, Niki responds to sexual abuse by subverting the power of her abusers over her. Through sex and the body she is able to regain power over her life. Niki, however, is not the only female character in the novel who responds to sexual abuse in a subversive way. There are other female characters that do the same though they use different approaches. This chapter discusses the subversive strategies of other women characters in *The Madonna of Excelsior*.

5.2 The subversion of Cecilia Mapeta

Cecilia Mapeta is a 19 year old African school teacher on the Valbankspoor farm in the Rouxville district. Like Niki, Cecilia is victimised by a white man. One evening Cecilia is visited by Barend Jacobus Nolan, a 33 year old former traffic inspector. She is instructed to tell her pupils that they should not play next to the road as it is dangerous because they can be knocked down by passing cars. After the message is clearly delivered and received, Nolan orders Cecilia to get into his car so that she can close the gate after Nolan has passed through. Nolan's motive is not good, as he does not stop at the gate as agreed, but instead passes and drives with Cecilia in the direction of Aliwal North. Nolan's intention is to extort sex from Cecilia, but Cecilia refuses to succumb to his wishes. The novel reports:

For the second time she refused him. He grabbed her hand and twisted it. She started crying and he hit her. Nolan undid the shorts he was wearing and made an indecent suggestion to her. He also put his hand up her dress. After she pushed him away and told him to stop it, he offered her R5 to have intercourse with him. (*Madonna: 92*)

This quotation reveals that Nolan subjects Cecilia to sexual violence just to get his way with her. When that fails, he resorts to offering her money. Unlike Niki, however, Cecilia rejects the financial gain that comes with Nolan's offer.

Nolan's use of force over Cecilia indicates the power that the white man assumes to have over a black woman. He cannot accept Cecilia's refusal because he sees himself as all-powerful and no black woman can turn him down. Moreover, the apartheid mentality has taught him that a white man can always have his way with black people. Thus, Nolan automatically expects Cecilia to accept his proposal. Her turning him down comes as a shock to him. Acting out of anger that Cecilia undermines him, he twists her arm and hits her. When Nolan realises that his physical power does not suffice for him to achieve the intended motive, his last resort is using his economic power. He tries to give Cecilia a five rand note to woo her to sleep with him, but she stands her ground and refuses. Though frightened by the encounter, Cecilia musters up strength and climbs out of Nolan's moving car. Fortunately for her, another car approaches and she escapes Nolan's retaliation.

Nolan's sexual assault on Cecilia becomes public knowledge because *The Friend*, a Free State newspaper, reports about it and this leads to the arrest of Nolan. The magistrate presiding on the case, Mr Van Zyl, sentences Nolan to three months in jail in the Bloemfontein Regional court for trying to contravene the Immorality Act. However, when the sentence is passed, the magistrate makes no mention of the

sexual harassment that Cecilia suffered and the trauma she went through when Nolan assaulted her. This shows that the apartheid government in the novel regards the contravening of the Immorality Act as a more serious offense than the sexual abuse of black women.

The novel, therefore, illuminates the historical roots of the complacency that generally characterises the then government's response to the plight of black women in South Africa who suffered from sexual abuse. Swift and Ryan-Finn (1995:28) argue that "the legal system should attempt to make prosecution less intimidating to the victims to encourage them to report more sexual crimes against women." This suggests that most black women do not bother to report sexual abuse because they feel intimidated. In the case of Cecilia in the novel, reporting a case of sexual abuse by a white man to an all-white government yields some positive results, as someone considers her case worthy of prosecution, though for selfish reasons. Cecilia's case is different from Niki's.

Cecilia's case is similar to Niki's. When Niki is raped by Johannes Smit, her friends Mmampe and Maria dissuade her from reporting the rape because they are aware that no one is going to believe her. They fear that instead Niki will be charged for framing a white man. This shows that the apartheid government depicted in the novel oppresses black women not only through its racial laws but also through its sexual politics.

Nolan shows no remorse for sexually assaulting Cecilia because he does not apologize to her; instead he blames his behaviour on having a quarrel with his wife, and having too much alcohol that day:

In a statement to a local magistrate in Rouxville,
Nolan submitted that on the night concerned, he and

his wife had argued. He left his home and went to a local hotel where he had been drinking the same afternoon. The next thing he could remember was that he was being arrested. (*Madonna*: 93)

Nolan is a man who is familiar with the laws of the government because he was once a traffic officer. During his trial he cites alcohol as a factor that led him to his unacceptable behaviour. He tells the court that by consuming more alcohol, he was trying to drown the sorrows of his argument with his wife. He said that he does not remember anything that led to his arrest. It seems that as a white man, with political and economic power, his pride does not allow him to ask forgiveness from a black woman.

Cecilia's refusal of Nolan's proposal shows that even though the apartheid system succeeds in making a black woman inferior to a white man, it could not take away her dignity. Cecilia's response to Nolan indicates that she is an assertive woman with principles who does not compromise her pride because of money. She refuses to have second thoughts about having a loose affair with a white man. She rejects Nolan's sexual advance forthright and is adamant about it. Unlike Niki who was deprived of education, Cecilia is educated and, therefore, knows her rights as a person. Her education is itself a source of empowerment. This explains why she is not threatened by Nolan but instead has the courage to undermine him.

Cecilia's reaction to Nolan's attempted sexual abuse indicates subversion. Although Nolan approaches her with the assumption that a black woman will always succumb to a white man, she proves him wrong, thereby, destroying his fantasy. In this way, she asserts her own agency. She is decisive and does not allow herself to be used by a white man. By defying the advances of a white man, Cecilia shows strong character, self-confidence and independence of thought.

Both Cecilia and Niki subvert white men's power over black women. The difference is that Niki does so by taking money from the white men to empower herself financially. She subverts the system using its own economic provisions. By contrast, Cecilia subverts the system using her own internal weapons: her intellect, pride, dignity and power of speech. In the end though, both women undermine white power over them because they are able to satisfy their own interests and not those of the white men.

5.3 The subversion of The Seller of Songs

The Seller of Songs is Maria's daughter. She is younger than Popi but like Popi she is also of racially mixed parentage. The novel reports that "she was born several years post-Excelsior 19" (*Madonna*: 196). She is the exact image of Reverend Francois Bornman, who is her biological father. Maria willingly slept with Bornman in order to acquire money to support her family and by so doing she subverts the system that does not approve any sexual contact between a white man and a black woman.

As a man of God, Bornman preaches the word of God every Sunday, but like many of the Afrikaner men in the novel he is also a hypocrite. His hypocrisy is evident in two ways: not only does he sleep with women he is not married to, which Christianity condemns as fornication, but he also views these same women as inferior because they are black. Worse still, he blames black women and the devil for his immoral behaviour:

The devil had always sent the black women to tempt him and to move him away from the path of righteousness. The devil had always used the black female to tempt the Afrikaner. It was the battle that was raging within individual Afrikaner men; a battle

between lust and loathing. A battle that the Afrikaner must win. (*Madonna*: 87)

From this quotation, a black woman is seen as a temptress, and the children born out of the sexual encounter are forbidden fruits; they are nothing more than sin, and it is not surprising to see their fathers disowning them even before birth. The attack on black women is driven from a theological perspective that denigrates women and holds them responsible for sin, particularly sexual sin. According to Christianity, women are evil temptresses since Eve led Adam to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. It is seen as the woman's sin for the man to be kicked out of the garden. The reverend Bornman clearly buys into this philosophy, which is why he blames the black women for tempting him into sexual sin. Moreover, he perceives them as the devil's emissaries. From his perspective, they are a threat to his moral welfare.

The fact that Bornman attributes his actions to the seductive work of a black woman collaborating with the devil only serves to highlight his hypocrisy. He attempts to commit suicide, and in a failed attempt loses an eye. Losing an eye is an indication of his moral blindness and hypocrisy and also a divine retribution for failing to acknowledge his daughter. Cornelia has the same opinion shared by Bornman that black women in particular are set on "luring white men into a deep sinful hole" (*Madonna*: 120). This suggests that the whites associate black women with sin and evil.

Men frequently fear women's sexuality and feel justified in blaming women for their acts of sexual violence. It is, however, ironic that Cornelia shares Bornman's view about black women. This highlights the point that beyond gender, race is a very important issue that African feminists cannot ignore. Nnaemeka (2004:76) maintains that "the feminist agenda everywhere in the world must include men and mobilise men in order for us to obtain a more successful completion of the work of

humanising society.” What Nnaemeka is saying is that the struggle can be a success if men join women to fight racial oppression and free the whole society irrespective of gender. She sees the problem of African women as one that involves not only gender but also race.

The race issue is one that cannot be trivialised in a feminist critique of *The Madonna of Excelsior* because it stands at the heart of the female characters’ subversion. According to Bornman, “the Afrikaner had a God-given right to rule supreme over all” (*Madonna*: 164) and the black women used their sexuality to test the faith of the Afrikaner as part of “God’s given plan” (*Madonna*: 88). This shows how, during apartheid, religion was used to cover white men’s unacceptable actions, even their lack of sexual control. Religion was used to sanction racism. It is ironic that the reverend sees himself as sacred and yet sleeps with a black woman and fathers a child. The child grows up to suffer from a deep sense of alienation because her father does not acknowledge her as his own. Yet The Seller of Songs finds a way to overcome her alienation and subvert apartheid’s mental hold over her.

The Seller of Songs, as the name implies, is a girl who goes from door to door and even on street corners selling music for survival. She is going through a rough patch in life because the community sees her as an outsider within their society, while her father, a rich and well-respected man of God, does not bother about her wellbeing. It is not only the father who does not help her to grow, even those that are next to her. Her uncle Sekatle, Maria’s brother, wants nothing to do with The Seller of Songs as he says: “I am not going to toil for Maria’s mixed-breed children” (*Madonna*: 201). As an uncle who is supposed to protect her from the storms of life, he is part of those who alienate her further.

Her long absence from home does not bother anyone and Viliki confirms that when Niki asks him about what The Seller of Songs' parents are saying about her long absence. Viliki answers by saying: "They don't care. No one came looking for her" (*Madonna*: 201). She is absent at home busy singing at the street corners and going door-by-door, singing for the community. Sometimes, she is in her lover's arms enjoying the warmth of somebody who cares about her.

Children like The Seller of Songs and Popi who are seen as outcasts and who do not grow up with proper guidance and love become the characters through which Mda satirises both the white, ruling population and the community. These children stand as a mockery of the moral values of the two groups.

As a young girl, she needs support from both the community and her parents so that she does not make bad choices in life or fall prey to sexual predators but neither the community nor her family gives her that support. She lacks proper love that can help her appreciate herself as a coloured in a country characterised by racism and sexism. In the face of these challenges, she finds strategies to empower herself and music becomes the source of her empowerment. The Seller of Songs subverts the community that labels her as inferior by singing for them. In due course, she catches their attention and they start to realise how important she is to them because she uplifts their souls and heals broken hearts.

She immerses herself in the life of the community fully, sharing her gift of music with them. The Seller of Songs uses music to subvert the community, because through music she is able to impose her relevance on the community. Motsemme (2004:925) states that "the invisible work of imagination can be viewed as an act of a woman's agency which embodies a potentiality to transform social action." This creative work serves as a survival strategy whereby people like The Seller of Songs and Popi who

suffer severe prejudice from their community can work with their imaginations to create an environment which is conducive for themselves. The Seller of Songs and Popi are able to create music to acquire their freedom.

Another way The Seller of Songs subverts the community is that she plunges deeply into the world of music, and this preoccupation with art protects her from the malicious gossip about her status as the “Other.” In a sense, then, she creates her own subjectivity independently of the community.

The Seller of Songs shows Popi the possibility of self-love through her obvious joy and love for music. At first, Popi cannot stand the sight of The Seller of Songs, because she reminds Popi of herself. It is only when she sees the love between her and her brother, Viliki, that she eventually relents. Popi once laments to Niki about her brother’s relationship with The Seller of Songs: “He can’t marry a girl like this, Niki. She is a disgrace, this girl” (*Madonna*: 200). Popi is not saying this out of hatred, but because the prejudice that she experienced from the community is obviously the same that The Seller of Songs experiences. Popi does not see any chance of the community accepting Viliki for marrying a coloured. She fears he would suffer the same alienation she and The Seller of Songs have suffered all their lives. However, in time she comes to appreciate The Seller of Songs and the two of them develop a warm relationship.

The Seller of Songs and Popi give music their whole, singing it from the bottom of their hearts. Their activities become an inspiration to those around them, helping the community to heal from pain and possibly leading them to act and effect social change. They are able to integrate with the community by singing at funerals, and they help to change the negative perceptions that the community has about them. Their singing weakens the prejudice of the community, forcing the community to

recognise them as human subjects. They break the system of domination and replace the closed structures of subjugation with the principles of self-determination, individual power and freedom.

Through music, The Seller of Songs, like Popi, subverts the apartheid system's imposition of powerlessness on her and chooses instead to be an active, relevant citizen.

5.4 The subversion of Maria and Mmampe

Maria and Mmampe are Niki's two friends who have been taking part in partner-swapping orgies a long time before Niki in order to support their respective families. They are deprived of education by the apartheid government, and are collecting cow dung in the sunflower fields to warm their shacks during cold weather. They engage themselves in the partner-swapping game in order to secure money to support their families. From a socio-economic perspective, these women realise that "you can make a lot of money from this foolish white man" (*Madonna*: 18), referring to Johannes Smit. This makes them more powerful as they are able to exploit these sexually obsessed men for their own financial gains.

Maria and Mmampe become prostitutes for the purpose of obtaining money to sustain their poor families. As in Niki's case, subversion using sex and the body is problematic from a feminist perspective because it still subjects the female to male dominance even though she gains financial power. Sigma Huda (2006:62) in her report for the United Nations Commission on Human Rights notes the following:

The act of prostitution by definition joins together two forms of social power, sex and money in one interaction. In both realms men hold substantial and systematic power over women. In prostitution, these power disparities merge in an act which both assigns

and reaffirms the dominant social status of men power over the subordinated social status of women.

This quotation affirms the view that prostitution places women in a subordinate position in relation to men as they become dependent on men for financial sustenance.

In many African cultures, prostitution is seen as morally corrupt and lowers a woman's self-image. However, there are reasons behind women selling their bodies and one of these reasons is financial sustenance. Prostitution cannot be carried out by women alone without men, but men are never described as prostitutes. This again demonstrates that women are always in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis men when it comes to contractual sex.

Mmampe and Maria engage in sex orgies with white men, which makes them prostitutes from their community's perspective, but they make a lot of money to support the children of irresponsible men with that money acquired during their sexual escapades. The women subvert how the community views prostitution because they use it for their financial advantage. To these women, prostitution is an independent decision which they make as an attempt to counter poverty and lack of job opportunities. Maria and Mmampe are from the lowest socio-economic classes, with a low level of education and from the most disadvantaged racial group. As such, they do not care about the partner swapping game because through it they can better their living conditions. Moreover, they regard it as fun. Their sleeping partners are, among others, Johannes Smit, Groot-Jan Lombard and Reverend Francois Bornman, who fathered *The Seller of Songs*. These men are respected among the Afrikaner community of Excelsior and they are aware that what they are doing in the barn is unlawful in accordance with the Immorality Act.

To show that they are aware that their actions are against the law, what they are doing is hidden in the fields, inside the barn, and this demonstrates the double standards of Afrikaner morality. Men are “squealing like pigs being slaughtered and heaving like dying pigs” (*Madonna*: 50). Afrikaner men are depicted as such when confronted with the sexuality of black women and this serves as a subversive tool because it undermines the power of white, male sexuality.

The emasculation of white male sexuality is evident when on one occasion Maria says to Niki laughingly: “Just take the money and let him water your thighs” (*Madonna*: 19). Maria regards Johannes Smit as less than a man because he can only emit “water” and does so flimsily. She makes fun of his weak manhood. To the Afrikaners who are said to be a superior race, this is a disgrace and to the black women this is a triumph. It shows the weakness of white men as they are unable to control their sexual desires for black women.

All the Afrikaner men who fathered the coloured children are cowards who evade the responsibility of financially supporting their children. The Seller of Song’s father, Reverend Bornman, and Popi’s father, Stephanus Cronje, both try to evade their responsibilities as fathers who should take care of their children. Stephanus succeeds in committing suicide while Reverend Bornman’s botched suicide fails. Niki and Maria are able to raise their children on their own despite their fathers disowning them. These women are able to subvert the patriarchal ideology that sees women as incapable of raising successful families without the help of men.

Maria is the sister to Sekatle, the mayor of Excelsior and one of the women implicated in the Excelsior 19 case. In the new dispensation, she is given a prime position of power at the council despite her being “barely literate” (*Madonna*: 249). This is nepotism because it is evident in a corrupt society that if next-of-kin has a

higher position, he/she can secure positions for relatives even if they are ill-equipped with knowledge. But in this instance it makes up for the injustices Maria suffered in the hands of the white government in the apartheid days.

As the novel shows, during apartheid it was not easy and common that blacks, especially black women, occupy prime positions in the government. Most of those women who were lucky found themselves occupying teaching and clerical positions, such as Cecilia Mapeta, but most of them worked as nannies in the whites' households, like Niki did. In the new dispensation, however, the tables have turned and black people, and particularly black women, are getting entrance into leadership positions in government. Maria's appointment is a subversive one, with which she subverts the apartheid legacy that blacks are passive and incompetent. By accepting the new position, Maria subverts the apartheid system that denied her education.

5.5 Conclusion

As in the case of Niki and Popi discussed in Chapters Three and Four, respectively, this analysis has revealed how women resort to different forms of subversion to free themselves from domination, to ensure their survival in the face of apartheid and patriarchy. Cecilia Mapeta, unlike other women in the novel, is a learned woman who defends herself through her education. She stands her grounds because she is aware of her rights as a human being. She knows that no one has the right to abuse her because of her skin colour and gender.

She is courageous, a survivor, independent and strong. Viewed from a feminist perspective, Cecilia can be embraced by both liberal and radical feminists. Radical feminists strive for women's autonomy in areas of sexuality and procreation, particularly in what they call 'forced motherhood' and 'sexual slavery' (Ashton & Whitting, 1987:13).

The Seller of Songs, like Popi, takes to the streets singing for the community that relegates her to an inferior position because of her skin colour. By going from door to door supplying her community with her music, she subverts how the community views her and at last they accept her as part of them.

Like Niki, Maria and Mmampe use their bodies and sexuality as weapons that secure their survival. They are able to feed their families through sex they supply to white affluent men who in turn give them money. Maria and Mmampe, like Niki, can be classified as liberal feminists. Whelenan (1995:27) maintains that feminists with a liberal perspective “tend not to identify their position as ‘political’ but rather as sensible, moderate and a reasonable claim for formal sexual equality.”

The analysis in this chapter reveals that these minor characters, like Niki and Popi, also suffer as a result of patriarchal and racial ideologies. The characters experience verbal, emotional and physical abuse from men. However, they are able to subvert patriarchy and apartheid using the weapons available to them.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Summary of findings

The path to gender equality is a thorny and long one which must also tackle issues of race and class, which means confronting the ways in which gender, race and class issues divide rather than unite, exclude rather than include. Female subversion is the manifestation of women's determination to break the cycle of oppression and to transcend class, gender and racial barriers. The success of this exercise lies to some extent on the removal of the apartheid legacy and patriarchal structures that deny women equal participation with men at all levels of society. This study has demonstrated that despite the restrictive and oppressive situations faced by female characters in the novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, these women are still able to overcome their hardships and create a meaningful life for themselves.

The findings of this study demonstrate that, in contrast with the male characters, Mda's female characters are more assertive in establishing a social plan to achieve liberation and independence from men. Mda's novel portrays African women who have agency and influence over their lives and those of their communities. Although they encounter domestic violence, sexual assault and all forms of humiliation, they aggressively try to free themselves from these forces. Sometimes, this involved completely separating themselves from the men whose selfish and calculated actions bring ruin to both their person and family. In this novel, patriarchy and the apartheid system combined to destroy women's ego and rob them of their independence and confidence. However, the women are clever enough to use their bodies as one extremely important strategy to subvert patriarchy and apartheid.

Since this strategy has its limitations, the women resort to many other strategies to empower themselves and counter prejudice, racism and sexism.

Niki, discussed in Chapter Three, uses her body by sleeping with Stephanus Cronje and Johannes Smit for financial gain. The money she acquires from these men helps her raise her family. Though Niki uses her body as a weapon for financial gain, which seems to be empowering, it must be acknowledged that using the body is also disempowering, because men are gaining pleasure through sexual intercourse and at the same time have economic independence. They gain financial freedom while women are further degraded as sexual puppets, for financial gain. To prove the point that prostitution is disempowering, Russell (1998:18) asserts that “the buyer is in most cases a man and the sexual service he is buying is from a woman, which is most often humiliating and revolves around power.” Prostitution is an exploitation of women’s bodies, a sign of male dominance over females which is intolerable. This is why Niki has to resort to other more empowering forms of subversion.

Niki rejects the traditional role of mother and wife by refusing to conform to the social expectations of being a wife and mother to her husband, Pule. The suspicion that Pule always has that Niki is having relationships with white men pushes Niki slowly out of her marriage. She denies Pule’s authority over her and resists spousal abuse by walking out of their marital house. She finds fulfilment as a single mother. She resorts to silence and subverts patriarchy while Pule dies in shame.

The birth of Popi is a means through which Niki dismantles the apartheid system that discourages the relationship between a white man and a black female. Niki contravened the Immorality Act by giving birth to a coloured child even if she is aware that it is not allowed. By trying to smoke Popi on a brazier, she wants to remove whiteness out of her and is an act of defiance against apartheid and

subversion of the apartheid system. She is at last a winner because she gains a confidante and a comforter in Popi, which means the contravention of the Immorality Act is a gain to Niki and a loss for the apartheid government.

Niki subverts apartheid through domestic work because it is through the money she earns from the Cronjes that she is able to maintain her family. The same system that denies her education and equality is the source of her survival financially. She takes care of the Cronje's son, Tjaart, whom she adores as her own child. Although Tjaart is infected by the apartheid syndrome, his bond with Niki is unbreakable.

The community of Mahlatswetsa, where Niki is staying, is not a supportive community to Niki. Instead of supporting her, they whisper behind her back about her infidelity to her husband. They point fingers at her instead of coming up with solutions to her marital problems. As such, Niki subverts the community by withdrawing her contact with them and seeks solace in bee-keeping. The honey that the bees supply gives her fulfilment.

Chapter Four shows how Popi, the daughter of Niki, subverts apartheid through acknowledging that she is a beautiful and intelligent girl who has the ability to turn her situation to her own advantage. Popi starts to admire her beauty by timeously looking at herself through the mirror and wearing mini-skirts that reveal her hairy legs. By so doing, she is subverting the apartheid system that is against any sexual contact between black and whites because she is the product of that contact.

By singing at funerals and community celebrations, Popi succeeds in getting attention from the community in spite of her different skin colour. This serves as subversion because she indirectly undermines the community's prejudice against

her. She, at times, uses Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor, to sing for them at their funerals. She uses the language indirectly to subvert the apartheid system that imposed this language to oppress blacks.

Through accepting her identity, Popi liberates herself and sees that being a product of miscegenation is not a sin but acceptable. Accepting herself is a form of healing and retaliation to the apartheid system for punishing her parents because of her birth. Her healing is compounded by the process of reconciliation because by calling a truce with Tjaart, Popi subverts the power that whites once had over blacks. There is a power shift here, because the power that Tjaart once had over her shifts as he asks her for forgiveness.

Chapter Five is about how other female characters in the novel overcome different challenges they are faced with. Cecilia is one woman who suffers sexual harassment from Nolan but her reaction to Nolan's attempted sexual abuse indicates her subversion. She destroys his fantasy by not succumbing to his sexual advances. She shows strong character, self-confidence and independence of thought.

Unlike Niki, Cecilia is educated because she is a teacher and, as such, uses her own intellect, pride, dignity and power of speech. Both Niki and Cecilia are able to satisfy their own interests: Niki uses her body to secure money from white men through her sexual escapades while Cecilia uses her education to resist the sexual advances of white men.

The Seller of Songs, Maria's daughter, is also affected by apartheid since she is born out of a relationship between a white man and a black woman. She is able to subvert the system through her music and to uplift the community's spirits. She

reverses the way the community views her by interacting with them through her songs.

Like Niki, Maria and Mmampe are women who make a living through sexual encounters with white, well-to-do men from Excelsior. They engage themselves in these escapades in exchange for money from men groomed by the system that denied them education and equality.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda condemns the sexual abuse of black women and shows different ways in which these women subvert those who abuse them. Mda is conscious that too much power corrupts. The women in his novel are against all forms of abuse and they validate their worth by using any means available to them to counter abuse.

6.2 Conclusion

As stated in Chapter One, the significance of the study lies in its literary appreciation of a text that illuminates female power exercised in unconventional ways. This study has endeavoured to show that female subversion is there because of patriarchy and the apartheid system. There were three research questions posed in the beginning of the study. The first one was: How do women in the novel transgress apartheid laws? This study has shown that the Immorality Act was against any sexual relationship between a black woman and a white woman. Women in the novel contravene this act directly by bedding white men, which results in coloured children, who become indelible markers of the immorality of the Act itself. What the women characters in this novel do is to expose the atrocities of apartheid and patriarchy.

The second research question was: How do these women use the existing laws to their own advantage? This study has illustrated that the laws that prohibit them from having affairs with white men are used for their financial gain and for the upliftment of their livelihood. Niki, Mmampe and Maria are able to support their families through participating in partner-swapping orgies. Their engagement in these orgies becomes their survival strategy in which they use their bodies to acquire money from rich, white men who are part of the apartheid government which denied them education and equality. The laws are used to dismantle apartheid of its policies of racial prejudices, especially against black women.

The third question that this study answered is: How do the women rise above these laws to establish their own subjectivity and independence? Through their bodies, women show that they have full control of their lives and, as such, no one is supposed to control them. Their bodies give them freedom from the bondage of patriarchy which prescribe how women should behave, thus relegating them to inferior positions in the society. As the novel progresses, Niki adopts silence as one of the weapons to fight male and community domination. She opts to spend time communicating with bees which serves as a source of her personal healing. Unlike, Niki, Maria and Mmampe, Cecilia uses the education she acquired in the face of apartheid, where blacks were not accorded an opportunity to be educated, for her own self-preservation. She does not succumb to sexual advances from a white man but instead maintains her pride and dignity through adverse circumstances. Both Popi and The Seller of Songs resort to singing which force the community to accept them as part of their own. Unlike Niki who withdraws totally from the community of Mahlatswetsa, Niki's daughter, Popi does not withdraw from the community, but immerses herself in community projects and that leads to her acceptance by the community.

6.3 Recommendations

This study has shown how women who were trapped in patriarchy and apartheid systems have been able to stand up and move forward with their lives. The study is limited to only one novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, by Zakes Mda, and it recommends that it should be extended to other novels in future, so that this theme can be broadened.

The *Madonna of Excelsior* is a text written by a man, who was born in South Africa, writing about the subversive ways in which women fight apartheid and patriarchy. There must be other texts written by women on the theme of subversion in the future as this subject involves them most, together with their experiences. This study is encouraging women to contribute positively to the literary output by looking within themselves positively. It is time that women stop watching when things are written for them about them. Instead, they should make an effort to recreate their own images in literature.

Furthermore, this study recommends that women in South Africa should consider subversion as a positive means of overcoming the challenges they face as a result of their gender, race or class.

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