



universität
wien

DISSERTATION / DOCTORAL THESIS

Titel der Dissertation /Title of the Doctoral Thesis

„Female Perspectives on the HIV/AIDS Epidemic in
Contemporary South African and Zimbabwean Fiction
Writing“

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doktorin der Philosophie (Dr.phil.)

Wien, 2024/ Vienna, 2024

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on the student
record sheet:

UA 792 393

Dissertationsgebiet lt. Studienblatt /
field of study as it appears on the student record sheet:

Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft

Betreut von / Supervisor:

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Dedication

Za mami. Za najmočnejšo žensko kar jih poznam, ki mi pokaže pot in svetlobo, ko je jaz ne zmorem videti.

To my mother, Anica Zajec; the smartest and strongest woman I know.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to Univ.-Prof. ao. Univ.-Prof. i.R. Dr. Norbert Bachleitner for his patience, guidance, and support.

Preface

This PhD thesis was started because of my first-hand experience of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern Africa. However, it was written during an outbreak of another global pandemic, Covid-19, which has altered the research but also amplified the meaning of ‘reading with care.’ Ultimately, this thesis is written in hope that it can, to a very small degree, help in preventing the ultimate price paid in any epidemic outbreak; claiming human lives.

List of Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
ARV	Antiretroviral
AZT	Azidothymidine
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HSPH	Harvard School of Public Health
MERS	Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SAMRC	South African Medical Research Council
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
WHO	World Health Organization

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1. Introduction

The latest available data from The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that there are currently 39 million people living with HIV. 20 million are women, 17.4 million are men and 1.5 million are children.¹ This means that globally, from the adult population, there are 2.6 million more women infected with HIV than men. It is of crucial importance here to highlight that there is no medical reason for more infected women than men.

With the (re)appearance of MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome), SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), 'Swine Flu,' Ebola, and COVID-19 in the last few decades, public health specialists prepare us for an upcoming 'Age of Pandemics' fueled global changes to the climate and the environment.² However, in his book "Plagues in World History" John Aberth calls HIV/AIDS the most culturally constructed disease "whose ever-shifting 'metaphors' relative to each society's attitudes and behaviors are intimately connected with the clinical and biological manifestations of the disease."³ The 'tale of two AIDS' is what he calls the different paths the disease has taken in 'the West' versus its rampage in sub-Saharan Africa, and, to some extent in the Caribbean.

In many ways, HIV/AIDS can now be perceived as 'the other.' The 'other' epidemic in terms of new more recent epidemics and old news in terms of the media. 'The other' as Africa in terms of being predominantly located on the African continent and as such not of primary interest to the 'West.' In terms of it predominantly affecting 'the other,' the black race. And in terms of it affecting, for 2.6 million lives more, 'the other sex' – women.

The social impact of HIV/AIDS changed the course of history for certain groups previously considered as 'deviant' like homosexuals, drug users, and sex workers. Activists achieved so by gaining epidemiological, virological and immunological knowledge, presenting science-based facts which challenged, for example, anti-gay assumptions. Thus, in an alliance with medical, health-care, biomedical, pharmaceutical and media professionals, they produced

¹ 'The Global Health Observatory: HIV', *World Health Organization*, accessed on 30.04.2024, <<https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/hiv-aids>>.

² Mark Harrison, 'Pandemics,' in *The Routledge History of Disease*, ed. by Mark Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 129.

³ John Aberth, *Plagues in World History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), p. 135.

new knowledge and consequentially new patterns of signification as well as changed the meaning and impact the epidemic has had on these groups.⁴ However, the same has not happened for women.

Women, with regards to HIV/AIDS, were first invisible, as it was considered a male, ‘homosexual’ disease, and were thus marginalized in medical and popular media discourses as the ‘secondary’ and ‘incidentally’ affected ones. Then they became visible as vectors of transmission for men and children. This era gave birth to a ‘female respectability’ strategy of protection, restricting female sexuality and choices, reducing and trivializing issues of women through destruction by silence. As more women than men get infected in southern Africa nowadays, this calls for an investigation of reasons behind this fact.

In this thesis, novels are understood as “frameworks of meaning realized by language but produced by institutional and ideological structures and relations.”⁵ In discourse analysis there is constant tension between ‘the ideological’ and ‘the real’ or ‘the actual.’ There is an ideological apparatus, a real structure, realized in families, in relationships, on a macro level as a rhetorical device or a metanarrative. Nonetheless, on micro/meso levels support to its members does not apply, and ostracizing those who do not comply or ‘fit in’ occurs. A narrative has the critical and creative privilege to bring to light what has become deniable or even unspeakable in reality.

Qualitative narrative analysis can understand the harm done that exceeds, or adds to, the legal and social perspectives. Narrative can correct the wrongdoings and bring forth possibilities for change, of different outcomes, or, for this thesis a key term, of ‘transformation.’ Narratives are brought into a dialogue to get a fuller picture and provide a discursive analysis of the stories they tell for the world to ‘make sense.’ A parallel phenomenological analysis includes the ‘phenomena’ that make up their historical, sociological, and psychological profile. Therefore, by the use of literary criticism, narratives are analyzed through an examination of their rhetorical effects concerning their context, both current and historical. For this, an

⁴ Jana Funke, ‘Deviance as Disease: The Medicalization of Sex and Crime’ in *The Routledge History of Disease* ed. by Mark Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 119.

⁵ Claire Jaynes, ‘The influence of the family on interracial intimate relationships in post-apartheid South Africa,’ *South African Journal of Psychology*, 40:4 (2010), p. 398.

understanding of the broader role of the ideologies by which we live, and through which we live our lives, is needed.

The opening chapter of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Death of a Discipline" identifies a conflict between the old textualist traditions of comparative literature and the cultural and historical materialism of cultural studies. What Spivak calls for is a 'composite comparativism' which is defined as a mixture between the "comparative literature's attention to language, and the material-historical insights of cultural studies."⁶ Spivak does not call for activist comparativism, like the work of the United Nations or international NGO's whom she calls "the real players in a dominant feminist collectivity crossing borders," but does claim that the effect of reading can often transgress the text.⁷

As Spivak writes in "Death of a Discipline," comparative literature *is* in politics, but what needs to be depoliticized is the politics of hostility, fear, and 'half solutions'. A responsible effort into the imagination of the reader for a different way, in gender training and human rights, is an intervention that gives an insight into how culture is performed and incorporated into narratives. In training the imagination against othering, comparative literature can become a sort of translation "not from language to language but from body to ethical semiosis, that incessant shuttle that is a 'life.'"⁸ To find alternative meanings to explanations given to women and society until now, as we can study as well as at the same time learn from literature. Unlike in politics or in the media, there is an undecidability in the texts between 'us' and 'them,' between identity politics and uncertainties. Reading is a process that is perpetually open and it is, per Spivak, salubrious that it is so. The language of the text lives in the reader. By the use of imagination, through the acts of writing and reading, a transfer of agency is performed. Such an act, adds a new dimension to the sphere of social sciences where the decision-making authorities are based.

A hole can be either opened or closed. It is an affirmative undecidability, of the 'perhaps,' of what is to come, a warning of what is to be, in imagining yourself "really letting yourself be imagined (experience that impossibility) without guarantees, by and in another

⁶ Hayley G. Toth, 'Spivak's Planetarity and the Limits of Professional Reading,' *Comparative Critical Studies*, 17:3 (2020), p. 460.

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 54.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 26.

culture [...] Teleopoiesis. Literature is what escapes the system; you cannot speed read it.”⁹ After all, at some point, the writing of the text is finished, but its re-interpretation, re-creation, transformation has no limits and poses a task for each new generation of readers. The analysis of the text can be regarded as an end, or as a means of increasing knowledge, of greater insight. It is a prism through which one looks at another thing. And the theoretical prism through which this thesis analyses the works of fiction.

1.1. Reading With Care

Spivak defines “teleopoiesis as poeisis (‘imaginative making’) that signals the spatio-temporal distance between producer and processes of production on the one hand, and product on the other hand.”¹⁰ Teleopoiesis here implies a self-reflective attention between imaginative production and subject-formation, or to put it differently, the relationship between the material and the textual. Such an experience of literariness means moving away from ourselves to see more clearly the place where we began, looking through the eyes of ‘the other’ as created in the text. Such a ‘new’ comparative literature, embedded in the practice of close reading, is defined by “a care for language and idiom, by reading with care.”¹¹ It is with a love and care for language, to see what language can do, but also for the reader to observe or re-imagine the conditions of the present with ethical sensitivity.

The aim here is that by reading about the fictional world, the reader changes perception about the ‘real world.’ The power, or at least influence, of the meta-world in the real one, enhancing ethical interfaces and associated dispositions. While this may sound idyllic, there is empirical evidence that “regular readers experience higher levels of empathy and display ‘greater willingness and desire to engage with strangers.’”¹² It is about thinking and acting differently, seeing the world anew, diversity and flexibility that goes beyond identity politics. Shocks, surprises and alienating effects might not be felt by the reader as physical pain, but as emotional pain, as empathy.

⁹ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p. 52.

¹⁰ Toth, p. 462.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, p. 463.

However, the focus on literariness does not depoliticize reading and literature, turn only to the text, and forget about the ‘real world.’ On the contrary:

“It is about not settling for the political conditions of the present, precisely because one recognizes inequalities in class, caste, race, ethnicity, nationality, language, gender, sexuality, and so on, and their relationship to colonialism and global capitalism. It is about striving instead to imagine – and teach others to imagine – a more humane world. It is about re-making the world as textual, its future as yet unwritten [...] an imperfect way of saying that we must move beyond what is (the political conditions of the present) and participate in the creation of what could or might be (through ethical engagement with texts and, subsequently, political action in the world).”¹³

Reading itself might not primarily increase insight, but invites us to engage intimately with the textual ‘other,’ breaking the cycles of appropriation and narcissism active in the capitalist-patriarchal-colonial regimes, and work toward training ourselves away from pure self-interest and towards a greater social justice. A constant re-appraisal and self-re-definition of suspending our own interests into the language that is happening in the text, can help train the imagination through affect into unlearning judgement while better bearing with otherness and complexity. Such a re-learning of “being with and among others as other(s)” is the wager for literature setting into motion its transformative potential.¹⁴

Can there be a world where equality of the sexes is possible, equality of the infected, equality of empowerment? And if that world can be imagined, can exist in a space, a horizon, what are the conditions for its emergence? What we already know does not need to be lost in the process, indeed, Judith Butler writes that we find ‘the ideal’ by examining the familiar and understanding that ‘the imaginary’ is composed of ‘the fictive’ and ‘the actual’ with the key ingredient of the latter being ‘the possible.’ Consequently, literary texts that make the reader question the world order we live in and create moments, which are neither in the past nor in the future, but represent a state between the adumbration and permutation of the present.¹⁵ It is not easy to see qualities that are not given, might not even exist yet. That is when metaphors or

¹³ Toth, p. 464.

¹⁴ Birgit M. Kaiser, ‘The Ends of Critical Intimacy: Spivak, Fanon, and Appropriative Reading,’ in *The Ends of Critique: Methods, Institutions, Politics*, ed. by Kathrin Thiele, et al. (Washington: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022), p. 121

¹⁵ Judith Butler, ‘Foreword’ in *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* by Natanson, Maurice (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. xiii.

words can escape their bounds and reveal the ‘essence of change’ in which the literary world exceeds the real one.

This no longer happens in the text alone, but needs ‘context.’ While recognizing that some theory ‘purists’ fear ‘contamination’ by the ‘thematic’ ideology and politics, Butler, Guillory and Thomas, insist that by theory engaging with the interdependent social and political world, it has become ‘impure’ in order to be relevant as intention and context ask pointed questions about literary influence and reception.¹⁶ Justice, freedom, equality of gender, race, and sexuality, are social themes interstitial with postcolonial cultural spaces of globalization. The insights of the literary in the social and political through metaphor, ellipsis, and allegory, have great relevance for the course of our collective lives.¹⁷ For only by engaging in politically responsible ways, and highlighting the specifics and challenges of the world we live in, can literary analysis enter complicated contemporary dimensions, which bring modern readers to literary texts in the first place.

While reading and literariness can be enjoyed by everyone, the estrangement, the moving away from the present, are in part always dependent on the reader’s material and cultural identity, their pre-existing repertoire. Wolfgang Iser, in his “The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response” estimates that as much as the unfamiliar influences our familiar, the familiar influences our unfamiliar.¹⁸ Location, education, tastes and prejudices, to mention only a few, might actually reproduce the world instead of transcending it, thus the ‘plea for reading in the service of transformation,’ might be a leap of faith that remains unrewarded.

What this thesis wants to do, is offer options, collect a ‘corpus of hope,’ but how it gets used in ‘real-life’ is impossible to predict. Evan Spivak acknowledges that this is an “undoubtedly utopian vision,” knowing that reading literature will not make a revolution, welcoming the multiple meanings and the plurality of voices instead.¹⁹ But it can at least keep narcissism in check and potentially inspire readers for wanting a different future. The example of Janice Radway’s analysis of women who read romance novels, shows that they do not do so

¹⁶ Judith Butler, John Guillory and Kendall Thomas, ‘Preface,’ in *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory* ed. by Butler, Judith, Guillory, John, and Kendall, Thomas (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), p. x.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. xi-xii.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 94.

¹⁹ Kaiser, p. 123.

out of contentment with patriarchy, but out of a utopian protest for a different world. It is a ‘special gift’ they give themselves, living vicariously through the relationship the heroine has with the hero of the story, to at least in the fictional world receive the same love and support that they are expected to provide to everybody else in their everyday lives.²⁰

The overall theory this thesis follows is a composite comparativist experience of literariness, a method of close reading dubbed ‘reading with care.’ It focuses on the ethics of reading critically, imagining new forms by listening to texts for alternative world formations that stand against identity politics. It is a re-making of the world as textual, transcending what is, and creating what could or might be. In the plurality of meanings a text can offer, such is a reading away from ourselves. As mentioned before, ‘reading with care’ is a plea for reading in the service of transformation, a constant re-appraisal and self-definition, a training of the imagination to bear with otherness and complexity. A self-proclaimed utopian vision which veers away from narcissistic self-involvement, denying the present situation for a future of reciprocation in which men bestow on women the same care and attention women bestow on them.

1.2. Reading With Care Concretized

The Spivak-Butler based ‘reading with care’ concept is concretized in this thesis with Louis Althusser’s theory on ideology and interpellation, explaining, changing, and dismantling the dominant discourses, as defined by Michel Foucault, about HIV/AIDS and women. The tool used for this task is the ‘transformative discourse’ which shows what ‘reading with care’ can do. The aim of the ‘transformative discourse’ is establishing a Homi Bhabha-inspired ‘equality in difference’ concept to gather a ‘corpus of hope’ based on reciprocity, moderation and complementation as an alternative for simple overpowering. To put it differently, the thesis ‘reads with care’ the words on the pages of the selected novels, contextualizes them, and then analyzes how they can be explained or ‘transformed’ to find ‘hope’ for women within them, trying to ‘interpellate’ the reader of this thesis to seek out in (any) novel beacons of hope for female empowerment. The following subchapter will break down this aim step by step.

²⁰ John Storey. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (London: Pearson Longman, 2009), p. 143.

Michel Foucault wrote about the relationship between power and knowledge within discourse and how discourses enable, constrain and constitute in order to form the objects of which they speak. They produce positions and write scripts its subjects ‘perform’ or as Storey puts it, what we experience is always already a part of a discourse, and our ‘self’ “is the internalization of a multiplicity of discourses.”²¹ The discourse of colonization has in South Africa and Zimbabwe created a distrust of anything Western. As the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been discovered by the ‘West’ it is unworthy of trust. Consequently, any preventive ‘western’ measure or medication is also untrusted. It also interferes with the patriarchy/masculinity discourse and the reproductive discourse as it creates ‘rules’ of protection for sexual intercourse. Additionally, pharmaceutical and cure opportunism intertwine with the capitalist discourse.

Within all these discourses women are secondary. They are also the discourses where power is held, thus women are disempowered within them. Power produces two additional things; knowledge and reality. Knowledge always presupposes power relations, and reality creates the ‘regimes of truth’ we live by. This is where Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology and interpellation comes in.

Althusserianism calls ideology a system of unconscious representations through which we live our lives. By the means of symptomatic reading, what is present, and what is absent, is equally important. While applying Althusser’s theory to texts, Pierre Macherey argues that a text never has a singular meaning or intention. Instead, the multiplicity of textual meaning(s), derives from a strife between explicit and implicit discourses exposing a gap between what the text actually says and what it wants to say. According to Althusser, all ideology has the function to construct or ‘hail’ individuals as subjects. Thus, “ideology is a material practice that creates subjects who are in turn subjected to its specific patterns of thought and modes of behavior.”²² Social identity becomes a question of what we consume instead of what we produce.

The discourses surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic have been successful in ‘interpellating’ people into believing that they are true. It is important to point out here that the ‘regimes of truth’ do not have to be true to function, they just have to be believed, or as Slavoj Žižek highlights, interpellation only works if the addressee recognizes her/himself in the social

²¹ Storey, p. 129.

²² Ibid, p. 78.

script that has been written by the discourse. For that to happen, the addressee needs to find the discourse credible, and often, beneficial.

There is another concept that deserves to be highlighted, Antonio Gramsci's hegemony. Hegemony is a consensus in which a (leading) group presents its interests as the interest of the whole. It is maintained by resistance as well as incorporation of the 'subordinate' groups reaching a balance also called a 'compromise equilibrium.' The equilibrium is maintained by what Gramsci calls 'organic intellectuals' and Althusser calls 'ideological State apparatuses.' While the 'repressive State apparatuses' like the police, courts, prisons, the army and even the head of state, the government and its administration, function by violence, in them, at least as seen from the outside, there is no plurality but complete unity. They also entirely belong to the public domain. In the 'ideological State apparatuses' group, we have the religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade-union, communication and cultural spheres. They function by ideology, are constituted by plurality, and are a part of the private domain.

So while we have the power of the State maintained by external force on the one hand, on the other, we have a subtler way of securing the internal consent of its citizens. These groupings view the aims of the state and the political status quo favorably. Thus, even though we as society and as individuals feel like we are choosing what we want freely, what we 'want,' is actually imposed on us. With the double functioning of violence and ideology it is important to point out that State power has hegemony over ideological State apparatuses which are in return a site of class-struggle and are therefore harder to take over. Therefore, the State power together with the ideological State apparatuses forms the ruling ideology.²³

In capitalist society, literature itself is an ideological form, both produced by and producing ideology. The unity that the literary text strives to present must be explored as well as the contradictions embedded within it. In Southern Africa and Zimbabwe certain discourses about the epidemic have been created in the public and private spheres and they have resulted negatively for women. The selected works of fiction explore these, for women, negative discourses. It should be noted that power is not necessarily a negative force. It does not only deny and repress, it also produces. Knowledge means that we have learned something. It can be a point of resistance or an opposing strategy. As Foucault said, knowledge is power. It is

²³ Louis Althusser. 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 147.

important, as Judith Butler noted, that the ‘regimes of truth’ societies live by are temporal, and readers are not a fixed ‘interpretative community.’ An understanding of a reading can change with re-reading and over time.

Nowadays, Anglophone African writers write about what it means to be an African. It is writing that is “neither a ‘writing back’ to Europe nor an endorsement of Euro-American neocolonialism. It is first and foremost about self-perception.”²⁴ A future cannot be completely separated from the past which haunts it. Especially considering Spivak’s estimation that “the undoing of the colonizer/colonized binary by economic fact gives us the genealogy of globalization in its current manifestation, before postcolonialism or liberal multiculturalism began.”²⁵ But fiction, can create alternative ways of being for the contemporary African through “intercultural scenarios in which two sign systems come into contact - African and Other - through which identity, history, culture, and language are parsed, fragmented, and then put back together again, allowing for a cultural mosaic to flourish.”²⁶

One of the reasons why Althusser’s ‘interpellation’ was chosen to be the underlying prism through which the novels will be ‘judged’ in this thesis is because socially constructed gender roles presuppose the male as the breadwinner and position him in the public sphere. The female belongs to the private, homemaking, domestic sphere. However, with globalization, the female role has changed and now entails both the public and the private, on the local, national, and even international levels. In the new economic reality, where a few accumulate all the wealth and the majority masses are exploited, women become a source of cheap labor in addition to working domestically. Women’s designated role as custodians of ‘culture’ means that they are trapped in a system and reality which allows their exclusion especially revolving around money, leading to power disparities excluding women from public power discourses.

The aim of the central discourse of this thesis is to ‘transform’ the colonial, patriarchal, masculinity, capitalist and reproductive discourses from being overpowering to being reciprocal/complementary. For this purpose, Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘equality in difference’ theory is used. In his essay “Our Neighbours, Ourselves: Contemporary Reflections on Survival”

²⁴ Valérie K. Orlando, ‘The Transnational Turn in African Literature of French Expression: Imagining Other Utopian Spaces in the Globalized Age’ in *Transcultural Literary Studies: Politics, Theory, and Literary Analysis*, ed. by Fischer, Bernd (Basel, Switzerland: MDPI, 2016), p. 93.

²⁵ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p. 53.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 96.

which was a part of the Hegel Lectures hosted by the Freie Universität Berlin, Bhabha describes his concept of enunciation as “the ongoing articulation of language that always tries to capture the present as it is passing into the future.”²⁷ Bhabha sees enunciation of language imminently torn between signification, which is opened and arbitrary, and discourse, which is orderly and regulatory, an ambivalence necessarily constantly re-negotiable with no guarantees.

However, this is by far, not the only ‘necessary’ process of ambivalence. Bhabha builds his case on the example of refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa who were HIV-positive and were granted hospitality in New Zealand only after agreeing to obligatory HIV-testing and being exposed to racial and cultural injustices. This case serves as an example where the ‘unconditional’ notion of hospitality and the ‘conditional’ system of law clash, a juxtaposition further explored within chapter two. The paradoxical ‘in-between’ third space Bhabha introduces, is set between ‘one’ and ‘the other,’ between signification and regulation, conditional and unconditional, ambivalent and antagonistic, realm with and around which we must work recognizing that “the third is nothing less ... than the beginning of justice.”²⁸ Bhabha’s third space is a site where an unstable, yet graspable, ‘consciousness of justice’ is stirred into being.

The ‘third space’ challenges the definition and limits of the self. A certain viewpoint seen as ‘commonly acceptable’ can suddenly become either self-protection or self-projection, right in line with what the ‘reading with care’ concept desires. Questions of how, from where and whom we are looking at, and their corresponding answers change when transgressions of historical, cultural, linguistic, or other norms are performed. Therefore, of interest here are narratives which insist “that the knowledge of identity and difference is as much a question of epistemology and history as it is a perceptual and phenomenological problem.”²⁹ Nonetheless, the question of how can ‘universality’ and ‘difference’, ‘equality’ and ‘singularity’ co-exist, especially in the struggle for recognition, for assuming agency, for reaching a certain level of self-fulfillment, remains.

²⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Our Neighbours, Ourselves: Contemporary Reflections on Survival,’ in *Hegel Lectures* ed. by Eva Cancik - Kirschbaum, Erika Fischer - Lichte, Klaus W. Hempfer and Joachim Küpper (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), p. 4.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 6.

²⁹ Ibid, p 8.

In an effort to overpass black and white divisions between ‘equal dignity’ and ‘the politics of difference,’ Bhabha offers an ‘interruption’ which not only ‘interrupts’ the ideological, the ‘normal,’ the expected, but instead, much like Butler suggested, alienates the “apparatus that gives authority to an idea, an image, a scene.”³⁰ The idea of what or who is on the inside or outside is both used and subverted. The ‘equality-as-universality’ is now changed to ‘equality-in-difference’ as Bhabha uses Etienne Balibar’s, a student of Louis Althusser, double and disjunctive articulation of equality and difference.³¹ The contradictory concepts of cultural ‘differences’ of race, gender, generation, and geopolitical location are, by the means of interpellation, ‘thought of’ as being exterior to modern politics, but their presence can eerily be found in political organization, legislation, discourses and repressive practices. Thus ‘recognition’ is a phenomenological condition as well as a political struggle. To achieve ‘equality’ both anxiety and ambivalence are needed, as are ‘repressed contradictions’ and mendacious claims needed for the heterogeneousness of freedoms.

Consequently, Bhabha claims “recognition always goes two ways at once,” the ‘self’ must open outwards in the same moment as the external turns inward in order to build a base for mutual understanding, for ‘being together,’ for ‘seeing oneself as other,’ which then creates the ‘anxious moment of turning’ “to and fro, within the web of human relationships” within which “the subject reveals its agency and discloses a regard for the neighbor as, at once, strange and close - an anachronous presence to consciousness.”³²

HIV/AIDS is the thing that binds all the stories collected in this thesis. It matters how women as protagonists or side characters are portrayed, how they are made to think, how they behave, and in the face of HIV infection, how they cope, how do they overcome. Such a collection of ‘hope’ from works of fiction from different genres, with different themes, from authors with various backgrounds, aimed for a diverse audience, is gathered to inspire the reader, and through the reader aspire for a world in which women are treated as equals to men. Such complementarity is demanded on the fact that women represent half of the population of planet Earth, and are as such most definitely not a minority, even though their rights are often treated as such.

³⁰ Bhabha, *Neighbours*, p. 14.

³¹ Ibid, p. 14 - 15.

³² Ibid, p. 18.

To create a ‘corpus of hope’ all selected works are analyzed through the lens of a ‘transformative discourse,’ and if such a discourse is established how did it do so. Which techniques do they use, what words do they write down? And if they do not incite hope, what could be changed in order for hope to prevail? The title of one of the novels included, “The Uncertainty of Hope,” is a great allegory for this thesis highlighting that just as ‘hope,’ the ‘transformative discourses,’ the ‘regimes of truths’ they (re)create, and the actions they potentially inspire in the reader, are equally colossally important, and yet, uncertain.

1.3. Scope and Structure of the Case Study

As mentioned in the first paragraph of this thesis, globally, there are 2.6 million more women infected with HIV than men. Today, a quarter of the world’s population living with HIV, almost 9 million people, live in the two countries selected for analysis in this thesis; South Africa and Zimbabwe. At the end of 2022,³³ roughly 39 million people were infected with HIV, out of which two thirds (25.6 million) lived on the African continent.³⁴ The two selected countries are both among the top ten countries globally regarding HIV prevalence. However, when it comes to the number of people living with HIV, South Africa is the global number one. The UNAIDS/WHO estimated number of people living with HIV in South Africa, with a population of 59.4 million people, is 7.6 million, out of which 4.8 million are women.³⁵ The UNAIDS/WHO estimated number of people living with HIV in Zimbabwe, with a population of 16 million people, is 1.3 million, out of which 750.000 are women.³⁶

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), altogether there have been 85.6 million infections with HIV since the beginning of the epidemic, and 40.4 million people have passed away because of AIDS.³⁷ In 2022, 1.3 million people got newly infected, and there were around 630.000 HIV-related deaths.³⁸ The HIV virus is latent and asymptomatic and can thus either develop quickly or hibernate for several years leaving the person infected unaware of

³³ According to the latest overall global verifiable data available in 2024 provided by the World Health Organization (WHO).

³⁴ ‘The Global Health Observatory: HIV’, *World Health Organization*, accessed on 30.04.2024, <<https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/hiv-aids>>.

³⁵ ‘South Africa HIV Country Profile 2023’, *World Health Organization*, accessed on 30.04.2024, <<https://cfs.hivci.org/index.html>>.

³⁶ ‘Zimbabwe HIV Country Profile 2023’, *World Health Organization*, accessed on 30.04.2024, <<https://cfs.hivci.org/index.html>>.

³⁷ ‘The Global Health Observatory: HIV’, *World Health Organization*, accessed on 30.04.2024, <<https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/hiv-aids>>.

³⁸ Ibid.

their status for long periods. However, such a person can still transmit the disease via “blood, semen or vaginal secretions, and breast milk.”³⁹ Immediately after infection, some may experience flu-like symptoms, but the symptoms which have become the most characteristic of the disease like diarrhea, weight and appetite loss, fever, sweats, and nausea paired with low T-cell counts, develop in the full blown-AIDS phase. That is when the immune system starts collapsing and opportunistic infections can wreak havoc. Without treatment, from this point on, the patient has from six months to two years to live.

AIDS patients have been particularly stigmatized because of the symptoms resembling those of the bubonic plague as well as extreme loss of body mass nicknaming the epidemic as the ‘slim disease.’ There is also an interconnectivity between the medical and religious, sometimes even magical, explanations of the origin of the disease with patients looking for a cure through all of them.⁴⁰ Despite scientific breakthroughs, there is still no cure, not for the illness itself nor its social luggage which forever marks the infected with the taint of a moral lapse. However, with antiretroviral medication (ARV’s) AIDS has become a manageable disease. Sitting on the, what John Aberth calls ‘margins of our consciousness,’ it is now a disease of the aforementioned ‘other.’

The crucial difference between the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the West and in Africa, considering gender, is that in Western countries the route of transmission is still nowadays, in majority, through homosexual intercourse, while in Africa, the main route of transmission is by heterosexual intercourse. This gave wind to the most controversial, outdated and strictly anecdotal assumptions of the hypersexualized, promiscuous, exotic African, despite the fact that poverty, malnutrition, climate-induced famines coupled with other continental diseases, all also contribute to the faster spread of the disease, though, as this point will be crucially important in the upcoming analysis in chapter two, they do not cause it. Sexual behaviors like maintaining multiple concurrent partners, and ‘high risk’ groups like “commercial sex workers, migrant populations, and urban dwellers displaced from their traditional rural environments,” for many of which survival strategy becomes ‘death’ strategy, contribute to higher infection rates all around the world.⁴¹

³⁹ Aberth, p.136.

⁴⁰ Catherine Rider, ‘Religion, Magic and Medicine,’ in *The Routledge History of Disease*, ed. by Mark Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 66.

⁴¹ Aberth, p. 155.

The HIV virus can linger in a person's body as a phantom or shadow for quite a while before it develops into full-blown-AIDS. Such is also the presence of the virus in contemporary South African and Zimbabwean fiction. Sometimes it is right at the heart of the story, while other times its presence is in the shadows, hiding until it is too late. Since both countries achieved independence the corpus of HIV/AIDS-centered female-authored novels is growing like for example Sharai Mukonoweshuro's 'Days of Silence,' Lutanga Shaba's 'Secrets of a Woman's Soul,' Tendayi Westerhof's 'Unlucky in Love' or Zukiswa Wanner's 'Men of The South.' The works of Tsitsi Dangarembga, Kopano Matlwa, Petina Gappah, NoViolet Bulawayo and Patricia Schonstein Pinnock highlight the impossibilities of women's everyday lives and struggles while being HIV positive. Chwayita Ngamlana's 'If I Stay Right Here' dives into the correlations between sexual violence and HIV vulnerability and Sindiwe Magona's 'Beauty's Gift' explores 'unbreakable' female friendships in light of being HIV positive.

Male authors have also found the disease as both a metaphor and 'vehicle' for their narrative messages starting with the famous South African work 'Welcome to Our Hillbrow' by Phaswane Mpe, followed by authors Zakes Mda, Niq Mhlongo, Kgebetli Moele, and Kabelo Sello Duiker known for their signature blunt language. The HIV/AIDS epidemic and gender (in)equality are prominent features in both 'open' texts, which invite reader collaboration, and 'closed' texts like detective, espionage or conspiracy fiction. Especially in this last group, does southern Africa have a growing crime fiction literary scene that can easily equal the Nordic one. The female group of established and emerging crime fiction novelists like Jassy Mackenzie, Lauren Beukes, Sally Andrew, Angela Makholwa, Karin Brynard, Margie Orford, or Irma Venter is in the good company of works by Mike Nicol, Imraan Coovadia, Deon Meyer, and Michiel Heyns. Finally, works like Lutz van Dijk's 'Stronger than the Storm,' Onne Vegter's 'Whitney's Kiss,' Jenny Robson's 'Praise Song,' and Sandile Memela 'Flowers of the Nation' all educate their potential young readers about HIV/AIDS.

With the theories of 'reading with care' in mind, especially Althusser's division of the world into three spheres, the economic, the political, and the ideological, to answer the overall research question of what empowers women within the realm of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa and Zimbabwe, the inward shaped pyramid structure (Table 3) of society/relationships/self is presupposed. In this structure 'society' entails mostly the political with female reactions and reactions to future potential epidemics, 'relationships' include

women in relation to men, family, other women, religion, class, race and sexuality, while ‘self’ is constructed by growth through periods of women’s lives.

Despite the options provided by Table 1 and Table 2, where either the ‘society’ or the ‘self’ serve as the base, or vice a versa, the tip of the pyramid, none fit the ‘current’ situation or fields of influence the selected novels describe. The inward pyramid model selected as shown in Table 3, serves as a hypothesis in itself of which ‘field’ is dominant. It starts, or ends, with the ‘self,’ empowered only as the last instance, thus, situated at the bottom. ‘Society’ is hoovering and influencing over the ‘self’ and ‘relationships,’ holding power over and distributing the dominating discourses. Even though Table 3 serves as the model on which this thesis is built, this is before the application of the ‘transformative discourse.’ In the pyramid model as well as in the ‘real’ world, someone is always on top, someone always has more power.

However, in the not-yet-existing ‘utopian’ ‘reading with care’ version of the future, a distribution of influence as shown in Table 4 is suggested. It is suggesting complementation/reciprocal circular co-influence, envisioning that if it can be imagined, it can become true. Table 3 shows the situation as presented in the books before creating the ‘transformative discourse,’ while Table 4 shows the situation envisioned by the works that can be put in the ‘corpus of hope’ created by a ‘transformative discourse’ which seeks out hope within works of fiction.

Table 1 - Possible Option 1

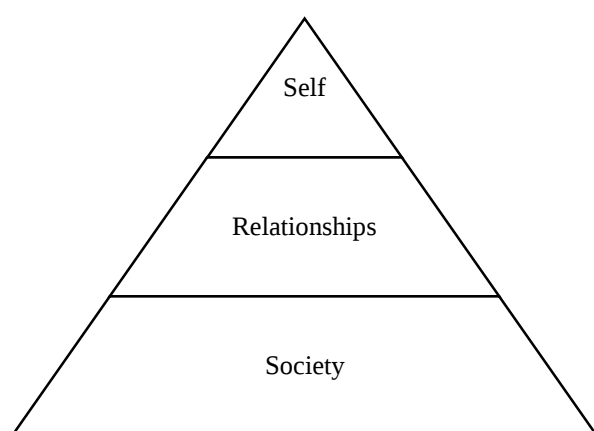


Table 2 - Possible Option 2

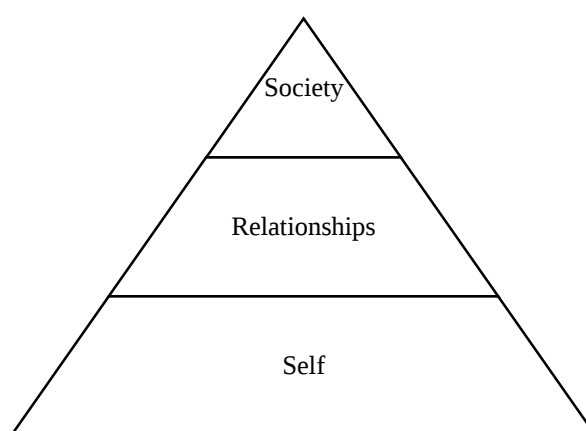
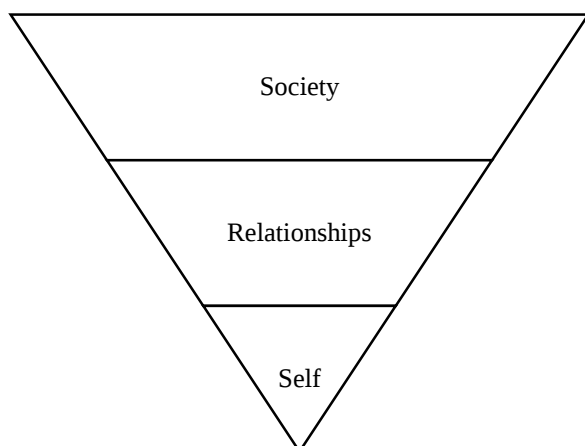
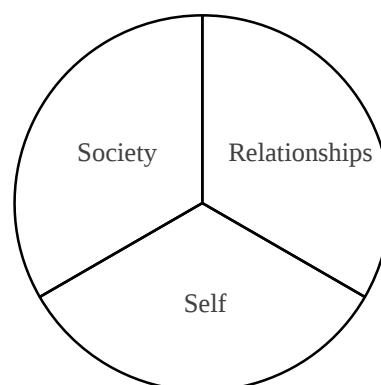


Table 3 - Selected Option**Table 4 - Desired Option**

Based on the division between society/relationships/self this thesis has three parts. Each part analyses four novels which were intentionally chosen because they have something in common and nothing in common. The aim is to group novels that are different in writing style, genre, and topics, to see, if they, despite being different, notice the same things and themes when it comes to female (dis)empowerment within the HIV/AIDS epidemic. All twelve selected novels are based either in South Africa or Zimbabwe, two countries who do not only share their high HIV prevalence. In addition to their geographical closeness, and post-colonial context, they are also countries where English is one of the official languages and the main language of fiction publication. While some of the books selected were published outside the two countries, they still geographically focus only on them. The focus of this study are novels which are set in the late 90's and 2000's era marked by disease misinformation and antiretroviral medication (ARV) unavailability.

Chapter two analyzes 'reactive' societies and the far-reaching consequences of political responses to the epidemic. Roger Smith's crime fiction novel "Dust Devils" (2011) was chosen because it represents women within the epidemic as 'static,' while in the critically acclaimed Masande Ntshanga's "The Reactive" (2014) women are simply 'clichés.' Charlotte Otter's "Balthasar's Gift: A Maggie Cloete Mystery" (2014) introduces an active female detective heroine fighting HIV/AIDS injustice(s), and Virginia Phiri's novel "Highway Queen" (2010) highlights one of the most vulnerable populations when it comes to HIV/AIDS, sex workers.

All four works of fiction differ in style and genre. It should be noted here that the introduction to each chapter provides more background information about either the book, author, intended audience or publication history, depending on the aim of the chapter.

Chapter two will also be asking the following research questions. How has, historically, the political sphere reacted to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in both countries? Do politicians feel any responsibility about their actions? Which are the dominant discourses at play? Are conspiracy theories about diseases powerful? Are cures and prevention methods promoted or resisted? What are the most dangerous superstitions regarding the epidemic that are particularly harmful for women? Do women respond passively or actively? What role do individuals/communities play in times of epidemic outbreaks? Is ‘compassion fatigue’ a trap? How does ‘epidemic female justice’ look like? Do ‘lived experiences’ of epidemics influence the ‘interpretative community’ of readers of HIV/AIDS fiction? Does meeting like-minded people or people in the same situation result in ‘safer’ life choices? Who is the guardian of ‘morality’ when it comes to disease outbreaks? Which literary figures or stylistic approaches do authors most often use to get their points across?

Chapter three focuses on relationships women have with other people, as well as their relationships with the material, the spiritual, the racial and the sexual, all in the shadow of a life-threatening disease. Charles Mungoshi’s “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark” (2013) focuses on familial and romantic relationships women have juxtaposed with Sue Nyathi “The Polygamist” (2012) which deals with the eponymous concept of polygamy amongst the rich and the poor. Vivienne Ndlovu’s “Waste Not Your Tears” (2014) paints HIV-positive Loveness as poor, abused and defeated which is opposed by the powerful women of Rozena Maart’s “The Writing Circle” (2007) despite being actual victims sexual violence.

There is a certain pattern noticeable when it comes to already available research on literature regarding women and HIV/AIDS. Most works focus only on female authors of fiction with the argumentation that women, for the first time, need to, and can ‘speak up’ for themselves and make visible the voices of the most vulnerable group in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. So far, the argumentation has been that only a female writer can ‘correct’ misconceptions, fill a void of self-identification. However, this thesis argues that change can only happen when both sides, to varying degrees, participate in it. History teaches us that violent overpowering or revenge does not persist in the long run. The participation of male writers is not only wanted but needed,

even if only to observe which misconceptions male writers perpetuate and how this can be fixed in the future.

Including male authors can also be seen as ‘writing against the grain’ proving that not only women are interested in women’s issues but men as well. It can be understood as a peek inside the male brain, how men envision a more ‘equal’ society. Only female-authored works cannot create a meaningful ‘transformative discourse’ for the future, as our society, is not made of one gender and cannot be presented as such. How men experience and describe female characters infected with HIV might provide answers to the question of why more women are affected by the epidemic.

Thus, the question will be asked whether there is a ‘male conspiracy’ against women, or are the selected male-authored works gender-balanced? Is there gender essentialism present and what kind of position do women occupy in the narratives? How are men presented, are they held accountable for subordinating women? Are there any avoidance strategies present to avoid dealing with an HIV-positive diagnosis? How does the ‘archetypal good woman’ look like? Is there ‘sisterhood’ between women or do they go head to head in a ‘women against women’ strategy? What kinds of masculinity/femininity/sexuality can be found in the analyzed works? Moreover, is a clash between the sexes, actually a clash between ‘the personal’ and ‘the public,’ between the ‘individual’ and the ‘institutional’? And is there a new, different, ‘detour’ discourse offered, and if so, what does it offer? How are the power dynamics between the sexes equalized and are there ‘discourses of resistance’ formed? Are race and class used as ‘smoke screens’ to address gender?

Each person’s ‘transformation’ starts with themselves. It begins with the individual, the ‘self.’ No matter what society and the people we surround ourselves with do, change is an individual choice, as is empowerment. When creating change, the fictional women are on their own. If they do not fight for themselves, who else will? The multigenerational female growth and creation of self-identity while dealing with rape and HIV infection is at the core of Futhi Ntshingila’s novel “We Kiss Them With Rain” (2018) featured in chapter four. Protection from HIV and adjacent prejudices are two of the themes at the heart of Tendai Huchu’s “The Hairdresser of Harare.” Shimmer Chinodya’s “Tale of Tamari” (2004) is a classical coming-of-age story of what it is like growing up in the times of AIDS, while Valerie Tagwira’s “The Uncertainty of Hope” (2006) brings the disease into adulthood when women wanting to break

free from toxic environments can no longer blame youthful innocence, but must find hope on their own.

Questions asked will include analyzing what kind of meaning-making mechanisms do people seek in order to protect themselves from the epidemic, or in the case of women, subordination? What are the techniques of female empowerment, and what are the techniques of female disempowerment these novels explore? Can both the 'gender discourse' and 'disease discourse' be realized at the same time? How are moments of crisis, like disease outbreaks perceived in terms of gender; as opportunities or disasters? Do characters change their lives because of fear of 'potential infection' or do they change only after infection?

The intentionally different genres and styles of the selected books for this thesis brake the comparative tradition of choosing a single genre for analysis. Detective fiction, children's literature, critically acclaimed, highbrow or deemed as 'chick-lit,' self-published or achieving great commercial success, included in school or University curriculums, the selected novels provide a plethora of fictional female opinions and experiences regarding the epidemic, mimicking real-life in its varieties of perspectives. The current state of the art of research on women and HIV/AIDS in works of fiction shows a gap as most of the research focuses solely on women-authored works. By including both female and male-authored works this thesis aims to help fill the gap and analyze a more representative sample.

Similarly, Louis Althusser's 'ideology' has been criticized for its lack of a feministic aspect in his interpellation theory. The 'transformative discourse' takes into consideration that we are not exposed to interpellation only as mere subjects, but as people, male and female. The innovative potential of this thesis also lies in the renewed focus on the HIV/AIDS epidemic which is slowly but surely becoming 'the other' or 'forgotten' epidemic as its epicenter moved from the 'West' to Africa, despite the fact that there have never been more HIV infected people alive, and that women are the ones suffering the most because of it. However, people are still getting infected, and people are still dying because of it. Drawing parallels between potential epidemic or pandemic outbreaks of new diseases and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as presented in works of fiction, introduces 'narrative witnessing' and 'reading with care' as coping mechanisms with 'discursive potential to transform.'

The transformative aim of the thesis in gathering works of ‘hope’ will be tested against four hypotheses. The first two are general ones, while the third focuses more on the disease aspect, and the fourth on the gender aspect, all within the realm of women and HIV/AIDS in South Africa and Zimbabwe:

- First hypothesis:

Female focused HIV/AIDS fiction is written to empower women.

- Second hypothesis:

Narrative witnessing of the HIV/AIDS epidemic can help in dealing with other epidemics.

- Third hypothesis:

The physical aspect of the disease is levelled by mental strength.

- Fourth hypothesis:

Self-transformation is intertwined with societal and relational discourses.

The first group of secondary bibliography that influenced this thesis was published around the year 2010. “Strong Women, Dangerous Times: Gender and HIV/AIDS in Africa” (2009) and “Rites of Passage in Postcolonial Women’s Writing” (2010) serve as excellent starting points from a time when HIV/AIDS was still the biggest epidemic of our time and focus mostly on women’s writing. “Society, Women and Literature in Africa” (2015), “Female Subjectivities in African Literature” (2015) and “Women Take Care: Gender, Race, and the Culture of AIDS” (2018) further offer feministic interventions, though ‘reading with care’ or Althusser’s ‘ideology’ are never used in analysis.

As the decade progresses, analysis becomes more topical. HIV/AIDS young adult fiction is the focus of articles by Judith Inggs (2009) and Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi (2007, 2010). HIV/AIDS and religion are of interest of Wenzel Geissler and Felicitas Becker’s “AIDS and Religious Practice in Africa” (2009) and Marian Burchardt’s “Ironies of Subordination: Ambivalences of Gender in Religious AIDS Interventions in South Africa” (2010). Cuthbeth

Tagwirei's "'Lame ducks' in the time of HIV/AIDS? Exploring female victimhood in selected HIV/AIDS narratives by Zimbabwean female writers" (2014) offers intriguing insights and critique into the concept of victimhood often featured in women's writing about HIV/AIDS, but does not go further, offering no solutions or possible changes. Works of Oliver Nyambi (2010, 2014, 2020) as well as Theresia Mdlongwa (2016) focus on prostitution and morality within the realm of HIV/AIDS fiction, while Kate Wood, Helen Lambert and Rachel Jewkes (2007), Naomi Nkealah (2010) and Jessica Murray (2011) tackle rape, and Sylvester N. Mutunda (2015) explores African masculinities as portrayed in works of fiction. Lara Buxbaum details how 'intimacy' can be risky for fictional women (2017), as Sabine Binder's interests (2017, 2021) lie in women within southern African crime fiction, while Jennifer M. Kilty and Katarina Bogosavljevic focus on HIV as the sexual predator within the media sphere (2019).

The Spivak-Butler 'reading with care' theories are 'modernized' by articles from Birgit M. Kaiser (2022) and Hayley G. Toth (2020), even though none of them applies the theories to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Influences from Francophone (Mutunda 2015, Orlando 2016) and Anglophone Africa (Griswold 2000, Berndt 2010, Braxton 2015, Eldredge 2015, Okolocha 2015, Cammaert 2016) as well as the Swahili novel (Diegner 2017) are taken into consideration as is the Anglophone literary world beyond the continent (Erney 2006, D'Souza 2008, Coulter 2009, Kabwila Kapasula 2010, Armstrong 2014, James Alexander 2014, Mulry 2014, Weekley 2015, Caracciolo 2016, Matthews 2018, Ruiz 2018).

The statistics used are from the World Health Organization (WHO), The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH). The empirical data used are from the 'African Journal of AIDS Research' (Kenyon and Zondo, 2011), the 'Journal of Behavioral Medicine' (Firpo-Perretti et al., 2018) and the 'International Journal for Equity in Health' (Mabaso M et al., 2019).

To conclude this introductory chapter some practical remarks about the terminology used in this thesis must be made. In this thesis, the terms HIV/AIDS are written together to signify the epidemic and its effect as a whole; when necessary the two terms, the 'human immunodeficiency virus' or HIV, and the 'acquired immunodeficiency syndrome' or AIDS, are written separately. The reason the HIV/AIDS pandemic is defined as an epidemic and not a pandemic in this thesis is not to ignore its status as a global disease, but to focus on the southern African region, where the disease is currently the most spread, deadly, and problematized.

The term female or male ‘sex’ in this thesis refers to the biological, and the term ‘gender’ to the socially and culturally constructed roles. The research is limited to binary gender oppositions for two reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, this thesis wishes to focus on women as the majority, not a minority. Too often, women or women’s issues and women’s writing, are considered as minority issues, which is simply wrong. Women are not a minority, and should not be treated as such. Thus, this thesis confronts a majority (women) with a majority (men). And secondly, the corpus of works of fiction that would deal with non-binary gender roles with regards to HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe and South Africa is still fairly small, which opens up a lot of possibilities for future research. There are a few bright exceptions, two of which are analyzed in chapters three and four, where the relationship between women, men and the representatives of the non-binary group found in selected works of fiction, are examined.

The novels chosen for this thesis have all been written and published in English, which is an official language in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. However, even though English is thought in schools from primary levels, it is often not the first language of the writers, but a ‘souvenir’ of colonial times. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, our first language, our mother tongue is the one that imprints on us our value system. No matter how many languages we learn to speak later in life, what we think is connected to what we speak.⁴² Writers have admitted that writing in English is sometimes more difficult, but it is also the only way to get published, as the likelihood of getting published in one of the other official languages is much smaller. Globalization and the parallel rise of English as a global ‘lingua franca’ only further the argument for authors to write and publish in English.

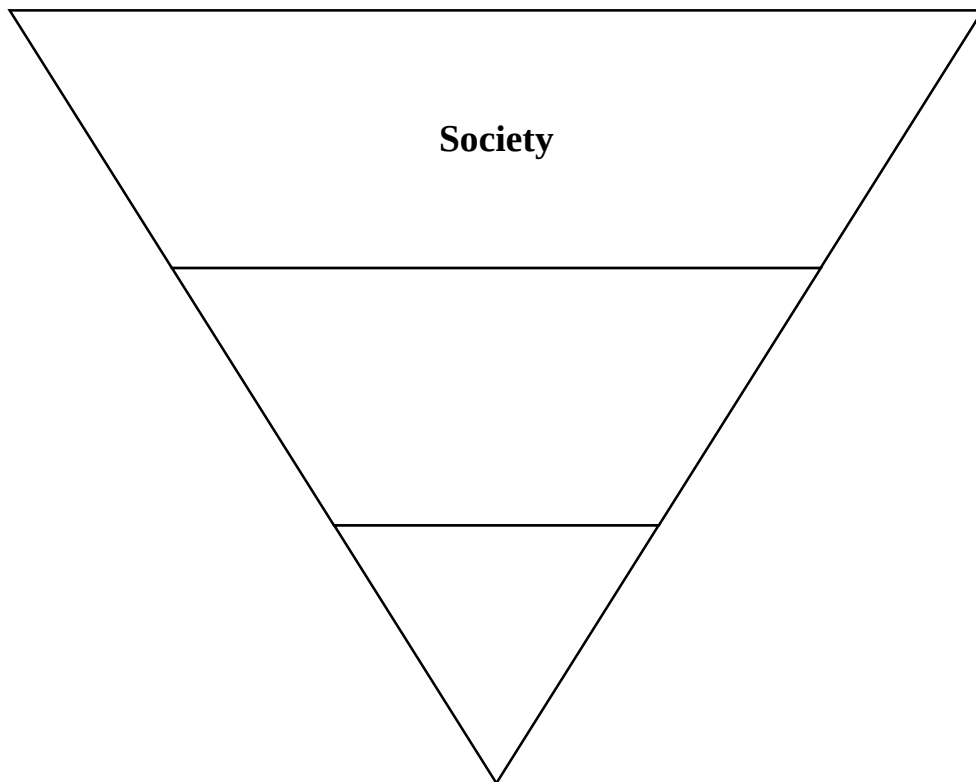
Finally, culture, is more than just men subordinating vulnerable women, and feminism is different in the West opposed to its appearance in the global south. That is why what constitutes gender inequality “must be kept disturbingly open to perpetual reinterrogation.”⁴³ However, it has to be clear that what this thesis refers to when it writes about what is ‘empowering’ for women, it means “that women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that

⁴² Henry G. Schogt, *Linguistics, literary analysis, and literary translation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 40.

⁴³ Bonnie Honig, ‘My Culture Made Me Do It’ in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. by Cohen, Joshua, Howard, Matthew and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 40.

they should be recognized as having human dignity equal to that of men, and that they should have the opportunity to live as fulfilling and as freely chosen lives as men can.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Susan Moller Okin, ‘Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?’ in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. by Cohen, Joshua, Howard, Matthew and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 10.



2. Women in ‘Reactive’ Societies

Lindanathi, the protagonist of Masande Ntshanga’s “The Reactive” (2014) calls himself ‘a reactive’ addressing his brother who has passed:

“A year after I graduated from Tech, and a week before the sixth anniversary of your death, I infected myself with HIV in the laboratories. That’s how I became a reactive. I never had the reactions I needed for myself, and I couldn’t react to you when you called to me for help, so I gave my own body something it couldn’t flee from.”⁴⁵

In the fictional world Ntshanga creates, ‘reactiveness’ becomes a metaphor for being HIV positive, for being dangerous because you are ‘contaminated,’ but also a metaphor for ‘reacting’ in a broader sense, to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and to the injustices connected to it not only on an individual level, but on a collective one as well. HIV is something society cannot flee from, and this chapter looks at how, on the basis of the political ‘reactions,’ literary society in South Africa and Zimbabwe ‘reacted’ to it, at the height of the ‘reactiveness’ of the epidemic in the region, in the early 2000’s.

The authors of the selected analyzed works of fiction all felt they needed to ‘react’ to what they saw happening around them. In addition to Ntshanga’s “The Reactive,” Roger Smith, the South African author of “Dust Devils” (2011) speaks of South Africa as a country where a “woman has more chance of getting raped than learning to read.”⁴⁶ Crime statistics, corruption, the sale of young women into marriage in the name of tradition, but most of all, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the ‘barbaric superstitions’ that surround it, as well as the 2010 sentence of South Africa’s former police commissioner to 15 years in prison for taking bribes from members of organized crime, serve as the backdrop of his work of fiction. Smith calls “Dust Devils” his most personal book and the darkest saying “it is no love letter” to his homeland with every page serving as a ‘whip-slap’ revealing something ‘distasteful’ or ‘disturbing’ about how each stripe of the rainbow dislikes and distrusts the others.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Masande Ntshanga, *The Reactive* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2014), p. 172.

⁴⁶ ‘Staubige Hölle von Roger Smith’, *YouTube*, accessed on 29.03.2024, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nAGsYWwFc4>>.

⁴⁷ ‘Dust Devils’, *Crime Fiction Lover*, accessed on 29.03.2024, <<https://crimefictionlover.com/2011/09/dust-devils/>>.

Anger and the real-life shock of seeing the new-born rainbow South Africa deny and conspire against HIV/AIDS related science was the trigger that set Charlotte Otter out on a quest to write “Balthasar’s Gift: A Maggie Cloete Mystery” (2014) about the injustices and AIDS orphans, as a sort of catharsis. In her pursuit of justice, Otter’s protagonist Maggie, is fearless, resilient, purposeful, singular, and physical, but most of all, she is angry. Sabine Binder calls Maggie’s characteristics and actions ‘doing angry female masculinity.’⁴⁸ It is a strategic gender performance of masculinity internalizing rage, crime, detection, aggression, and rebelliousness. Maggie’s anger is a direct reflection of the author Charlotte Otter’s rage as she admits that gender inequality, gender-based violence and injustices make her ‘furiously angry.’⁴⁹ Both Otter and Smith’s books are crime fiction novels. The popularity of crime novels, and their ‘sister’ creative non-fiction investigative journalist books, can be attributed to what Leon De Kock calls the ‘plot loss’ in post-apartheid South Africa, where the uncertainty of the current situation in the country attracts readers to either fictional explanations or in-depth analysis, both of which help in coping with the uneasiness and uncertainties that surrounds them.⁵⁰

Completely different in content and style is Virginia Phiri’s novel “Highway Queen” (2010). Phiri was a guerilla fighter during Zimbabwe’s war of independence.⁵¹ Her activism and political involvement could have cost her her life if it was not for the sex workers who took her in, hid and fed her, until she was safe.⁵² Phiri, thus wrote “Highway Queen” (2010) in first person narration aiming for Marco Caracciolo-defined ‘character-centered illusion’ which focuses on the reader-protagonist relationship whom the reader projects in ‘real life,’⁵³ as an homage to those women and in an effort to highlight the background, situational-awareness, stigmatization and marginalization of sex workers as one of the most vulnerable female populations to HIV/AIDS.

⁴⁸ Sabine Binder, *Women and Crime in Post- Transitional South African Crime Fiction: A Study of Female Victims, Perpetrators and Detectives* (Leiden/Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2021), p. 192.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 194.

⁵⁰ Leon de Kock, ‘From the Subject of Evil to the Evil Subject: “Cultural Difference” in Postapartheid South African Crime Fiction,’ *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 16:1 (2015), p. 31.

⁵¹ ‘A Meeting with Virginia Phiri, Zimbabwe,’ *So You Want to be a Writer*, accessed on 29.03.2024, <<http://martingoodman.com/soyouwanttobeawriter/2006/03/meeting-with-virginia-phiri-zimbabwe.html>>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Marco Caracciolo, *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction: Explorations in Readers' Engagement with Characters* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), p. 1.

Interpretations are under the influence of personal experiences.⁵⁴ However, the ‘purpose’ and ‘transformation’ of the text, are in the hands of the reader’s self-reflexivity and lived metatextuality.⁵⁵ When an epidemic, or a pandemic, is physically or emotionally removed from the reader it remains in the realm of fiction, but when such outbreaks of diseases become a lived experience, reader identification, or at least reader understanding, is heightened. Within the epidemic of interest, which discourses have women been ‘interpellated’ into and what have or can women learn from them?

Literature is not exempt from ideology, but is intertwined with its discourses. Detective fiction is a good example to showcase this and is thus intentionally chosen for analysis in this thesis. Crime is an unavoidable occurrence in any societal context, however, literature, whilst creating its own ideology, can become a site of comfort in dealing with it. In detective fiction, crimes are solvable and a consequence of a deviant behavior or individual. Applying Althusser’s theory on it, on the one hand, seeks out how a narrative either complies with as well as strengthens the status quo maintained by capitalism, or writes against it. But also, on the other hand, points out how the act of reading itself intervenes and transforms the text.⁵⁶

2.1. Political ‘Reactions’

One of the most important, if not the most important societal ‘reaction,’ but undoubtedly the one with the most far reaching consequences to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the southern African region, is the political reaction. It is also the reaction that most profoundly influences the plots of the novels. From international and highest state levels to the local ones, the following answers local politician Phiri gives Maggie in “Balthasar’s Gift: A Maggie Cloete Mystery,” encapture the essence of the problematic. Otter uses the rhetorical device *aporia* by making Maggie ask Phiri questions in pretend uncertainty and doubt using it as a tactic to bring out the misconceptions he talks about and, consequently, discredit the points he is making in his answers:

⁵⁴ Caracciolo, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Lutz Diegner, ‘Leaving Parched Gardens and Discussing Narration with the Reader: Metatextualities in the Contemporary Swahili Novel,’ *Research in African Literatures*, 48:1 (2017), p. 25.

⁵⁶ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 4th ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009), p. 203.

“The questions that are being asked in government – do ARVs stem the development of full-blown AIDS? Does HIV even cause AIDS? If not, then what does? These are the questions that I am thinking about right now.” [...] ‘I mean, this drug, this AZT, it is not proven. What if it is poisoning people and is not making them better? Activists, like yourself are asking the government to put millions of Rands into giving untested drugs to people when in fact they could potentially be killers.’ [...] ‘Some scientists are claiming that antiretrovirals cause AIDS.’ [...] ‘My message is that further research is needed before the government can get behind an antiretroviral campaign. We need to know what we are dealing with and not blindly accept what the first world says works. The situation here in Africa is different – there is poverty, poor sanitation, lack of services. There are other diseases, like malaria, TB and cholera. We have a different model here. We need to work out what works for us.’”⁵⁷

This exchange shows how Otter gradually builds her argument to encourage the reader to re-examine any assumptions that they might hold. The anti-West postcolonial discourse is shown, in the words of the successfully interpellated Mr. Phiri, about not knowing if HIV causes AIDS, as well as doubts in the effectiveness of ARV’s and AZT⁵⁸ as a direct reflection of the period now dubbed as the ‘AIDS denialism era’ when South Africa’s then President Thabo Mbeki, questioned if HIV actually causes AIDS, delayed launching the rollout of antiretroviral (ARV) medication claiming they are ‘toxic’ and blamed ‘the West’ that they are using the disease as a weapon against Africans, and consequently denied state funds for clinics who used AZT for PMTCT (prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission).⁵⁹

Concrete evidence of how an ideology has material effects is further highlighted in a research conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) which estimates that “more than 330.000 people died prematurely from HIV/AIDS between 2000 and 2005 due to the Mbeki government’s obstruction of life-saving treatment, and at least 35.000 babies were born with HIV infections that could have been prevented.”⁶⁰ It is a stance Mbeki, has not changed, repeating his views as late as 2022, prompting the South African Medical Research Council

⁵⁷ Charlotte Otter, *Balthasar's Gift: A Maggie Cloete Mystery* (Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2014), p. 157-158.

⁵⁸ AZT stands for azidothymidine, the first drug used to treat HIV infection. ‘Antiretroviral Drug Discovery and Development,’ *National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)*, accessed on 29.03.2024, <<https://www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/antiretroviral-drug-development>>.

⁵⁹ ‘The cost of South Africa’s misguided AIDS policies,’ *Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH)*, accessed on 29.03.2024, <<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/magazine/spr09aids/>>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

(SAMRC) to release a statement that “his administration’s ambiguity on the role of HIV causing AIDS resulted in a decline in life expectancy from 62 years in 1994 to 52.5 years by 2005.”⁶¹

It took years of civil disobedience and several law suits for the South African government to roll-out a full scale antiretroviral programme. In the time in between, ARV’s were only available to a selected number of people which gave rise to pharmaceutical opportunism. This is notably present in “The Reactive” with Lindanathi being a ‘lucky reactive.’ Because he got infected at work, his insurance covers ARV’s. ‘Lucky’ twice over, because due to his youth and general good health HIV is ‘arrested’ in his blood, therefore he does not need ARV’s, and decides to sell them so he doesn’t have to work. With his best friends, Cecilia and Ruan, they find their potential clients at group therapy meetings for HIV positive people, most of whom do not have access to ARV’s.

But that is not the worst case of fictional re-telling of HIV/AIDS opportunism. The main plot of “Balthasar’s Gift: A Maggie Cloete Mystery,” takes inspiration from two historical facts. The first is that Mbeki’s health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, promoted herbal antidotes like lemon, garlic or beetroot as substitutes for ARV’s. The second is that, in 2008, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and the South African Medical Association, won a landmark court case against “vitamin salesman Matthias Rath to stop promoting his vitamin supplements as a treatment for AIDS.”⁶² The case was the first victory against cure deceitfulness which flourished in the denialism era. In “Balthasar’s Gift” a similar court case is fictionalized with Maggie relentlessly chasing after ‘Dr. Schloegel’ who sells ‘curing vitamins’ to HIV/AIDS patients. The court hearing of Mrs. Nhlangulela whose son died of AIDS explains the process of successful ‘hailing’ of individuals into an untruthful ideology and the reasoning behind using such cures:

“Her son discovered he had HIV, which rapidly developed into full-blown AIDS. In desperation, when Dr. Schloegel came peddling his vitamin cures, known as Schloegel’s Herbals, they bought these instead of trying to scrape together the money for antiretrovirals. Schloegel assured them that the vitamin preparations should be taken

⁶¹ ‘Statement on Comments by former President Thabo Mbeki on HIV and AIDS Delivered at UNISA on Wednesday, September 21, 2022,’ *South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC)*, accessed on 29.03.2024, <<https://www.samrc.ac.za/press-releases/statement-comments-former-president-thabo-mbeki-hiv-and-aids-delivered-unisa>>.

⁶² ‘Timeline: Moments in the history of HIV,’ *Spotlight*, accessed on 29.03.2024, <<https://www.spotlightnsp.co.za/2019/12/01/timeline-moments-in-the-history-of-hiv/>>.

daily, and also recommended a healthy diet with lots of fresh, preferably organic, vegetables. 'Mrs. Nhlangulela, for how long did your son take Schloegel's Herbals?' [...] 'Four months.' 'And in those four months, how much money did the family spend on vitamins?' 'R4000.' 'And why did you not spend that money on antiretrovirals?' 'We were told they made people more sick.' This rumour had gone from a whisper to a rumble. If the government didn't trust the medication enough to make it universally available, then people didn't trust it either. 'And how long after he started the course of vitamins did he die?' 'Four months.'''⁶³

With the use of words like 'peddling,' metaphor 'whisper to rumble,' and providing opinion on the government and medication, the narrator becomes intrusive, conveying Otter's 'angry' reaction. Even though the narration is in 3rd person, the narrator is omniscient, as a few lines under this passage the reader can peer into Maggie's mind while she wonders "it was hard to understand why the government wouldn't make antiretrovirals available when they could halt the progress of AIDS. Someone like Benjamin Nhlangulela could still be alive, working and supporting his family," furthering the opinions expressed earlier and trying to 'transform' the reader to behave or 'react' differently.⁶⁴

The situation regarding political reactions did not improve even after Mbeki, as his successor as President in South Africa, Jacob Zuma, was trialed for rape in 2005. Even though he was, at the time, the head of the government's National AIDS Council, he stated during the trial, that despite knowing the woman was HIV positive, he did not use a condom during intercourse, but showered afterwards incorrectly claiming that "this would minimize the risk of contracting the disease."⁶⁵ All the political reactions mentioned above are personified in "Dust Devils" antihero Inja, who repeats the hegemonic anti-West, anti-disease, anti-pill false political, preventive and cure discourses almost word per word:

"The doctor told him it was routine to test the blood of people admitted to the hospital for HIV, here where the incidence was the highest in the world. Told Inja that the virus was eating him, that he had what was called full-blown AIDS. That he needed to go on medication called antiretrovirals. Inja had refused. Left the hospital. He didn't believe in

⁶³ Otter, p. 39 - 40.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 40.

⁶⁵ 'SA's Zuma 'showered to avoid HIV'', BBC News, accessed on 29.03.2024, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4879822.stm>>.

this white man's nonsense. And he was in good company. A previous president of South Africa hadn't believed HIV caused AIDS. The health minister had said you could cure it by eating beetroot and garlic. The new president, a Zulu, said you didn't need to wear a plastic when you fucked, all you needed to do was shower afterwards. And the men in Inja's area said if you got this thing it was easy to cure if you had sex with a virgin girl."⁶⁶

The paragraph is representative of Smith's writing style with metaphors like 'the virus was eating him.' Even though Smith uses ellipsis as a narrative technique to omit spans of time and jump back and forth between characters, Inja is the character he intentionally keeps focus on to tackle the HIV/AIDS narrative. In addition to the political figures, antiretroviral medication rollout, and fake cure topics already mentioned, Inja's inner monologue opens up quite a few more pivotal themes crucial to fully understand the HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern Africa.

Firstly, it once again mentions the distrust towards Western medicine and diseases naming them 'white man's nonsense' mirroring the words politician Phiri said in the "Balthasar's Gift" interview with Maggie to 'not blindly accept what the first world says works.' It additionally, opens up discussions about alternative traditional cures, 'virgin cures,' and condom use. To start with the former, a widely believed alternative to ARV's or to a nutritional diet, are traditional healing methods and superstitions. As Inja, by his own admission, distrusts anything Western, he first consults traditional healers also known as 'sangomas.' He is told that his body must be 'cleansed' and 'purified,' and that after he is 'clean,' his blood needs to be 'replaced.' Smith vividly details the rituals Inja goes through in a paragraph full of similes and metaphors:

"The woman bowed, handing Inja a clay gourd filled with shit-colored liquid. The smell burned his nose when he swallowed, the medicine as bitter as death. Immediately he felt dizzy, and sank to his knees. A violent spasm seized his gut, and puke spewed onto the sand. Sweat sprang from his body like morning dew and he spat strings of vomit. Fought for breath. Another spasm hit him and he heaved again. And again. Until he was empty. Purified [...] The sangoma sliced Inja twice, horizontally, across his bony chest. Shallow cuts, but blood ran down Inja's torso, pooling in his lap, dripping onto his thighs and

⁶⁶ Roger Smith, *Dust Devils* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2011), p. 92.

*knees. The witchdoctor chanted as he twisted open a metal shoe polish tin. Dipped his fingers into the black paste, made from charred herbs and animal fat. Battle medicine that could turn bullets to water, so they said [...] The sangoma shouted an order and two youths emerged from the smoke, dragging a protesting goat, paws tied with baling wire [...] The woman's chant grew louder, her face swimming through the flame, eyes dipped back in ecstasy, yellow as gobs of fat. The sangoma grabbed the goat by its snout and exposed its neck. Slit its throat with one quick movement of his arm. Hot blood geysered down onto Inja, running over his head, dripping down his body. He turned his face up toward the dying animal and opened his mouth to receive the blood. He drank and was filled. Inja saw his father and his father's father before him. His ancestors guiding him back to the river of power. Entering him through the liquid, giving him strength for the battle ahead. At last the goat drooped lifeless over the branch. Bled out.*⁶⁷

Smith offers a powerful insight and reflection on how deeply meaningful such rituals are for individuals. For Inja, it is a moment of clarity and connection to his ancestors who will help to heal him. His strong bodily responses are juxtaposed with the lyricism of the war/re-birth metaphors of a process as 'bitter as death,' turning 'bullets to water' to access the 'river of power' in order to win in the 'battle ahead,' giving space to the unavoidable ambivalence of traditional healing methods like forced vomiting, ritual cutting and animal sacrifice. Smith uses visual, auditory, olfactory and gustatory imagery as he approaches the topic respectfully, and holds a critical stance towards 'cure deals' only when they are not a choice, but are forced onto someone, like the infamous 'virgin cure.'

A 'virgin cure' is a superstition that if an HIV positive man sleeps with a female virgin, he will be cured of the virus. Such a discourse gives a boost to patriarchal and masculinity-affirming ego trips of adult males overpowering innocent children/girls. A vice a versa belief that if a woman sleeps with a virgin man in order to cure herself of AIDS has not gained the same momentum. As Inja's CD4⁶⁸ count keeps on dropping, even after he undergoes the cleansing rituals, he decides to find a virgin to marry, to 'purge the demon from his blood.' A sixteen-year-old virgin from the Zululand hills is 'bought' by him for this purpose:

⁶⁷ Smith, p. 204 - 205.

⁶⁸ CD4 are white blood cells used to check how well the immune system of an HIV positive person is functioning and to measure the effectiveness of the ARV's. If the number drops below 200 per cubic millimeters the person is considered to have AIDS.

“He stared at the photo as he chewed⁶⁹[...] Inja felt a surge of optimism. The coming union between him and his new bride would placate the ancestors, restore the natural order of things. End this run of poor fortune. And purge the demon from his blood.”⁷⁰

For Inja’s character Smith often uses auditory and gustatory imagery to emphasize his primitiveness. A literary device commonly used as well is exaggeration, for example, that at the time of death, his third wife was so small she could have ‘fit in a tomato box.’ Smith makes sure to highlight the other side of the virgin ‘cure deals,’ the lack of consent. That there is also a person behind the myth, that the sacrificed virgin, also has a face and a name and a will of her own, a desire for a life with free choices which might not include marrying a sick older man. In “Dust Devils,” the ‘sixteen year old Zululand virgin’ is called Sunday. She is sold to Inja, but not before undergoing the obligatory virginity test during which “the inspector opened her up and peered inside her, like she was checking bread in an oven [...] Sunday felt one of the women dab the white paste on her forehead. Another gave her the rubberstamped certificate that was like a death sentence.”⁷¹ Sunday is treated like an object, she is sold to the highest bidder and has no say in her fate, a fact which will be discussed in the following subchapter.

The other big topic constantly brought up in works of fiction is the aforementioned condom use, where the political influence, especially in the initial phases, played a very negative part, not the least the Zuma rape trial. The negotiation for condom use is in one way or another part of every single novel included in this thesis. The consequences of not using a condom during sexual intercourse can make the difference between being HIV positive or not, but during the height of the epidemic, it literally meant the difference between life and death. The urgency of addressing this issue is heightened by considering the impact it has on reproduction. Inja in “Dust Devils” ‘kills’ three wives because he refuses to wear a condom. Furthermore, the issue accentuates the core focus of this thesis, gender inequality.

In “The Reactive,” Lindanathi never even considers using a condom when having intercourse with a prostitute, but when he, at the end of the novel, falls in love with Esona, being ‘careful’ and using preventive measures to not infect her, is of the highest priority. It would seem that the decision whether a woman gets infected or not, to exaggerate, lives or not,

⁶⁹ Smith, p. 15.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 35.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 33.

is in the hands of a man. In Ntshanga's work, only a man's love can truly protect a woman. Of course, there is a question of the woman's will, after all, the prostitute in question could insist on condom use. Virginia Phiri's "Highway Queen" illustrates why that might not be so easy. Some sex workers risked contracting the AIDS virus as men offered more money if no protection was not used. According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) data from 2023, HIV prevalence amongst sex workers in South Africa is 62% and 45% in Zimbabwe.⁷² Sophie, the protagonist of "Highway Queen," tries to negotiate condom use again and again, especially after her own HIV positive diagnosis, in order to protect others from infection, and to avoid accelerating her deteriorating health by re-infection. The following three selected excerpts from different parts of the novel highlight her pro-condom use stance:

*"I was armed with a few packets of condoms, determined to use them. I wanted to avoid re-infection and also protect my customers from the AIDS virus that I carried [...] It didn't take me long to find out that the more I insisted on protection, the more I put off prospective customers. I just couldn't understand the men [...] On the first and second day I lost two prospective customers, only one had agreed to use protection. On the third day no one seemed interested at all."*⁷³

*"'I think it is best you use these,' I said as I handed him a packet of condoms. 'Is it necessary?' 'There is AIDS out there.' 'I don't have AIDS! I'm clean! I only sleep with my wife!' 'I am not your wife.' [...] I wasn't going to let the young man bully me, I had to stand by protection. Realizing that I would not budge, he picked the packet of condoms that he had abandoned on the coffee table."*⁷⁴

*"He looked surprised when I handed him a packet of condoms. 'Not my favorite!' he complained. 'It is safe this way. AIDS is real.' 'Rubbish!' he dismissed me. 'Sorry, I cannot without protection,' I stood my ground. Realizing that I was serious, he gave in [...] Men took risks. He had no idea that I was HIV positive."*⁷⁵

⁷² Data checked on the World Health Organization's South Africa and Zimbabwe HIV Country Profiles for 2023, accessed on 30.04.2024, <<https://cfs.hivci.org/index.html>>.

⁷³ Virginia Phiri, *Highway Queen* (Harare: Corals Services, 2010), p. 82 - 83.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 169.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 198.

Three quotes about condom use are intentionally chosen, because of the importance they have when it comes to prevention, from HIV, and gender inequality. Sophie's insistence on protection is juxtaposed with male refusal over and over again. All these quotes will be used again in the continuation of the chapter to analyze the influence and 'reactions' of the fictional women to politics and the societies they shape. But what is already clear is how ardently Sophie tried to encourage the protection discourse. It is also a topic which appears time and time again in all selected novels already foreshadowing itself as one of the key issues in need of being addressed.

The final excerpt included in this section highlights the sense of responsibility politicians should, theoretically, feel as leaders. After all, people voted for them because they thought they were the best option to lead them forward. When Maggie in "Balthasar's Gift" confronts Mr. Phiri, she asks him how will he protect from HIV/AIDS the most vulnerable in society, children and women, against the atrocities such as the antecedent 'virgin cure' or rape, he replies:

*"'It's not my job to protect,' he said, buttoning a cuff. 'But it is your job to prevent,' Maggie replied. 'I don't know what this is all about,' Phiri stood up. 'I've got better things to do with my time than be attacked by a cabal of feminists.'"*⁷⁶

Phiri's lack of any sense of responsibility as a politician is paired with a dismissal of women who are, only by asking legitimate questions, referred to as a 'cabal of feminists.' Despite sounding like fiction, the section on political reactions scraps only the surface of the injustices real people had to face in South Africa and Zimbabwe from their elected supposed torchbearers of democracy. However, even though the reactions of women in real-life were not given center stage, fiction gives them a voice, and the right they always had, to react to the injustices they saw happening all around them.

⁷⁶ Otter, p.158.

2.2. Female ‘Reactions’

So how do the women react? It seems that they can be put into two juxtaposed groups. In one they react passively, waiting for someone, men in the majority of the cases, to save them. They are successfully interpellated into the male written and dominated discourses. In the other group they are active, they take matters into their own hands despite of no guarantees of a happy ending. Starting with the first group, “Dust Devils” features only one prominent female character, Sunday. Despite the fact that Sunday’s perspective is included, she is not really a figure of ‘action,’ meaning that she doesn’t actively contribute to the plot. She expresses her opinion about Inja and tries to run away, but when she is caught, the wind is taken out of her sails. Her life, and with it the gender justice mandate, is in male hands, thus, not truly realizing the potential of a ‘transformative discourse’ regarding gender.

This follows the crime fiction tradition of individualism of the main protagonist, and what Murray calls “extensive male chauvinist traditions of description, attitude and behavior, as well as the complacent acceptance of a patriarchal social order.”⁷⁷ It is the man who is the savior, who restores control, Sunday is just a plot device to move the story along and for men to resolve any issues that arise in the narrative. It is ironic, that the men in the story are saving her from being sacrificed as a virgin, but in the end she, as a character, still ends up being ‘sacrificed’ stylistically. It is tempting to classify this as a dismissive masculinist pose, but perhaps it is more the case of what David Mulry calls a ‘static identity’ which instead of criticizing or being misogynistically dismissive simply maintains the current gender roles and the culture which makes them possible.⁷⁸

In “The Reactive” Ntshanga seems to be aware of the irony of a narrative frame with obtusely masculine writing including only superficial female characters. So much so, that he calls Cecilia, the novel hero’s best friend and principal female character, a cliché woman.⁷⁹ She is defined by her racial liminality, and her cultural as well as social marginality. Cecilia searches for an ‘emptiness of mind’ in the hope of escaping socially constructed norms expected of her whilst still having to live them. It is not that she reacts the right or the wrong way, she simply

⁷⁷ Jessica Murray, ‘Constructions of Gender in Contemporary South African Crime Fiction: A Feminist Literary Analysis of the Novels of Angela Makhohwa,’ *English Studies in Africa*, 59:2 (2016), p. 15.

⁷⁸ David Mulry, “‘Lost in the Haze’: Joseph Conrad, the Ruined Maid, and the Male Gaze,” *South Central Review* 31:1(2014), p. 90.

⁷⁹ Ntshanga, p. 115.

chooses not to react at all. Ntshanga actually creates a pattern for cliché women in scripting female reactions or better put, lack of reactions. The only other, very minor, female character who appears in the novel, is Nathi's insurance case manager, Sis' Thobeka. When Nathi tells Thobeka that he got infected by accident, she, true to the 'rule' of being a cliché woman, doesn't know how to react so she chooses not to and ignores his admission.

Mortality, in particular, seems like an open wound for female characters. Building a relationship with death as 'the other' is uncomfortable, however, human beings inevitably always live close to its proximity, especially within an epidemic. By introducing death as a phantom character, Ntshanga creates an imagery of the 'other,' which on the surface seems is the disease, but in fact, awakes parts of the 'self' and the fear of dissolution this hidden part represents.⁸⁰ Such an experience can also be attributed to Lindanathi, but he is allowed to create a liminal awareness of his shadowy existence, while Cecilia's access to such an enlightenment is denied. Cissie is not written to understand her own sense of mortality, therefore, death, and other ghosts, continue to haunt her.

"The Reactive" is not a gender-balanced novel. There is a void, a missing perspective, present in Lindanathi's story. The women Ntshanga creates are weak, and offer no self-identification opportunities to a potential female reader. However, at the same time, women of "The Reactive" and their subsequent insignificant position, can be understood as a reflection of an un-balanced society. Such a self-consciously limited narrative tactic by Ntshanga walks the line between paternalism and satire, acknowledging and yet never fully accepting or critiquing.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the fact remains that both Ntshanga and Smith bypass the complementarity of both sexes in their fiction. The type of arrogant male novel, that ignores, mutes, and degrades women to the status of 'second class beings' functions as a hegemonic patriarchal weapon of control and calls for a correction on misconceptions, and rewriting of stereotypes. Not only do they not correct the injustices, but in the world of fiction in which anything is possible and 'transformation' can happen, their fictional women remain marginalized and muted.⁸²

⁸⁰ Nedine Moonsamy, 'Spectral Citizenry: Reflections of the 'Post-transitional' in Contemporary South African Literature,' *English Studies in Africa*, 57:2 (2014), p. 77.

⁸¹ Mulry, p. 94.

⁸² Charles Smith and Chin Ce (ed.), *Female Subjectivities in African Literature* (Nigeria: Handel Books, 2015), p. 8.

In the second group there are women of action. They ‘react,’ because one way or another, they are compelled to. As can be concluded from the book excerpts included in the previous subchapter, Maggie the heroine of “Balthasar’s Gift: A Maggie Cloete Mystery,” is a woman who takes matters into her own hands. Otter wrote the book with a feminist agenda with an intent to bring women into the spotlight and give them a voice.⁸³ In the ‘fight’ against patriarchal domination women of all colors are united, however, it cannot be overlooked that in southern Africa, historically, white women were more privileged in this regard. Nowadays, black women, like Nkosazana and Mbali in the book, are the group most affected by HIV/AIDS. Through the ‘spectacular’ and ‘event-based’ crime genre, “Balthasar’s Gift” exposes gender and race injustices within a violent society ravaged by the AIDS epidemic.⁸⁴

By contesting the connection between masculinity and power, Maggie’s journalistic pen is her weapon of choice in the fight for ‘inclusive’ justice. Nevertheless, even though she highlights the cracks and loopholes of the system, she is ultimately contained within it. Sabine Binder wonders about the feminist potential of a female ‘detective’ given that the media and the police, Maggie’s areas of expertise and Althusser’s ideological and repressive State apparatuses, work within the patriarchal system that constrains and marginalizes women. Female scholars have written critically about the legal system being neutral and objective only by male standards. Similarly, achieving being impartial and objective in journalism is extremely hard as well as rare.

Maggie intentionally defies the ‘objectivity’ expected from her and gets personally, as well as emotionally, involved in her stories. With an empathic gaze and an ethical stance Maggie does not practice distancing and gladly takes on responsibility.⁸⁵ Her work is principled, and it is within it, that she finds her ‘purpose.’ Maggie becomes the victim’s advocate and the police, a core member of Althusser’s ‘repressive State apparatuses,’ corrective, as she is on a ‘remedial’ justice mission to find the culprits and give the victims, or their families, answers and peace. She is a conglomerate changing the face of justice; she is a woman, she is emotional, she contradicts traditional femininity with her looks and actions, has female allies of color, and isn’t afraid to question authority. Maggie’s individual agency conveys to the (female) readers

⁸³ Sabine Binder, ‘Female killers and gender politics in contemporary South African crime fiction: Conversations with crime writers Jassy Mackenzie, Angela Makholwa, and Mike Nicol,’ *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 52:2 (2017), p. 198.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 204.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 200.

how, both, systemic oppression and (lack of) empowerment within it, work.⁸⁶ Her solitary ‘angry female masculinity’ exposes patriarchal structures, but in the end the police get the credit for her work, and her paper, where she does receive acknowledgement in the shape of a promotion, is increasingly being influenced by male led corporate interests.

Detective fiction can be considered as conservative with its aim to restore the status quo. The genre’s narrative structure starts with a disturbance of order and ends with the re-establishment of that order through the means of discovering an autonomous criminal which is responsible for the disturbance. The moral restitution is fulfilled and the criminal’s motives are rationally deduced. Despite its conservative nature, detective novels can always be considered as social critique as all societies they describe have crimes, thus, none is perfect. However, that is a dangerous path to take, acknowledging that society, and the carefully maintained status quo, might be blamed for crimes and not only an individual. This is a point made in “Balthasar’s Gift” in which Otter’s Maggie not only looks for a criminal, but also blames patriarchal society. Detective fiction is additionally known for solo heroes saving the day, but the positive impact of their actions is limited to a selected few. Maggie’s story is seemingly not different, as she prefers to work on her own, and alone, her impact is minimal.

However, true to the ‘emphatic gaze’ stance, Otter decides to change the narrative by sharing Maggie’s spotlight with the frontline workers and highlighting the impact of community. “Balthasar’s Gift” is an homage to NGO’s. The novel’s eponymous character Balthasar opened an orphanage for HIV positive children. After his death only an elderly woman named Nkosazana is left to care for them despairing: “So much death. Sickness and death. Death and sickness. And I am just so tired. These children need help and all they have now is me. Old, tired Nkosazana. I don’t know if I can carry on.”⁸⁷ Repetition is a popular literary device Otter uses to get her point across, especially in moments of vivid clarity. Such a key moment appears when discussing how NGO workers combat compassion fatigue.

⁸⁶ Binder, *Women and Crime*, p. 207.

⁸⁷ Otter, p. 69.

Both Nkosazana and Maggie are women of ‘action,’ but even they have moments of despair as Maggie wonders: “Where do you start? [...] Do you help one person or ten? Do you give to a charity or take in a family? It seems insurmountable [...] It hurts too much to care, so you just stop caring.”⁸⁸ She wonders how do AIDS workers prevent themselves from getting fatigued and are able to see each case as an individual one and not as a statistic. The answer is the synecdochical ‘AIDS woman,’ Mrs. Dlamini, the head of the local AIDS Mission, and the strongest female character, the real hero of the novel. Otter uses repetition in the climax of the novel in the form of a chant ‘we do not accept’:

*“In an NGO like ours, we are accustomed to death. We see it every day, feel the seed of it in many of the people we meet. We are even accustomed to tragic death, seeing fathers and mothers cut down in the prime of their lives, seeing children orphaned and the elderly left to do the work of the young [...] We are used to it, but we do not accept it. That is why an organization like the AIDS Mission exists [...] because we do not accept. We do not accept that our people, so newly free, are being enslaved by a virus, we do not accept that young people should be allowed to die and we do not accept that this virus should be allowed to spread unchecked. That is why we work here, why my colleagues and I get up every morning and come to work – because we do not accept.”*⁸⁹

Unlike Smith’s Sunday and Ntshanga’s Cecilia, by learning from Mrs. Dlamini, Otter allows Maggie’s character growth. She learns empathy and gains insight into the power of community, aiding the infected and vicariously affected, fighting the ‘mark of shame’ the disease brings, promoting protection, ARV’s, regular testing, and above all else, trying to give back patients their humanity. When comparing the tasks and responsibilities that AIDS frontline workers take on every day with the job politicians have been doing regarding HIV/AIDS, and especially considering the avoidance of political elites when it comes to taking on any responsibility, it would seem that politicians are the real ‘reactives’ of society, just that the disease they carry is even less curable.

Sophie, the heroine of “Highway Queen,” understands the power of community with regards to the epidemic. In addition to the already mentioned insistence on condom use, Phiri

⁸⁸ Otter, p. 138 - 139.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 78.

highlights this in two more ways, voluntary testing and HIV/AIDS education. Sophie is afraid to go get tested for HIV as she considers this a shameful and solitary act:

“I found the testing centre without any problems. I had kept an old newspaper cutting that gave the address and times of conducting business. We were altogether fifteen in the waiting room. Each one of us kept to ourselves. I was comforted that there were more people than I had expected. I was number eleven in the queue. When it was my turn, I was nervous. I nearly ran away. The fact that the ten people in front of me had gone through with it, gave me courage. I proceeded to the counselling room where I was met by a chubby young woman. Her intoxicating smile gave me confidence. I felt very welcome. By the time she was through with me, I was ready to get tested. When the blood was being taken, I felt that I had done the right thing.”⁹⁰

Sophie had informed herself about the location and opening times of the testing facilities. But due to the discourse of shame surrounding the epidemic, she did it in secret, thinking she would be the only one there. The excerpt shows how encouraged she was by the fact she was not alone. She was not the only one there, there were others in the same situation as her. The way she was treated and received is an intentional narrative move by Phiri to write against HIV testing being such a taboo topic, encouraging not only Sophie, but also the reader that knowing your HIV status is ‘the right thing to do.’ The first person narration and starting nearly every sentence with ‘I,’ increases reader identification and emotional attachment. After all, as Nyambi assesses,⁹¹ storytelling is an identity project, and using such a narrative tactic helps the reader to identify more with the character.

Phiri, through the voice of the doctor, continues calming Sophie, and the reader, when she receives the news that she is HIV positive:

“Flipping through the file a few times, she calmly informed me that I had tested HIV positive. I went numb. I had not expected that. ‘Testing positive does not mean the end of the world nor a death sentence. At least you now know your status. You are able to make plans and do something about it. There are many people living positively with the virus,’ explained Mrs. Ndoro. I was now miles away, shattered and too shocked to say anything.

⁹⁰ Phiri, p. 70.

⁹¹ Oliver Nyambi, ‘Re-framing the Prostitute Identity in Zimbabwe: An Approach to Virginia Phiri’s Novel Highway Queen (2010),’ *Literator*, 36:1 (2015), p. 5.

I broke down. A young man brought a tray with tea. Mrs. Ndoro quickly poured me a cup then herself. We sipped our tea in silence for a few minutes, then she pulled a handful of magazines and books from the shelf. Together we went through the pile. I was able to see other people who had tested positive and how they had accepted their status. Some of them were working professionals, it wasn't only ordinary people like me. These people had accepted their status and were carrying on with their lives. That gave me hope but I knew that it would take time for me to accept my status."⁹²

This paragraph is purposefully full of imagery enhancing the tranquil mood. From the calm tone of the doctor, to the offering of tea, sitting in silence, looking through magazines and books, the aim is to maintain an encouraging climate. It also conveys a sense of belonging to a group of people who can overcome an HIV positive diagnosis. The reference to 'ordinary people' foreshadows the author's intended audience. Dissimilar to, for example "The Reactive," where Ntshanga uses stream of consciousness as a narrative device for Lindanathi, Phiri's language is intentionally not metaphorical. She wants her message to be delivered in a clear and concise way using only short sentences with uncomplicated structures, all in an effort to make the understanding as easy as possible for any reader, 'working professional' or 'ordinary people.'

Phiri shows how to 'react' to negative news in a calming, positive way. Her novel has been labelled a 'prostitute-centered narrative,' using its 'transformative discourse' potential to break stereotypes and change the way people view sex work.⁹³ By acquiring first-hand knowledge of the life of a prostitute, and the reasons behind it, by reading, the reader can potentially change his mind about how prostitutes are thought of. However, Phiri pairs that intention with awareness about the HIV/AIDS epidemic and education about it as well as the power an individual has in bringing community together to create positive change. As with Otter, community and individuals are important, each bringing positive change in any way they can. Again Sophie leads the way volunteering and supporting HIV prevention education amongst sex workers:

"I also had to do something. I volunteered to track down new girls. On the other hand, I supported Ice's efforts to drum up protection amongst sex workers. I used Sissi's long

⁹² Phiri, p. 73 - 74.

⁹³ Nyambi, *Re-framing the Prostitute*, p. 4.

illness and death to make a point. That helped. Most sex workers had seen Sissi when she was sick. There was suddenly traffic to the local clinic for condoms. AIDS service organizations contacted by Ice also supplied sex workers with condoms. There was never a shortage.”⁹⁴

Sophie had seen a lot of fellow prostitutes, like Sissi, as well as their clients die of AIDS. After she finds out that she is HIV positive, Sophie voluntarily and intentionally informs herself, reads all the posters, pamphlets, and magazines available to her. She decides that no one, and for no amount of money, will touch her again without protection, not even her husband. Additionally, she starts teaching the new sex workers how to prevent getting infected as well as supporting the efforts of others to do so. Even though they don’t appreciate it, by protecting themselves, the prostitutes protect their clients, and their families. Aware, that in her township community sexual education is also needed, Sophie starts an additional program there and her efforts do not go unnoticed:

“‘By the way, we do appreciate the work you are doing on HIV and AIDS,’ said the Chief. ‘I am doing the best I can but we need more volunteers on the home based care programme.’ ‘Let me give you my word, you will certainly get volunteers,’ promised the Chief. AIDS service organizations that I had introduced to the camp were doing their part but most camp residents had taken long to appreciate the help. Many AIDS patients had benefited in terms of medication and food [...] All I wanted was to make a difference in the lives of those who were suffering from AIDS.”⁹⁵

Sophie becomes the unlikely hero of her community. Through narrative witnessing her character has the potential to change the reader’s view of the epidemic, of the HIV infected, of women and humanizes those who ‘sell sex’ to make a living. She creates a ‘transformative discourse.’ “Highway Queen” shows the female experience of prostitution. Sophie’s prostitution is a conscious decision on her part, based on her economic situation due to the job loss of her husband Steven. She is aware that society considers ‘selling sex’ as ‘shameful,’ but her body is the only thing left she has control over.

⁹⁴ Phiri, p. 214.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 288.

“Highway Queen” also addresses the men who ‘buy’ sex, how the discourse of ‘shame’ is always on the women, the providers of the service, and not on the buyers of the service proving the gender-bias double standard of what is ‘immoral.’ It explores why men need such power and control over women, why they need to reduce a woman to the price of her body, exhibiting deeply embedded misogyny.⁹⁶ As proven by the earlier excerpts on condom use, in majority, men are the ones who refuse protection, with wives, with lovers, with prostitutes, thus, the novel suggest that they are the ones to ‘blame’ for the increase in infections, that they are ‘the bad guys.’ Examples show that sometimes they offer more money if the prostitutes agree to not use condoms, the logic behind such reckless behavior being if money can buy men anything, surely that includes immunity from diseases.

Drawing from Theodor W. Adorno, Judith Butler asks about the thin line between collective and individual morality, while building on Friedrich Nietzsche, Butler identifies ‘punishment’ as the main tool established systems of justice use to impose or interpellate morality upon their subjects. The ‘regimes of truth’ come into question when we cannot recognize ourselves in them, especially if the terms they are set up in, are not in line with how ‘I’ as an individual feel or see myself.⁹⁷ However, if we recognize ourselves or not in these regimes, they will define us or how others will define us even if we are indifferent to these norms.

Theresia Mdlongwa blames women’s oppression on capitalism in which moralistic principles of what is ‘good’ and what ‘bad’ are in the male domain. Within such a system, a man can sleep around and not face ‘moral’ consequences, but a woman cannot do the same without getting a negative ‘label,’ proving that definitions can tell us much more about the definer than the defined.⁹⁸ Mdlongwa argues that women as ‘properties’ that can be bought with money, are exploited and entrapped in a patriarchal system’s belief that those who hold power can control all.⁹⁹ Unfortunately this is seemingly confirmed by the female lived experience of HIV/AIDS which is currently far from the ‘ideal of autonomy.’ In southern Africa, in Zimbabwe, in Sophie’s camp, the ones who hold power, the ones who have money, capital, the

⁹⁶ Tendai M. L. Njanji and Elda Hungwe, ‘Toxic Masculinities in Virginia Phiri’s *Desperate* (2002) and *Highway Queen* (2010),’ *Journal of African Indigenous Languages and Literature*, 1:2 (2010), p. 48.

⁹⁷ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 25 - 26.

⁹⁸ Theresia Mdlongwa, ‘Pragmatism, prostitution and morality in Philip Chidavaenzi’s *The Haunted Trail* (2012) and Virginia Phiri’s *Highway Queen* (2010),’ *International Journal of English and Literature*, 7:4 (2016), p. 49.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 52 - 54.

‘privileged’ ones, are men. Morality, and within it the concepts of ‘shame’ and ‘blame,’ are not universal. They are the ‘privilege of the privileged’; they are the privilege of men.

There is a final point to be made at the end of this section. In its beginning, the fictional women were divided into passive and active ones, depending on how they were written to react to the injustices of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the political connotations brought with it. If a line is to be drawn, two leading female characters, Sunday and Cecilia, are not rich, full, multidimensional figures. They experience no growth throughout “Dust Devils” and “The Reactive.” Maggie from “Balthasar’s Gift: A Maggie Cloete Mystery” and Sophie from “Highway Queen,” however, are complex characters, who change and grow in their respective stories.

The first two books are written by men, the second two by women. Masande Ntshanga, a black South African man, got the offer to publish “The Reactive” while he was still doing his Master’s Degree. The book received high critical acclaim and got published in North America as well as being translated into Italian¹⁰⁰ and German.¹⁰¹ The book “Dust Devils” by Roger Smith, a white South African man, was published in the United Kingdom and in the United States and was translated into German¹⁰², Spanish¹⁰³, French¹⁰⁴ and Czech.¹⁰⁵

Charlotte Otter, a white South African woman, moved to Germany for work, therefore “Balthasar’s Gift: A Maggie Cloete Mystery” was first published in German¹⁰⁶ and a year later in English in South Africa where it proved to be a commercial success, so much so that in 2015, “Karkloof Blue,” the second Maggie Cloete Mystery series book was released. Virginia Phiri, a black Zimbabwean woman, was refused by several publishers, so upon saving enough money she self-published “Highway Queen” and all her other books.¹⁰⁷ These examples show that

¹⁰⁰ ‘Il reattivo - Masande Ntshanga,’ *Pidgin*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <<https://www.pidgin.it/prodotto/il-reattivo/>>.

¹⁰¹ ‘positiv,’ *Verlag Das Wunderhorn*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <<https://www.wunderhorn.de/?buecher=positiv>>.

¹⁰² ‘Roger Smith, Staubige Hölle,’ *Klett-Cotta*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <https://www.klett-cotta.de/buch/Literarischer_Krimi/Staubige_Hoelle/14052>.

¹⁰³ ‘Diablos de Polvo,’ *Es Pop Ediciones*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <<https://espop.es/catalogo/pulpo-negro/diablos-de-polvo/>>.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Le Sable était brûlant,’ *Le Livre de Poche*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <<https://www.livredepoche.com/livre/le-sable-etait-brulant-9782253177883>>.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Prašné víry,’ *Albatros Media*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <<https://www.albatrosmedia.cz/tituly/52809715/prasne-viry/>>.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Balthasars Vermächtnis,’ *Argument*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <<https://argument.de/produkt/balthasars-vermaechtnis/>>.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Phiri: Self-publishing success story,’ *The Herald*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <<https://www.herald.co.zw/phiri-self-publishing-success-story/>>.

muting and marginalizing women is not limited to the fictional world, but also to the very ‘real’ publishing world.

The selected works of Roger Smith and Masande Ntshanga have been praised as remarkable for their prose and lyricism,¹⁰⁸ seemingly favoring style over content, but they were also called “fresh and compelling.”¹⁰⁹ There is no doubt that both books offer new perspectives on various issues, nevertheless, when it comes to the main research interest of this thesis, female representation within the realm of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the overall lack of a woman’s point of view calls for a correction on misconceptions, and rewriting of certain stereotypes propagated by Ntshanga and Smith’s stories.

The fact that both books are written by men paired with the general “prejudice toward women’s writings, sexism in the publishing field, and lack of educational opportunities”¹¹⁰ for the majority of women in South Africa and Zimbabwe, shows why female authors with strong voices are much needed in southern Africa “seeking to rectify masculine views that have relegated women to insignificant positions.”¹¹¹ Based on the four books included in this chapter only female authors seem to be interested in female empowerment within the epidemic.

¹⁰⁸ ““Ten Years Ago, I Helped a Handful of Men Take My Little Brother’s Life” by Marian Ryan,’ *Slate*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <<https://slate.com/culture/2016/07/masande-ntshangas-the-reactive-reviewed.html>>.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Liquid shadows by Eckard Smuts,’ *Aerodrome*, accessed on 31.03.2024, <<https://thiswasaerodrome.wordpress.com/2015/05/06/liquid-shadows/>>.

¹¹⁰ Pauline Ada, Uwakweh, ‘Debunking patriarchy: The liberational quality of voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s ‘Nervous Conditions,’’ *Research in African Literatures*, 26:1 (1995), p. 1.

¹¹¹ Ho Okolocha, ‘Rethinking the African Woman’s Identity,’ in *Female Subjectivities in African Literature*, ed. by Charles Smith and Chin Ce (Nigeria: Handel Books, 2015), p. 72.

2.3. 'Reacting' in the Future

In "Dust Devils" there are graphic descriptions of AIDS patients lying on the floors of hospitals, being pushed around in wheelchairs, their bodies exhausted and skin marked by the disease. Because of the South African HIV prevalence being the highest in the world, Smith amplifies that people "especially the women and the girls - they are dying like flies."¹¹² The novel's final setting, Zululand's Bhambatha's Rock, where AIDS prevention billboards are used for target practice instead of being read, is "the worst-infected area. One in three people carried the virus. Years of ignorance, superstition, government apathy and misinformation had erased a generation [...] A plague almost biblical in its ferocity."¹¹³

Charlotte Otter describes the consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as creating an 'orphan generation.' And yet, as AIDS annihilates communities, Mrs. Dlamini knows why she doesn't give up and continues to help: "I carry on [...] because I know that each person who dies is not just a number, but a beloved son, daughter, wife, husband, mother, father, aunt, uncle, grandchild or cousin. Every death is the end to scores of relationships."¹¹⁴ Popular fiction, thus, becomes a 'currency' for telling their tales, for re-imagining society where their destinies are either inversed or perverted.

New diseases and their effects on the human body are completely different to HIV/AIDS. However, if HIV/AIDS is de-historicized, de-territorialized and de-contextualized from southern Africa, certain parallels when it comes to denying disease existence, the refusal of preventive measures, refusal of routine volunteer testing, doubting the routes of transmission, misconceptions about the disease origin, cure medication distrust, or alternative healing methods seem to always be present, no matter which disease they refer to.

Fiction writers have 'reacted' to disease outbreaks throughout history. Books with their aesthetic, cognitive impact and power of affect can make the reader demythologize norms. The reader as the enabler experiences the emancipatory, and at times therapeutic 'narrative witnessing,' giving birth to new perceptions, and social consequences, resulting in sympathy and admiration for characters fighting against injustices.¹¹⁵ Spivak's desire to listen and learn

¹¹² Smith, p. 84.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 134.

¹¹⁴ Otter, p. 67.

¹¹⁵ Nyambi, *Re-framing the Prostitute*, p. 3 - 4.

from the texts, to read in the service of transformation and train the imagination to react differently, is crucial, since if we do not learn from the past, we will need to repeat the lesson over and over again. The fictional women featured in this chapter are a mirror of an imperfect society. Some react to HIV/AIDS too hastily, some harness the power of community overcoming physical pain with mental strength, and some succumb to societal pressure and do not react at all.

Judith Butler highlights the temporality of the ‘regimes of truth’ societies live by. The ‘regime of truth’ of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has changed with time. Progress has been made in almost all areas regarding the epidemic, so we are no more witnessing ‘five funerals per day from AIDS’ as Sophie did in “Highway Queen.” But has society learned to ‘react’ differently? Recent pandemic experience showed two interesting facts. The first one is that people thought that living through an epidemic or pandemic is a solitary, never before experienced happening, which obviously is not true. And the second is that interest in ‘epidemic fiction’ has heightened. People wanted to read about how others reacted to similar disease-outbreak situations in the past.

HIV/AIDS fiction is ready to be read with all the lessons and mistakes included. The ‘learning by repetition’ would not be necessary if it would be substituted with a second look. A corrective-complementary analysis of the past gives a warning and a lecture to learn from history, to look at the present with the knowledge and experiences we have from the past as only by understanding the past can we “account for the present.”¹¹⁶ As utopian as the thought of fiction helping in any aspect of fighting a disease is, the nano-moves of practicing intimate exposure to what was once experienced as foreign veers the reader away from narcissistic self-involvement and suggests thinking about others first.¹¹⁷

In the very small way that it can, with its critical transformative potential, fiction can try and ‘deactivate’ the ‘reactiveness’ of society towards any disease outbreak claiming its ultimate price; human lives. With mistakes included, perhaps instead of listing all the reasons why literature cannot create impact, fiction should also be considered as a leader of change and be

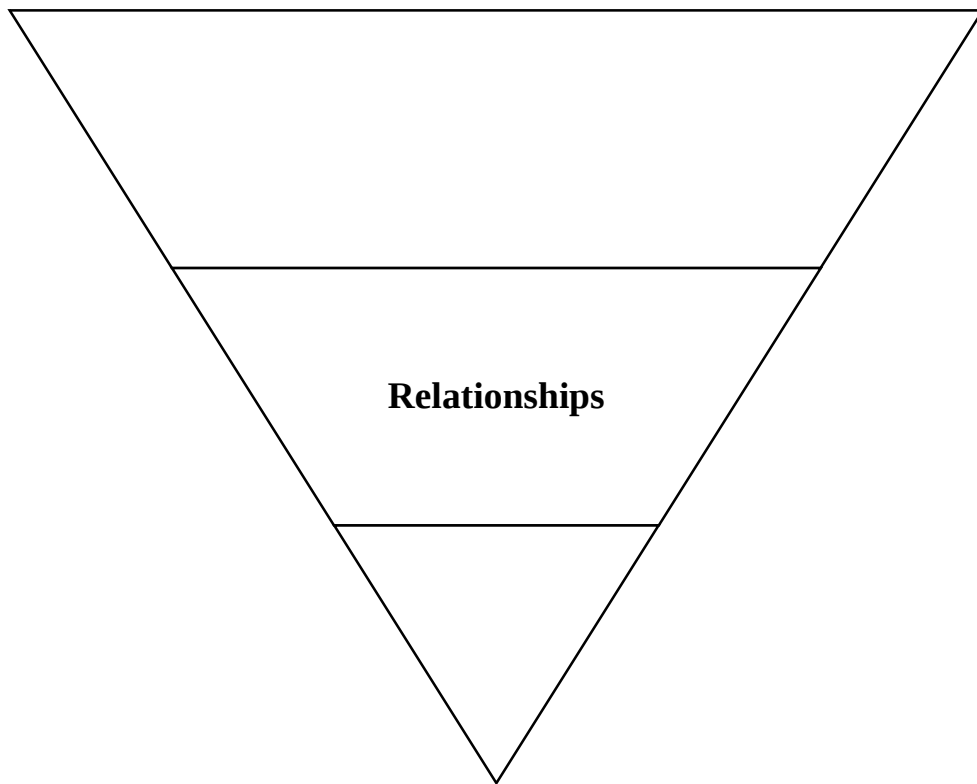
¹¹⁶ Binder, *Women and Crime*, p. 207.

¹¹⁷ Kaiser, p. 121-123.

‘looked upon to lead’ in creating a ‘stronger human species’ as Lindanathi in “The Reactive” ponders:

“I thought about our country’s infection rate. I wondered if we’d been selected in particular for this trial. Perhaps HIV was a purge, I imagined, a brutal transition on the other side of which might lie a newer, stronger human species, one resistant to a thousand more ailments and vital enough to survive all the trials that were still germinating in the future. It was just an idea, but I thought that when the time came, those who knew might be looked upon to lead.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Ntshanga, p. 201.



3. Women in Relation To...

It might seem strange to have a chapter on women in relationships as the core chapter of this thesis when women have been fighting for recognition of their singularity, for being considered on their own and not part of something else, a couple or a part of a family, for so long. However, in order to consider them ‘on their own’ as the next chapter will do, an understanding of why and how women got to, and in many cases remain, where they are now. After taking a look at the reactions of ‘society’ to the epidemic in South Africa and Zimbabwe it is time to take a look at the key ingredient keeping women ‘in place,’ their relationships.

The title of this chapter intentionally uses the three dotted marked ellipsis, a literary device popular with the authors of the works of fiction included. Due to the nature of transmission of the HIV virus, the key relationship is with men, but by indirect influence familial relations, and relations with other women are also examined. However, those are not the only type of relationships of interest. To fully understand the reinforcement of harmful ideas about what makes women ‘worthy,’ their ‘relationship’ with issues like race, class, religion and sexuality are further explored by listening to the female voices of works of fiction.

‘I’ can only exist in relation to ‘you,’ for without ‘you’ the ‘I’ story is impossible. According to Butler, the encounters ‘I’ experience shape recognition beyond the point of no return, but we do not exist solely on our own as we communicate by using language and agree to norms and conventions which transcend the relation of those immediately involved. Foucault writes, “discourse is not life; its time is not yours,” as discourse ‘interrupts’ and ‘contests’ the fallacy that ‘I’ is ever on its own, but is in fact, a part of society, involved in voluntary and involuntary relationships.¹¹⁹ The narrative stories of ourselves we tell, are also constituted by authoritative knowledge that ‘I’ was not a part of, nor accountable for. Thus, our stories are never fully solely our own but are always *in media res*. Things ‘I’ has no influence over have happened before ‘I’ existed, but exactly because they existed, ‘I’ is even possible whether ‘I’ knows about them or not.¹²⁰

Homi K. Bhabha uses this ambivalent textual narration on the example of writing about a nation, which pre-requires a Janus-faced understanding of being *in media res*; history still in

¹¹⁹ Butler, *Oneself*, p. 36.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 39.

the process of being made, cultural authority still being composed, an analytic pluralism which is at once composed of “subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing, guiding.”¹²¹ Müller-Funk and Ruthner, following Gramsci, point out that culture is a battleground between different stakeholders, and which narrative gets representation or dominance in a certain society is always a question of power.¹²²

In claiming agency amongst ‘otherness,’ Bhabha sees recognition as a key point because how we define ourselves is always in relation to others, or how we want others to see us. The search for recognition within alterity is where equality starts, not by neutralizing our differences, but by diversifying freedoms.¹²³ The interplay between ‘I’ and ‘you,’ ‘we’ and ‘they,’ ourselves and others, requires recognition of rights which empower our words and actions or as Bhabha puts it, recognition can be found when within what is considered as ‘objective,’ by the means of transformation, empowerment can be found.¹²⁴

Charles Mungoshi’s “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark” (2013) follows the protagonist Serina’s life living with the ‘dark little angel,’ the HIV virus, surrounded by something ‘dark and ominous.’ Despite being the one who infected her with the virus, her husband Michael leaves Serina, as their daughter Zanda, dies from AIDS:

*“So, he panicked [...] packed a few belongings and flew the coop, leaving me to handle the darkness alone on my own. Zanda died and Michael wasn’t there. And the people looked at me the way they look at people like us.”*¹²⁵

What Serina means when she says ‘people like us’ is that she is compared to a vampire and a witch, something ‘evil’ and ‘nocturnal.’ For the first time in her life Serina feels ‘inferior,’ ‘disabled,’ and ‘like a leper’ when kids run after her on the streets calling her names and blaming her for the departure of her husband and the death of her daughter. Even her mother turns her back on her. The dark mood haunting the novel amplifies the ostracism Serina is facing due to her HIV positive diagnosis, and already hints at the unjust treatment she is receiving

¹²¹ Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Introduction: Narrating the Nation’ in *Nation and Narration* ed. by Bhabha, Homi. K. (London, New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 3 - 4.

¹²² Wolfgang Müller-Funk and Clemens Ruthner, ‘Preface by the Editors’ in *Narrative(s) in Conflict* ed. by Müller-Funk, Wolfgang, Ruthner, Clemens, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), p. 1 - 2.

¹²³ Bhabha, *Neighbours*, p. 12.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 13.

¹²⁵ Charles Mungoshi, *Branching Streams Flow in the Dark* (Harare: Mungoshi Press, 2013), p. 16 - 18.

from not only people who do not know her, but by people who should have been her pillars of support like her husband and her mother.

Charles Mungoshi is one of the most well-known and critically acclaimed contemporary Zimbabwean writers who has been hailed the ‘Zimbabwean Chinua Achebe’¹²⁶ and was described at the time of his death as a ‘giant’¹²⁷ of the country’s literature scene. “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark” has been praised for its ‘lyrical mastery’ marked by unsettling attention to detail, balanced with tender empathy, and won the Zimbabwean ‘Outstanding Fiction Book Award’ in 2014.¹²⁸ The selection of the novel’s title refers to the ‘branching streams’ of a broken family, who is ‘flowing in the dark’ because of its brokenness with Serina’s character serving as a caricature of the ‘sexist tragedy’ women in southern Africa endure, with the ‘blame and shame’ of HIV/AIDS solely on their shoulders.¹²⁹

In Vivienne Ndlovu’s “Waste Not Your Tears” (2014) ‘innocent and naïve’ Loveness faces similar cruelty and husband abandonment as Serina does. Ndlovu intentionally ‘performs gender’ with the self-denying, caretaking archetypal ‘good woman’ portrayal of Loveness only to turn her from passive to active right at the end. In opposition, is the book’s antihero, the ‘lady-killer,’ Roderick:

“He was Roderick. Invincible. Lady-killer. In his short life he had six ‘wives’ including Loveness, although he hadn’t married any of them, never paid lobola¹³⁰ and he had left all of them weeping for him, begging for him to stay. He laughed to himself as he walked down the street. Lady-killer. That was him. Only now it was for real.”¹³¹

It was for real, because he knowingly infects all the women by not using protection despite being HIV positive. Pierre Bourdieu’s “Masculine Domination” foregrounds that a ‘real

¹²⁶ ‘Charles Mungoshi’s genius manifests,’ *The Herald*, accessed on 06.04.2024, <<https://www.herald.co.zw/charles-mungoshis-genius-manifests/>>.

¹²⁷ ‘Tribute to Charles Mungoshi...saluting author’s loving wife Jessesi,’ *The Herald*, accessed on 06.04.2024, <<https://www.herald.co.zw/tribute-to-charles-mungoshi-saluting-authors-loving-wife-jessesi/>>.

¹²⁸ ‘Reflecting on the 2014 literary scene,’ *The Herald*, accessed on 06.04.2024, <<https://www.herald.co.zw/reflecting-on-the-2014-literary-scene/>>.

¹²⁹ Bernice Borain and Mbongeni Malaba, ‘Serina Maseko in Charles Mungoshi’s Branching Streams Flow in the Dark,’ *English Academy Review*, 35:2 (2018), p. 83.

¹³⁰ Lobola is a custom in Southern Africa in the form of payment, either in money or goods, that the groom has to pay to the family of his bride-to-be prior to their marriage.

¹³¹ Vivienne Ndlovu, *Waste Not Your Tears* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2018), p. 7.

man' needs to 'prove' himself publicly in order to establish his 'proper' manhood.¹³² On the other hand, 'proper' womanhood can only be established in the private sphere. Despite the fact that women literally 'give birth' to nations they are still pushed to the periphery of public life, and the discourse of their sexuality, as well as what 'proper' womanhood is, is under male control.¹³³ While seemingly following such a script, "Waste Not Your Tears" carefully dissects and dismantles the concept of 'successful masculinity' and 'proper womanhood.' Ndlovu does this so successfully, that following the book's initial release in 1994, several NGO's including SAFAIDS, a Harare-based NGO dedicated to sexual and reproductive health awareness for which the author works, called for a re-release of the book, which happened in 2018, so that they could use the book for their HIV prevention campaigns.

With a similar aim to debunk certain gender related myths, but with a completely different writing style is Sue Nyathi "The Polygamist" (2012). By addressing topics like polygamy, female sexuality, and (lack of) sisterhood, the book has been particularly well accepted by the younger audience. While at a quick glance the book appears as a 'chick-lit' novel, its light tone segues to complex topics like female economic dependence, questioned masculinity and intimate partner violence.

These themes are also present in Rozena Maart's "The Writing Circle" (2007), but particularly the last topic, sexual violence, is of special importance to Maart, who worked in the Cape Town Rape Crisis Center for several years. While sexual violence is not new, the consequences concerning the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic are. Maart doesn't create the picture-perfect image of South Africa of freedom, equality, rainbows, and Nelson Mandela. Instead, violence, murders, crime, and rape reign supreme.¹³⁴ Pushing back on sentimental representations of women as presented in "Waste Not Your Tears" and "Branching Streams Flow in the Dark," Maart's narrative voice is clear speaking directly to women, particularly those who have been victims of sexual violence saying: "It's not your fault. Don't blame

¹³² Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford: California University Press, 2001), p. 118.

¹³³ Simone A. James Alexander, *African Diasporic Women's Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2014), p. 2.

¹³⁴ Irene D'Souza, 'Circle of violence: violent legacy leaves women in its wake. 'The Writing Circle' author Rozena Maart,' *Herizons Magazine*, 21:4 (2008), p. 53-55.

yourself.”¹³⁵ Additionally, ‘taboo’ topics like interracial and interreligious relationships as well as ‘un-African’¹³⁶ gay, lesbian, and bisexual relationships are openly discussed.

3.1. Men

Much of the work related to gender and its connection to HIV has been focused on routes of transmission and the consequences of contracting the virus. In this light women’s social and financial dependence on their male partners has also translated to their sexual relations. Having multiple women available and being in control of them sexually is considered as ‘successful masculinity’ consequently leading to a model where having more women equals being more successful.¹³⁷ A high number of women also means a higher place in the male peer hierarchy. However, this is a double standard as women who have had or still have ‘more men’ are positioned in a very low place on the societal scale. As seen above, Roderick in “Waste Not Your Tears” builds himself up, by ‘collecting women.’ He ‘catches’ them by saying what he tells Loveness:

*“‘I Love you, Loveness. We’ll get married and live together in our own house, and I’ll go out and work while you stay at home and keep house for me. And we’ll have at least three beautiful children’ [...] Loveness appealed to him because she was so clearly besotted with him. She was too young to stand up to him and he could see she was the kind of girl who would submit completely to her husband’s will.”*¹³⁸

It is clear that Roderick’s ‘successful masculinity’ is based on notions of overpowering women and his virility. He successfully ‘interpellates’ a script all women are supposed to follow, to get married, take care of the house and children, and take care of whatever needs her man might have. When Roderick first meets Loveness he notices her straight away because of her ‘innocent provocation’ that to him says ‘virgin:’ “And that was how he liked them best. That way they were sure to fall in love with you and believe every word you said, and he needed that sort of dependence - it reminded him of his complete omnipotence as a child.”¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Rozena Maart, *The Writing Circle* (Toronto, Mawenzi House Publications: 2007), p. 36.

¹³⁶ Andrew Grant, ‘The emergence of black queer characters in three post-apartheid novels,’ *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde*, 56:2 (2019), p. 3.

¹³⁷ Marian Burchardt, ‘Ironies of Subordination: Ambivalences of Gender in Religious AIDS Interventions in South Africa,’ *Oxford Development Studies*, 38:1 (2010), p. 65.

¹³⁸ Ndlovu, p. 38 - 40.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

Such thinking is mirrored in Jonasi from Sue Nyathi's "The Polygamist," a poor township boy, who takes advantage of the temporary Zimbabwean financial boom, and becomes extremely rich. As his power grows, so does his relentless womanizing, which brings him to a bitter end, death from full-blown AIDS. The book is narrated by four different female characters, his four wives who initially do not know the other women exist, and finished with an epilogue written from Jonasi's perspective. Officially, polygamy is not allowed anymore in Zimbabwe or South Africa. However, in more traditional contexts it is still accepted and practiced if the husband can pay the lobola, and financially sustain all his wives. In a polygamous marriage, the wives must remain loyal to their husband, and in return, the husband can only be with his wives; "for this reason, traditional African polygamy is termed monogamous polygamy (faithfulness within a polygamous marriage) and differentiated from polygamous monogamy (commonly termed serial monogamy), which is prevalent in the West."¹⁴⁰ The appeal of serial monogamy is clear as it allows multiple sexual partners and does not require marriage. Even though Jonasi's wives expect monogamous polygamy, he practices polygamous monogamy.

Jonasi's behavior can be explained as 'hegemonic masculinity,' a male fantasy having as many women as possible and going to each one whenever it pleases him. If there are problems with one of them, he just goes to another. Joyce, his first wife, wonders: "Maybe it's a status symbol for Jonas, accumulating wives like he accumulates investments. It's true that gluttony is a sin and my husband is greed personified."¹⁴¹ When she points out to Jonasi that he swore before God to love only her, he calls her selfish, and that he is in possession of enough money and love to share. Jonasi expects Joyce to simply play along with the 'successful masculinity' discourse:

"They are such a beautiful couple..."

'They have such beautiful children...'

'And they have such a beautiful house!'

*'And they are so in love after all these years. Some people are blessed...'*¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Njeri Mbugua, 'Cultural Attitudes and Ambivalence to the ABC Model in Sub-Saharan Africa,' in *Strong Women, Dangerous Times: Gender and HIV/AIDS in Africa*, ed. by Ezekiel Kalipeni, Karen Flynn, and Cynthia Pope (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009), p. 176.

¹⁴¹ Nyathi, p. 8.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 44.

With the use of marked ellipsis Ndlovu highlights the words and sentences omitted indicating Joyce's dissatisfaction with the role she is expected to play: "I looked glorious on the outside but on the inside I was slowly dying." Here, the symptomatic reading of what is absent is much louder than what is present. Similarly, the 'second wife' Essie secretly struggles with the fact no one knows what is really going on in her life: "I am the trendsetter here. Everyone wants to be like me. Everything always looks rosy from the outside." However, for Jonasi, the parallel existence of his wives is natural, deliberate, and purposeful. They are something he is entitled to. In a world where money can buy anything, his wives are "bought and paid for."¹⁴³

Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that such an arrangement is occasionally mutually beneficial. In trying to comprehend why women would willingly enter a polygamous marriage, their socio-economic situation needs to be understood. Economic dependence keeps women bound to their partners. Loveness is economically dependent on Roderick. Without an income of her own, her lack of money makes it very difficult for her to leave him.

Even worse off is Essie in "The Polygamist." She, and her two children, are entirely financially dependent on the mercy of Jonasi. However, the matter is not so black and white. Essie was continuously sexually assaulted by her mother's 'boyfriend' who, in return, paid her school fees. The man with whom she had her first child, was killed in the bush war. Thus, as a single mother in a poor township, Jonasi's money is enough for her: "Men will always cheat but I'd rather be somebody's wife than somebody's whore. I want the security that comes with marriage. The security of belonging."¹⁴⁴ The 'marriage as security' metaphor is further explored and problematized differently in chapter 4 through the prism of Valerie Tagwira's novel "The Uncertainty of Hope." Essie is secure in her belonging to Jonasi, she always gives him what he wants, and that is why he keeps on coming back to her when he feels like it, with a cheque of course. Despite finding him physically and emotionally draining, she does not stand up to him, knowing that money, and with it her comfortable life, will leave with him. Her economic dependence becomes particularly important during her fight with the HIV virus. Jonasi pays for her medication, her visits to traditional healers, her nutritional diet, and when she develops full blown AIDS, he is the one paying the bills for her hospitalization.

¹⁴³ Nyathi, p. 85, 49, and 112.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 76.

Jonasi's third and fourth wife marry him to better their social standings and live a more luxurious life. The union gives them security and status which a woman on her own still cannot acquire in southern Africa without raising eyebrows. Matipa only has children with him to protect herself, and Lindani plans to have a child with him just as an 'insurance.' The majority of these cases have a connection with the issue of 'class' and even 'race,' topics which will be addressed in their respective subchapters.

To showcase his 'invincible' masculinity, besides with his wives, Jonasi also sleeps with other women. It is unclear from whom he gets HIV, but it is clear that he has been 'breeding' and spreading the virus for a while. He refuses to wear condoms with any of his lovers and prohibits any of his wives to use birth control. In a study from Malawi, it was revealed that men only agree to wearing a condom with extramarital partners due to the risk of contracting HIV.¹⁴⁵ Matipa is the first of his wives to insist on protection when he gives her gonorrhea: "I went to the doctor today and he told me I have an STD. If you are going to sleep around Jonasi, at least wear a condom..."¹⁴⁶ By using marked ellipsis again, Nyathi allows the reader to fill in the missing meaning. That she knows he cheats, Matipa leaves unspoken.

Jonasi is in complete denial about condoms, testing to find out his HIV status, and the use of ARV's. He goes from saying "the doctor, what does he know? I'm not sick. Only fools get HIV" in the beginning, to "I'm going to die and I'm really scared"¹⁴⁷ in the end, whilst walking a slow and painful path towards death in between. His health deteriorates quickly and in two years he is dead. It starts with tuberculosis, but he recovers. Then he gets shingles followed by severe pneumonia that sends him to the hospital for weeks. He vomits blood, stops eating as he has continuous diarrhea so that he needs to wear diapers. Right before his death Joyce describes him in the following paragraph full of metaphors:

"He looked like a corpse that had escaped from the graveyard. He had aged considerably and was almost bald. You could count the ginger strands of wispy hair sprouting on his

¹⁴⁵ Veronica Escamilla and Ezekiel Kalipeni, 'Factors Affecting the Male-Female Differences in Condom Perceptions and Use in Rural Malawi,' in *Strong Women, Dangerous Times: Gender and HIV/AIDS in Africa*, ed. by Ezekiel Kalipeni, Karen Flynn, and Cynthia Pope (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009), p. 145.

¹⁴⁶ Nyathi, p. 111.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 147 and 152.

pimpled, crabby, peeling head. His skin was dull and lifeless and his complexion the color of midnight, his red eyes and lips like burning coal."¹⁴⁸

Despite his horrible state in the end, an even more grave consequence of his 'hegemonic masculinity' is that he did not allow 'his women' to use protection, test or take ARV's, thus, potentially being responsible for even more deaths. He is not the only fictional man to do so. In "Branching Streams Flow in the Dark" an exchange between Michael and Serina serves as a prime example of his 'toxic' masculinity. Serina has just found out she is HIV positive after undergoing a voluntary HIV test, but he is mad because she did not ask for his permission to go and take the test. He insists that if she wanted to go, she should have asked him, and if she decided on her own, she is married to herself and not to him. She tries to reason with him:

*"You see, our only child, a girl, had died when she was only one-year-old. And when the doctor told me what I needed to know about that death, I decided to undergo some tests. He stamped his foot hard on the floor and called me a whore [...] When I told him that the doctor had said that he should also have some blood tests. He didn't see the point of knowing what his status was, because whether he knew it or not, he was going to die eventually. We were all going to die, anyway, so why waste much-needed money on having some stupid tests?"*¹⁴⁹

Within the patriarchal discourse Michael understands marriage as complete obedience of the wife and no responsibility of the husband. Additional patterns are starting to be noticeable. The refusal of condoms, refusal of tests, refusal of knowing the truth about HIV status, seem to be endemic amongst men just like the virus. In "Waste Not Your Tears" Roderick also does not want to use condoms as there is "no point in eating a sweet with the wrapper on" as well as refuses testing: "Better to live with the possibility that he might be negative than to be damned with the truth that he was, once and for always, HIV positive."¹⁵⁰ The fact that men are interpellated and try to interpellate women into thinking that sexual intercourse is more pleasurable without a condom than with it, ignoring the disease and (unwanted) reproductive discourses is a repetition of what the fictional women of chapter two,

¹⁴⁸ Nyathi, p. 149.

¹⁴⁹ Mungoshi, p. 45.

¹⁵⁰ Ndlovu, p. 54 and p. 21.

in particular Sophie in “Highway Queen,” experienced. The refusal to know the truth about one’s HIV status just shows cowardice.

The premise of Loveness’s character in “Waste Not Your Tears” is her complete and total naivety, both when it comes to men and when it comes to HIV, therefore, she never insists on using condoms. The difference is that when it comes to Roderick the choice of not using a condom can be attributed to showing power and sexual preference, while with Loveness the reason provided is ignorance and subordination. Taking into consideration the previously mentioned fact that when she met Roderick she was a virgin, finding a hospital form dated two years before she met him that he is HIV-positive, provides her with the undeniable truth that he purposefully did not protect her from HIV. When she confronts him about it, just like the men in other novels, Roderick considers himself blameless:

*“What difference does it make if I’ve got this stupid infection anyway? We are alive aren’t we? [...] I’m not sick. It’s not my fault. I never forced you to love me. You made your own choice. Did I bring AIDS to Zimbabwe? I was just unlucky. It’s not my fault.”*¹⁵¹

Roderick feels no sense of responsibility for his (lack of) actions. He is very good at playing the victim, convincing himself that AIDS is only a story, a plot to spoil his sexual pleasures. He develops a ‘controlled schizophrenia’ meaning that he can be a promiscuous ‘player’ at night, a ‘normal’ man around his family and friends, and a reformed AIDS humanitarian when need be. He likes the publicity, the money, the ‘privileges’ that come with being the HIV-positive ‘poster boy’ for an AIDS-awareness NGO that pays him for his public appearances. He lies to them about using protection and about continuously going for testing. He is a pathological liar and knows exactly what to say to whom in order to be believed. Through his lies he creates a comfortable workless life.

Such performance or ‘fake’ interpellation of ‘living positively’ is not unique to Roderick, but is present in many other African countries where living up to the ideas or requirements of NGO’s, church-based organizations, or international organizations, provides either financial or material means of survival.¹⁵² Such performances go beyond the personal, as the previously discussed political elites on the continent have long learned how to manipulate

¹⁵¹ Ndlovu, p. 57.

¹⁵² Wenzel Geissler and Felicitas Becker, *AIDS and Religious Practice in Africa* (Boston: BRILL, 2009), p. 22.

inflows from abroad. A relevant example involves antiretroviral medication that was originally too expensive for African countries to buy. However, when funds were provided via the international community, much of the money did not go for the life-saving ARV's but into the pockets of corrupt politicians. Additionally, politicized aid, when a donor country or organization seeks to establish influence in the receiving country through 'helping' with HIV/AIDS, serves as further proof of the political and global connotations of the epidemic and the corruptive practices that mushroomed with it.

Contrary to performing survival and 'living positively' is the actual disease and the sick body as its consequence. Loveness and Roderick's baby Solomon is born with HIV. He coughs, gets a thrush in his mouth, his fontanelle collapses, he fails to gain weight and constantly has diarrhea. Before his first birthday, Solomon dies of AIDS. Descriptive images of a suffering person, and of an infant nonetheless, are used as a method to evoke sympathy as well as horror and fear.¹⁵³ As seen above, Roderick considers himself blameless, but has no problem blaming everyone else, Loveness in particular. He calls her 'stupid' for not knowing anything about sexual relations or diseases connected to them, and when she is bleeding while being in labor he refuses to get help ignoring the fact that she is pregnant for the second time because he refuses to wear condoms:

*"She dumped herself on me, and I don't have to do anything. It's her own fault she's in the state she's in [...] She's not sick. She's having another miscarriage. I don't know why she keeps getting pregnant. You'd think she'd have more sense after the baby died [...] She's going to die anyway [...] what difference does it make whether it's now or later."*¹⁵⁴

The gendered discourse of blame in "Waste Not Your Tears" regarding HIV/AIDS is oppositional and hierarchical. In Ndlovu's imagined patriarchal society, women are voiceless victims who get 'dumped' on men, the predatory victors. Such is a dangerous path to take though. Portraying women as complete victims is a double-edged sword since, it can make the reader very angry and annoyed, but at the same time, continuously reading belittling words and

¹⁵³ Lizzy Attree, 'Silent bodies and dissident vernaculars: representations of the body in South African fiction and film,' in *Images of Africa*, ed. by Julia Gallagher (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 188-200 (p. 191).

¹⁵⁴ Ndlovu, p. 76 - 77.

facing constant passivity can be harmful as well. Once an image of a character is created and maintained for so long, it is hard to change it.

When it comes to gender relations, the resistance and reinforcement, the challenging and the perpetuating, the intimate and the political become intertwined. Thus, what sets out as helpful, faces the danger of becoming hurtful or at least complicit. However gendered Vivienne Ndlovu's representation of women is, it does manage to show how hypocritical and deeply placed in society gender ideology is. Her heroine, Loveness, exemplifies the suffering, tenacity, and vulnerability of women living with HIV, often overlooked in mainstream political, social, and even cultural responses to the epidemic. Just in representation itself, Ndlovu's story has the potential to save women's lives as many readers can relate to or feel sorry for Loveness.

Illness can no longer be dismissed as bad luck or as a personal problem, as it is clearly connected to the hierarchical institutional level. There are real people, real stories, behind the biological and statistical data. Works of fiction can build the bridge between the two, and 'humanize' the epidemic. Yet, for progress, writers need to transcend the 'counter' narrative. Demonizing, reinforcing, or scapegoating men is harmful to both sexes. It robs women of agency and gives them a false sense of security. Vulnerability and compassion are not weaknesses, but as can be seen in Loveness's example, they can be a 'trap' when it comes to writing about HIV and gender relations. Nothing is absolute, not culture, not patriarchy, not control. Every ideology has gaps where resistance can form; feminism is a great example of that. The thin line between a 'counter-reading' and an 'empowering' reading of a novel is a distinction explored in the following subchapter.

Before that, the focus now turns to the most lyrical description of a 'blameless' man in the form Albert, Serina's alienated ex-boyfriend in "Branching Streams Flow in the Dark." She got pregnant with him when she was twelve and had an abortion. As she meets him again years later, he is a mere shadow of himself preparing to die from full-blown AIDS. Albert has had a severe impact on her life and is the reason no one wanted to marry her for so long, and yet, he doesn't even remember her. The descriptions of his rashes and sores provide visualization of the diseased male body. For Serina, seeing his condition is a wake-up call as to what she might be facing in the end. Mungoshi becomes an intrusive narrator passing judgement on Albert's character, pointing out that Albert's actions alone have brought him to where he is now even though he wants to blame everybody else as the reader is being rhetorically asked:

*“Why? It is too late now for him to see clearly, to see that nobody has been or is responsible for the condition he is in, that he has been his own master – and victim? – Right from the beginning. Now he cannot control anything, he cannot face himself. Now he wants witnesses. He wants victims. He wants a scapegoat. He thinks the world has done him wrong and he is seeking revenge.”*¹⁵⁵

Albert is an aesthetic of horror of an alienated individual doomed to psychic and physical suffering.¹⁵⁶ Mungoshi is not interested in excuses men give to blame others, he insists on men taking personal responsibility. He calls Albert cruel, lonely, a coward, selfish and ignorant conveying a message that Serina’s compassion and empathy are not irrelevant. That asking for help and receiving it is not weak.

The final part of this section returns to women being treated as properties, most prominently in “The Polygamist.” When things do not go the way Jonasi plans them, he loses control, exhibiting ‘aggressive’ masculinity. This is most obvious when it comes to ‘his’ women. As he sees them as possessions, he expects them to be loyal to him, and only him. He beats and rapes all his wives. He beats Joyce when she first finds out about the other women and wants to leave him. He also beats her, when she suggests using protection during sexual intercourse as she now knows he is sexually active with others. He beats Matipa for the same reason. Nevertheless, Jonasi is most violent with Essie, as he thinks that because she is the poorest and ‘lowest’ of them, he can treat her the worst. A few times he beats her so badly she has to be hospitalized. When she tells him she is considering sleeping with other men to make means end, he rapes her, conceiving a child in the process, ordering her: “I’m your man, don’t you ever forget that.”¹⁵⁷

The term ‘rape’ in this thesis is defined as “sexual coercion or ‘forced’ sex as penetrative sex that is non-consensual or ‘against one’s will.’”¹⁵⁸ In the new post-Apartheid South Africa, rape has been dubbed a ‘scandal of manhood’ and dealing with it presented as a national priority in order to ensure the ‘moral regeneration’ of the country. Media outlets have a tendency to

¹⁵⁵ Mungoshi, p. 66.

¹⁵⁶ Gerald Gaylard, ‘The Postcolonial Gothic: Time and Death in Southern African Literature,’ *JLS/TLW*, 24:4 (2008), p. 3.

¹⁵⁷ Nyathi, p. 50.

¹⁵⁸ Kate Wood, Helen Lambert, and Rachel Jewkes, “‘Showing Roughness in a Beautiful Way’: Talk about Love, Coercion, and Rape in South African Youth Sexual Culture,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 21:3 (2007), p. 279.

focus on the sensationalistic aspects of sexual violence, like Jacob Zuma's rape trial, or the numerous child-rape cases, both of which make their way into Rozena Maart's "The Writing Circle," and yet, most of the time, rape happens within women's intimate sexual relationships.¹⁵⁹

All four female protagonists of Maart's novel have been raped. When Isabel's rapist is about to rape her in her car in front of the house the 'writing circle' of women meet each week, he notices a newspaper on her back seat. On the title page, there is news coverage of Jacob Zuma's rape trial. The rapist smirks and takes it as a sign, a blessing from Zuma even, that what he is about to do to Isabel is right and only natural. This repetition of referencing the Zuma rape trial highlights its importance and long-lingering consequences, but also, in this instance, alludes to one of the most common rape myths, that the woman is 'asking for it' with her attire. During the trial, Zuma claimed he could not control himself because of the way his victim was dressed.¹⁶⁰ After Carmen is assaulted the anger in women spills out:

*"We can't let these men get away with this," she said. "This country will never move forward if we women don't stand up for ourselves." [...] She kept telling me that it was not my fault, which I appreciated, adding that men of all ages, creeds, and colours raped women. "...all ages, creeds, and colours. Now don't blame yourself, my dear.""*¹⁶¹

Maart also uses the three-dotted marked ellipsis for dramatic effect. When Carmen decides to report the rape to the police, a core repressive State apparatus, an officer tells her "firmly yet arrogantly, that cases like mine often ran into dead ends. Imagine being referred to as a dead end."¹⁶² As much as class and race can significantly shape a 'rapist,' the decisive category to comprehend rape is gender.¹⁶³ Murray argues that the general belief in South Africa is that women themselves are responsible for not getting raped, otherwise they are considered as if they are 'asking for it.' Only if women behave 'correctly' by not wearing revealing clothes, not going to places they 'shouldn't,' not 'behaving as they 'shouldn't,' or not being in any way

¹⁵⁹ Wood, Lambert and Jewkes, p. 278.

¹⁶⁰ Jessica Murray, "'She Had Agony Written All over Her Face': Representations of Rape in the Work of Rozena Maart," *Journal of Literary Studies*, 27:4 (2011), p. 46.

¹⁶¹ Maart, p. 36.

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 40.

¹⁶³ Murray, *Agony*, p. 47.

seductive, they do not ‘deserve’ rape. After all, it goes in men’s favor that rape is one of the hardest crimes to prove and that victims are often not believed.¹⁶⁴

At the beginning of “The Writing Circle” Isabel describes how, during the night, her partner Tom usually drives behind her car until she reaches her destination to make sure she arrives safely. The night she is raped, Tom couldn’t do that. The fact that Isabel is raped by a ‘stranger’ makes it a more ‘real’ rape than if she was raped by an intimate partner.¹⁶⁵ If someone whom a woman knows for a while rapes her, as is the case with Jazz who is raped by her mentor Dr. Singh in an act of abuse of his power over her and her career, she is often not believed and is labelled ‘an attention seeker.’

Maart’s novel successfully explores nuances of the sexual violence women, and also men, endure. She tackles child rape through her female heroines, for example, Carmen is continuously raped by her father from the age of twelve, and Isabel is abused by her uncle Reggie. Maart also writes about how a twelve-year-old boy is raped in his bed by a family friend who later ridiculously defends himself by saying that “the boy was responsible. That he wanted it.”¹⁶⁶ Isabel’s sister Dolores, is raped by her high school teacher Mr. Jacobus, for which she takes him to court, only to not be believed as he is found not guilty, which eventually leads to her suicide: “Not being believed is the worst fate a woman can suffer.”¹⁶⁷

Perhaps the simplest answer to the question ‘Why do men rape?’ is: because their masculinity is questioned.¹⁶⁸ Simone de Beauvoir writes about how in their family units’ little girls already ‘learn’ the hierarchy of the sexes. Even if the mother is the one with the actual authority, she learns how to ‘camouflage’ it for the sake of the man. Everything the woman does is in the name, and authority, of the father.¹⁶⁹ When Tom tries to claim such authority over Isabel’s body after her rape she is outraged. At this point, Isabel doesn’t know if she is pregnant or infected with HIV or has any other sexually transmitted disease, but she does know who is the one ‘in charge’:

¹⁶⁴ Murray, *Agony*, p. 39.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 41.

¹⁶⁶ Maart, p. 159.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁸ Wood, Lambert and Jewkes, p. 291.

¹⁶⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 1949), p. 314.

*“I am not okay with men who tell women what to do. I may be pregnant right now. I may have to have an abortion. I don’t know. I have not thought that far. I hope to God I don’t have to. I will have to live with every decision I make, and all the consequences that go with it, but I’d be damned if I allow you to tell me what to do. So please leave now! ‘Isabel, there is the morning after pill and there are...’ I gasped in disbelief. ‘Tom, just leave. I will decide on my options, not you.’”*¹⁷⁰

Many writers wish to write strong female characters such as Isabel since assertions of power have been for so long associated with assertions of masculinity.¹⁷¹ Maart has written about ‘textual coloniality’ of (post)colonial subjects who are now born into reading, writing, speaking, and consequently thinking, in languages that are spoken by and uphold the civilizations of the colonizers.¹⁷² Such a parallel can be drawn to the position of women within patriarchy, when a woman’s every act or how she is ‘thought to think,’ is constructed in a matrix designed by men, and women trying to redefine their position in a patriarchal system still need to work within it, eventually abiding by its values. Thus, Maart’s decision to write a women-centered and gender-aware novel not only highlights the social injustices women must face, but creates a space in which women, despite their gender-unjust dispositions, manage to succeed and overcome the violent obstacles they are faced with.¹⁷³

Many times, fictional narratives are the ones that shine a light on the discrepancies between official narratives and people’s personal experiences. In South Africa, a country so marked by high levels of sexual crimes against women, anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff understand works of fiction as an “effort to produce social order.”¹⁷⁴ Fiction can create a ‘discourse of resistance’ by ‘writing into life’ exemplary characters who act honorably and stand still against the current of crime threatening to overflow them.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Maart, p. 57.

¹⁷¹ Binder, p. 263.

¹⁷² Rozena Maart, ‘Exordium: Writing and the Relation: From Textual Coloniality to South African Black Consciousness’ in *Black Intersectionalities: A Critique for the 21st Century*, ed. by Monica Michlin, and Jean-Paul Rocchi (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), pp. 21-33 (p. 22).

¹⁷³ Jessica Murray, ‘Constructions of Gender in Contemporary South African Crime Fiction: A Feminist Literary Analysis of the Novels of Angela Makholwa,’ *English Studies in Africa*, 59:2 (2016), pp. 14-26 (p. 15).

¹⁷⁴ Binder, p. 264.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

Novels often include stereotypical representations of women as male novelists write them ‘traditionally’ meaning their importance in a story is often only tied to male storylines.¹⁷⁶ Such a secondary role is the result of narrative structures and thematic frameworks in which female characters are not the main focus of plots. This creates a scenario for both sexes to ‘perform gender’ as weak masculinities and strong femininities are deemed as incompatible.¹⁷⁷ Such a ‘masculine reason’ method follows the male ‘rule’ that a woman should be ‘pretty and silent.’ Her ‘use’ or ‘function’ is to be gazed at, and not to be ‘reasoned with.’¹⁷⁸

Based on Althusser, Lacan, and Freud, Laura Mulvey states that “that the act of looking was in itself an exercise of power” and that the patriarchal ‘male gaze’ is constructed to “suit male pleasure and desires.”¹⁷⁹ That is why Hélène Cixous argues that women must write about themselves, and encourages as many women as possible to write so that they are properly represented on their own terms.¹⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Onyebuchi Orabueze concludes that African female and male novelists’ main contribution to the fight for equality of the African woman is in writing which represents both sides so that societally determined gender ‘roles’ are at least questioned if not subverted.¹⁸¹

Blaming men entirely for the misfortunes of women is an easy way out. Women should be held accountable as well. Cultural automatons disempower both men and women. The visibility of women in an epidemic is often only in terms of their relationships with men. Even though women know how to appear sexual to men, this does not translate into awareness about the consequences of sexuality on their health. In Ndlovu’s novel, romantic love and faithfulness are assumed as female qualities. The women who appear in “Waste Not Your Tears” are seemingly taught what to do and what to want by the dominant culture as exemplified in the following excerpts from different parts of the book:

¹⁷⁶ Mutunda, Sylvester N., *Descriptions of Masculinity in African Women's Creative Writing: Mariama Bâ, Philomène Bassek, Delphine Zanga Tsogo, Calixthe Beyala, Aminata Sow Fall* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2015), p. 34.

¹⁷⁷ Eduardo Ruiz, ‘Three Faces/Phases of Male Desire: Veiled Woman, Passive Virgin, and African Devil in María de Zayas’s “Tarde llega el desengaño,”’ *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 72:3 (2018), p. 159.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Jessica Cammaert, *Undesirable Practices: Women, Children, and the Politics of the Body in Northern Ghana* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), p. 221.

¹⁸⁰ Margaret Anne Orford, *Nostalgia for the Future: Gendered violence, post-apartheid spatiality and the male gaze: The troubled ‘new’ South Africa in ‘Like Clockwork’, ‘Daddy’s Girl’ and ‘Water Music’, three crime novels by Margie Orford* (United Kingdom: University of East Anglia, 2020), p. 41.

¹⁸¹ Onyebuchi Orabueze, *Society, Women and Literature in Africa* (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2015), p. 30.

“As a child, she had never imagined any future ahead of her except as some man’s wife, the mother of his children and she had loved her first child’s father with all her heart. He had denied her. They had all denied her, yet still she believed what she had been brought up to believe – a woman’s place was to look after a man, that without a man she was nothing.”

“Free to begin her real life, which she was convinced could only happen when a man picked her up and made her into someone, his Wife.”

“He liked her. He had noticed her. This was what she’d dreamed of – meeting a man, not a boy, and knowing instantly that this was what she was made for; to be his wife, to look after him. Here was her destiny. He was what she had dreamed of. Here, at last, was Life.”¹⁸²

These are almost perfect examples of interpellation of women into patriarchy. ‘Life’ only begins when a woman becomes a wife and a mother. As mentioned before, the premise of Loveness’s character is her complete and total naivety, both when it comes to men and when it comes to HIV or sexually transmitted diseases in general. Ndlovu at times becomes an intrusive narrator to remind the reader that all is not going to go according to Roderick’s plan, but this change of character for Loveness comes much too late. Her passivity, self-denying, and self-sacrificing are countered by Roderick’s self-definition and self-determination. When disease enters her life, Loveness exhibits typical ‘female’ behavior, taking care of the man, taking care of everybody else except herself, falling prey to the ‘Mother Theresa syndrome’ and repressing any needs she herself has:

“She devoted herself to him completely for she knew no other way [...] she would spend the rest of her life with him and the love she had grown for him still burned strong, unhindered by the daily cruelties and the many dismissals he dealt her. It was surprising how easily she could deny the feelings of anger and betrayal which occasionally came to her in the middle of the night, or at odd times during the day.”¹⁸³

¹⁸² Ndlovu, p. 5, 34, 38.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 69 - 70.

“Waste Not Your Tears” almost becomes an interpretative narrative of male-domination. By using such a representational tactic, Ndlovu succumbs to the power of ‘controlling’ narratives that merely reveal issues rather than try and resolve them. The question at hand is; does Ndlovu’s portrayal of Loveness go too far into ‘sentimentality’ that it can blur interpretation, especially for young readers, or is it in fact even more effective in the end because it goes so far into ‘victimhood’?

There is no single answer, as both, resistance and reinforcement patterns can be found, and a perspective can support or critique depending on the point of view.¹⁸⁴ According to Spivak, knowledge is never innocent as it expresses the interests of its producers.¹⁸⁵ Drawing from Butler and Bourdieu, the social is becoming more and more represented as biological when it comes to the ‘culturalized’ social order of gender. However, the root of gender relations as we know them is found in countless historical facts that are presented as natural and right.¹⁸⁶ By deciding what is male and what female a social structure is built according to the plans of its creators; men.

When Loveness is presented in chapter three, her story is told by an omniscient third-person narrator, so even on the storytelling level, she does not get a voice. Her whole storyline is that from birth onwards she is a victim. Her mother leaves her at birth, she is less loved by her father than her twin brother, she goes to an orphanage, is hated by her new step-mother, and at boarding school, she gets into bad company and fails all her exams. She has no interest in or knowledge about how to access agency: “All her life, things had happened to her; life was something that happened, not something she needed to make decisions about.”¹⁸⁷ The novel can be read as a lesson of how important agency is in an individual life, and how a series of small bad decisions ultimately result in grave consequences, like when it comes to HIV/AIDS, in death.

Nonetheless, such a sentimental discourse does not necessarily transgress ‘traditional’ female roles and gender-based separate spheres. Hogan argues that this sort of writing finds its roots in white middle-class rhetoric of female experiences of society that presuppose

¹⁸⁴ Katie Hogan, *Women Take Care: Gender, Race, and the Culture of AIDS* (London: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 28.

¹⁸⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 286.

¹⁸⁶ Burchardt, p. 77.

¹⁸⁷ Ndlovu, p.34.

conservative ideas of women as guardians of virtue, morality, caregiving, and domesticity.¹⁸⁸ Such a 'feminine' voice is given a place as a powerless separate sphere instead of claiming its central position with far-reaching empowering effects which describe issues of more than a half of the population infected with HIV/AIDS.

In her book "Women Take Care: Gender, Race, and the Culture of AIDS," author Katie Hogan draws attention to the fact that many AIDS literary representations reproduce stereotypical female ideals in order to evoke sympathy in the audience.¹⁸⁹ She highlights that during the epidemic, notions such as 'self-denying' and 'self-sacrifice,' have become synonymous with the archetypal caregiving 'good woman' who inevitably 'has to' take on the caretaker role and put everybody else's wellbeing in front of her own no matter the circumstances. Loveness fits into this scenario perfectly. Ndlovu's portrayal of Loveness, for most of the book, is of a girl too clever for her own good who lacks qualities such as humility and circumspection. After her second miscarriage, her general health starts to deteriorate as she is constantly coughing, has a fever, and has very low energy levels. Nevertheless, she still makes food for Roderick though she does not eat it, takes care of the house, and does all the chores, while he is jobless and spends all their support money on alcohol.

The narrative assumes women are supposed to take care of their HIV-positive partners or children, all the while forgetting to take care of themselves. In such a framework, caregiving is perceived only as a private matter, and not a public one. However, if the oppositional morality and depravity have unfairly become symbols of the epidemic, they cannot be countered or annulled only by female sacrifice, kindness, and caregiving. Even though the reach and influence of literary representations is limited, it is significant, as it can affect the way the reader acts or understands a certain topic. However, while representations of HIV/AIDS are necessary and often groundbreaking, a dangerous and unwanted side-effect of trying to do justice to the epidemic is subscribing roles to women that they have tried to overthrow for decades.

Gender essentialism is most noticeable in what Aisha Matthews calls the 'hierarchy of being' where a male is presented as the reasonable one, and the female the unreasonable one.¹⁹⁰ The 'sacrificial paradigm' of a self-sacrificing and all-enduring woman is once again present in

¹⁸⁸ Hogan, p. 26 - 27.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁹⁰ Matthews, p. 640.

Mungoshi's protagonist Serina.¹⁹¹ She is overpowered by men, both psychologically and physically, and passively accepts that her role is to take care of all the men in her life. Serina is a passive protagonist who does not investigate or wish to transform gender relations, she accepts them without question.¹⁹² Having the 'dark little angel,' does not make her more active.¹⁹³

The hegemonic patriarchal discourse influences social structures, blurs objectivity, and incapacitates the potential for subversion.¹⁹⁴ Internalization of the role and position of the female gender as a social construct results in accepting biases and stereotypes that go against one-self. Serina subconsciously realizes that, when in the letter she writes to her friend Fungisai, she wonders how could all of this happen to her, a "thin wispy waif of a girl who lived so peacefully and innocently under the sharp hawk eye of a pastor's daughter."¹⁹⁵ She knows that there are people who 'deserve' to get the HIV virus more, considering their lifestyle. But instead, Serina is the one who starts feeling the judgment of society because of her disease, possessing a 'contaminated' touch, a loneliness, aloneness she internalizes as deserved as described in the excerpt opening this chapter and in the paragraph below:

*"In a kind of bizarre sad - masochistic way I made it even worse for myself. I allowed them; I made myself feel that they were right to shun me! I mourned and mourned and told myself that I was being punished for my sins. And how I just loved being punished for my sins! You see? It was that time in one's life when one doesn't know anything about anything and those who know are happy to see one making a mess of it all."*¹⁹⁶

Serina exhibits what Jean-Paul Sartre would describe as masochism, in a sense that she assimilates and identifies herself with the way 'the other,' in this instance men, look at her.¹⁹⁷ Sartre sees sadism and masochism sharing the same goal of transcending the "restrictive character of corporeality," but while a sadist follows a path of self-denial, the Sartre-defined

¹⁹¹ Uwakweh, p. 2.

¹⁹² Eunice E. Omonzejie, 'Traditional Patriarchy in Two Male-Authored Narratives,' *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 9:2 (2014), p. 154.

¹⁹³ Mungoshi, p. 12.

¹⁹⁴ Matthews, p. 654.

¹⁹⁵ Mungoshi, p. 33.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 47.

¹⁹⁷ Butler, Judith, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2012), p. 146.

masochism means that what they actually seek is “transcendence by pushing restriction to an extreme.”¹⁹⁸

The consequence of Serina’s internalization of patriarchal standards is her complete submission to the men in her life. She becomes a ‘mother’ to all of them exemplifying what the phallogentric society thinks are ‘qualities’ of a woman like patience, self-denial, and resignation.¹⁹⁹ Only when she conforms to these ‘rules’ does she feel accepted, all the while re-confirming gendered-hierarchical society.²⁰⁰ There are situations where submission can become a gesture of “self-affirmation and power,”²⁰¹ but not for Serina, who does not use her power for subversion and resistance: “That was because she had taken things the way most people always take things, grabbing the nearest, the simplest and the most obvious without applying thought or a bit of restraint.”²⁰²

The fact that Serina remains confined within her gender-defined ‘traditional’ role shows two things. Firstly, the above mentioned deep internalization of such a role that she never even considers abandoning. And secondly, how Mungoshi, as a male, sees, conforms, and consequently writes ‘into being’ a representative of the ‘weaker’ sex.²⁰³ Serina knows that she got infected, either by her ex-boyfriend Albert, or by her husband Mike, but she never transcends her prescribed roles of wife and mother. She simply continues to participate in male structures of oppression.²⁰⁴ Her acceptance of internalization and submission comes with a price, stigmatization, not only because of having a disease, but also, for failing as a wife and as a mother. She cannot avoid gossip saying that she is to blame for Mike abandoning her. The gossip is never countered with the truth by her, and she remains on the level of a ‘good’ silent woman without a public opinion of her own. Mungoshi doesn’t create a female character that assumes agency on her own, she can only do it through men.

In “Branching Streams Flow in the Night” women are only a by-product used to tell male stories. Serina is a perfect example. She is supposedly the protagonist, but it turns out she

¹⁹⁸ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p. 146.

¹⁹⁹ Sylvester N. Mutunda, *Descriptions of Masculinity in African Women's Creative Writing: Mariama Bâ, Philomène Bassek, Delphine Zanga Tsogo, Calixthe Beyala, Aminata Sow Fall* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2015), p. 29.

²⁰⁰ Smith and Ce, p. 7.

²⁰¹ Matthews, p. 654.

²⁰² Mungoshi, p. 47.

²⁰³ Matthews, p. 654.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

is created only to introduce all the male characters who become the heart of the story. We don't know what happens to Serina, there is no resolution of her plot. When all the male plots are resolved, Serina disappears. There is no room for her in her own story. Mungoshi's novel includes a female voice, but that voice is not liberated, mirroring the state of affairs regarding gender in society. Serina is there for 'decorative' storytelling reasons, and as the unrealized and unfinished protagonist, remains silent, flat, and passive. As such, "Branching Streams Flow in the Dark" drafts a microcosm of patriarchal dynamics and highlights the current state of female (dis)empowerment in Zimbabwe, where, even when acknowledged, women are not heard.

The reason, the selected books of this chapter, provide for why women allow such treatment, is 'love.' In "Waste Not Your Tears" Loveness knows that Roderick deliberately infected her, but still "her love for Roderick denied that her suspicions could be true."²⁰⁵ In "The Polygamist" Joyce speaks directly to the reader:

*"I can just see you rolling your eyes thinking what a pathetic excuse I am for a woman. That if you were in my shoes you would have packed your bags and left a long time ago. The thing is that you are not in love with Jonasi. You did not have four kids with the man. You had not built a life with the man. I loved him and I was not ready to give up."*²⁰⁶

For 17 years Joyce was married to Jonasi. When she finds out he has three other wives, she does not leave him because of 'love.' Similarly, Essie, the second wife, believes "I was the first woman Jonasi loved and I knew deep down he would always love me."²⁰⁷ Lindani, the fourth wife, follows suit by acknowledging: "You see that's the thing about love. You love someone too much and they always have the power to hurt you in some way."²⁰⁸

Serina in "Branching Streams Flow in the Dark" never blames Michael for infecting her with HIV, leaving her to deal with the disease herself, not caring that their child dies of AIDS wondering "how could she make them understand that she loved Mike?"²⁰⁹ In the 'love' these women give as an 'excuse' there is an underlying desire for receiving the kind of love they are

²⁰⁵ Ndlovu, p. 55.

²⁰⁶ Nyathi, p. 38.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 51.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 135.

²⁰⁹ Mungoshi, p. 49.

expected to give every day to their partners. To be valued, taken care of, expecting a reciprocity based on simply asking for the same as they give.²¹⁰

Eventually, the fictional women who do assume agency, do not do it through or with the help of their male partners. They do it on their own or with the help of other women. How they manage it will be further explored in subchapter “Other Women” and in chapter four “Women on Their Own.” A great help or burden can also be family, a topic explored in the following subchapter. It is with the help of her daughter that Essie, Nyathi’s most pragmatical woman, finally understands that if she wants to stay alive, she needs to take care of herself:

“I had to take my ARVs religiously. If there’s one thing about my daughter is that she knocked some sense into me about my health. She said I could see all the faith healers I liked but I was not to lose sight of the reality that I was HIV positive. And you know what, that hard talking saved me because I was alive and Jonasi was dead. It could have been any of us being buried today but I had chosen to live. If Jonasi had also accepted it, he might have been alive today.”²¹¹

When, in her book “In the Beginning, She Was,” Luce Irigaray talks about ‘the other,’ it is about the one who provides closure of the world and sets it with limits. It is about someone irreducible to ‘me,’ but also transcendent to ‘me.’ One cannot be higher than ‘the other’ as an absolute ideal, as one cannot truly appropriate ‘the other.’ In such a world ‘the other’ can never be reached and by respecting this inaccessibility of ‘the other,’ my world gets limits, creating a space in between the two, belonging to none and both. Two separate persons who open to each other but also care for the ‘self.’²¹² Unfortunately, too often, that is not what happens between men and women as they never speak, listen or respect each other. ‘Her’ message does not get a reply, but is transmitted to other men, and is carried on from generation to generation of men.

Therefore, the constructedness of the male world separates it from ‘the other’ – ‘her,’ instead of creating the world with ‘her.’ The closure between the two can only be opened by the one who initially closed it. Instead of listening to ‘her,’ the energy of the overpowering ‘he’ becomes an explosion of violence which destroys and wishes to order and dominate instead of

²¹⁰ Storey, p. 142.

²¹¹ Nyathi, p. 164.

²¹² Luce Irigaray, *In the Beginning, She Was* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 14.

aiming for an exchange. Bodies, worlds, discourses are cut by the chase for glory born and kept alive by struggling instead of finding common ground.²¹³ If men only continue to talk to each other, in signs and a language they have established, laws and rules they have set, this energy will continue its rampage, until they will be able to hear, see, listen, and understand that to fight chaos, the harmonious in-between of ‘the one’ and ‘the other’ must be established, maintained, and cultivated.

3.2. Family

Based on how the selected novels approach family this subchapter is divided into three groups; the influence of parents, the influence of siblings, and the influence of children. The influence of parents is the most prominent. However, in the majority of cases this influence seems to be a negative one. The motif of an absent parent appears in “Waste Not Your Tears,” where Loveness’s mother leaves her when she was just a child, while in the case of Serina the absent parent is her father. Nevertheless, Serina’s father is an untouchable character for her. He cheats, finds another woman, creates a new family, a new life, abandons all his duties, and yet he is ‘blameless.’ He has Serina’s love and forgiveness, something Serina mother is never given by her daughter. This absent father figure in many ways defines Serina’s relationship with all the other men in her life. His absence is something that is normal to her, and thus, in her eyes, all men can get a ‘pass’ for a certain period of absence as long as they come back, or as long as she goes and finds them. Her father’s behavior is the norm. With such a limited point of view and narrow knowledge of the male world Serina starts, and in many ways remains, in awe of men.

Serina’s relationship with her mother is complicated precisely because they do not agree on how to deal with the ‘absent’ father who left them. Serina’s mother is unable to forgive him, and Serina, therefore, labels her as ‘vindictive.’ When Serina’s HIV-positive diagnosis is revealed, her mother’s ‘vindictiveness’ gets projected onto her daughter. As far as her mother is concerned, Serina is to blame for her state. She wants nothing to do with Serina. No greetings, no handshakes, only waiting for ‘death as release’ to absolve her from the terrible burden that is her daughter. Within this relationship, Mungoshi touches upon a rarely discussed topic of inter-family female violence. The mother-daughter conflict escalates and reaches its peak in

²¹³ Irigaray, p. 49.

physical violence. When Serina decides to leave home, her mother prevents her from taking Rita, her granddaughter, with her. When Serina is called a whore by her own mother, she hits her. It is something that goes fundamentally against her Christian upbringing but is released by the spike of uncontrolled rage.

As Serina walks out of her childhood home she realizes that it was never her real ‘home’: “This was a place of going away from, not a place of coming home to.”²¹⁴ It was never a place where she felt safe and accepted nor did she manage to make it such for herself. The motif of Serina’s mother as a ‘failed homemaker’ is repeated throughout the novel; it is why her husband left her, it is why Serina walks away, and why as soon as she can, her granddaughter Rita will walk away too. Serina never stops judging her mother for falling apart after her husband had left her. She pities and even ridicules her mother realizing that she didn’t love the person her father was, but the person, he could perhaps one day become, for falling in love with his potential, comparing it to elections:

*“Serina came to think that maybe her mother had fallen in love with her father in the same way that the electorate falls in love with a political candidate: for the promises of progress and development. And she couldn’t forgive her mother. There were women Serina knew, women who had had several husbands and one or two children with each of them but had made it. They had dared to make that bold leap to joy – to life.”*²¹⁵

Serina judges her mother for her ‘failed’ relationships with men but is unable to see that she is doing exactly the same thing, she lets men explain to her how she should live her life as if she is unable to do that on her own, repeating her mother’s mistake. Therefore, the pity is reversed when Serina gets diagnosed with HIV. Thus, the two women interchangeably mock and ridicule each other. Mungoshi pits his fictional women against each other as if they are so unreasonable that they cannot find common ground.

This sort of ‘vengeful’ woman type is also present in Joyce’s mother in “The Polygamist.” When she caught her husband, Joyce’s father, cheating with another woman, she did not take revenge against him, but against her. She poured boiling water down her back which put the woman in the hospital for six months. She suggests Joyce does the same to

²¹⁴ Mungoshi, p. 23.

²¹⁵ Ibid, p. 76.

Jonasi's other wives: "We don't fall apart Joyce [...] We get even."²¹⁶ She also forbids Joyce to get a divorce after years of supporting, polishing, and teaching what having class is to Jonasi. Similarly, Essie's mother does not understand why her daughter would settle for being only a 'second wife.' But Essie remembers how her mother was treated by her father, like a second-class citizen, despite the fact she was his first, and only, wife. Essie watched how her father had abused her mother throughout their marriage all the while she did not have the courage to stand up to him, much like Serina's mother. Serina and Essie repeat the patterns they saw at home with their mothers.

Next to the two cheating fathers in the first two novels, the fathers in the second two books are more versatile, from the absolute worst to the very best. Carmen's father in "The Writing Circle" abused and raped her from when she was twelve. Her mother knew, but did nothing to stop it. But when Isabel's sister Dolores was raped by her high school teacher her parents stood by her when she took him to court. Loveness's father is different, he cares about her, and is hurt and disappointed when she leaves for Harare with Roderick in "Waste Not Your Tears." He always helps her when she reaches out. When she gets tuberculosis and stays in the hospital for a long time, her father comes to visit her and they start rebuilding their relationship. She makes a full recovery vowing that she will now live a 'full life.' By proclaiming her liberation from the past, Loveness distances herself from an earlier 'self' who behaved differently. Many novels use such a technique of splitting the protagonist into a character, belonging to the past, who acted in an unethical way, and a present, remorseful contemporary character, one who knows better.²¹⁷ At the end of the book Loveness is still going strong and earns her father's respect so he is proud to say: "Oh yes. That's my daughter, Loveness."²¹⁸

The second group of familial relationships are siblings. This group is more connected to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In "The Writing Circle" Beauty loses her brother to AIDS, and in "Branching Streams Flow in the Dark" Serina's brother Saidi is also HIV positive. In Mungoshi's novel, there are two different approaches, two different male perspectives on the inevitable end each human being is faced with; death. Albert and Saidi are both in the last stages of full-blown AIDS. In a child-like manner Albert naively 'decides' to hide from it. Such an approach to death is juxtaposed with Saidi's, who chooses to accept death and celebrates his

²¹⁶ Nyathi, p. 28.

²¹⁷ Rosemary Jolly, *Cultured Violence: Narrative, Social Suffering, and Engendering Human Rights in Contemporary South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 64.

²¹⁸ Ndlovu, p. 86.

life before death's arrival. Saidi is actually Serina's half-brother from her father's second marriage, and the male character that most influences her. For Serina, Saidi is perfect. Only he knows the right way, for AIDS, for 'life.' Only through him, and because of him, is she able to tell 'her' story which actually turns out to be his story. Saidi is open about his HIV status with family and friends. He prepares for death with a big party for everyone he knows. He kills himself the morning after the party due to his wish to 'die with dignity' while he is still healthy, not wanting to go down the same path as Albert.

However, despite Serina idolizing him, Saidi is a problematic character. He seeks Serina out, hoping, and partially knowing, that she will eventually cook and clean for him, and even borrow him money for his farewell party. He also expects her to take care of Albert. Before his 'saint-like' behavior at the very end of his life, he infected many women. He convinces everybody that he is 'blameless' as he got infected by a 'murderess' woman named Cornelia. Yet, it is through Saidi's character that Mungoshi's authorial voice is strongest. He does not let Saidi 'off the hook' so easily and addresses him as the narrator:

*"I won't hide it from you, Saidi, son of Maseko, I won't beat about the bush, leaving the hole where the killer viper is – you killed them. You can scream as much as you like wherever you are, I say it and I say it again and again, you and your Cornelia killed all those girls who died after her. You – you –."*²¹⁹

Mungoshi's use of emotive aposiopesis emphasizes that Saidi is to blame. The dashes used, purposefully leave the sentences incomplete, their emptiness echoing the 'blame.' But, again, despite creating a female heroine and wanting to give her a voice, Mungoshi fails to do so, as it becomes clear that Serina is actually telling Saidi's story. That is why, when Saidi's story ends, the novel ends. It does not end with Serina. How her life unfolds remains unknown to the reader.

The final familial relationship discussed is with children. In one way or another all books write about the stereotypes of all women wanting to find a man to achieve fulfillment, the substitution of female individual identity for that of 'mother,' the equation of womanhood and reproduction, or motherhood as the peak woman's achievement. Every woman has several

²¹⁹ Mungoshi, p. 98.

identities, potentially being a mother, is only one of them. And yet, Hogan observes that even women who do not give birth physically are expected to be caretakers or ‘mothers’ on a metaphorical level.²²⁰ Here the traditional and feminist stances on womanhood, motherhood, sexuality, and HIV, clash. When it comes to HIV/AIDS, the needs of children have become synonymous with women’s needs.

However, this fact that women can give birth while men cannot is used to perpetuate the ideology that sacrifice, nurture and selflessness are qualities authentic and automatic to women.²²¹ When the needs of the child are always put before the needs of the mother, none benefit, as a healthy mother can take better care of a child, than if she is suffering as well. And if a woman’s HIV infection is only of interest because of its effect on the infant, the problem comes full-circle to the fact, that women are destined to be caretakers of either children or men, but never of themselves. For example, in “The Polygamist” Jonasi naturally assumes that Joyce is the one that has to take care of the children because “You’re his mother [...] It’s your responsibility.”²²² He doesn’t understand why she isn’t happy as, according to him, she has everything she needs, thus, the other women in his life should not bother her.

Orabueze points out that in African society ‘the childless woman’ is more frowned upon than ‘the unmarried mother.’ An interesting point about this is brought up in “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark.” Serina and Mike’s marriage was not born out of love but out of necessity. They were both alone in a time when they were expected to already find someone. After their first child, a daughter, is born, Mike takes a ‘time-out’ from their marriage, just like Serina’s father did, but eventually returns. Because he was sending her money for child support, he feels like he has fulfilled his ‘duty’ as a father and to Serina. Unfortunately, his return and subsequent conception of a second child means infection with HIV for Serina. The truth about the disease is only revealed when the second child dies of AIDS. This is the point where motherhood and HIV protection clash as:

“Serina only regretted – wished – that Mike should have been more careful. But how? How, if they were going to have babies, if the whole point of this transaction, this deal, was to have babies, children who would be the heirs, who would carry on the name of

²²⁰ Hogan, p. 103.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Nyathi, p. 16.

Mike and his family line? Serina saw that she couldn't blame Mike without blaming herself as well in this business."²²³

As PMTCT or prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission medication is not yet available during the time the novel is set, Serina has a point. Women were forced to choose. Either they reproduce, follow the traditional marriage to motherhood path, and risk HIV infection for themselves and their children. Or, they protect themselves and face the 'wrath' of society, families, and other women. Consequently, they are not released from the two contradictory parts of the 'self'; being potential 'mothers' to all or becoming autonomous self-realized women on their own within a society that pushes women to choose one or the other and making it seem impossible to be both at the same time as if only by choosing the first one the other can be achieved.²²⁴ This is a dilemma not only African fictional heroines are facing and a crucial dilemma discussed in the next subchapter.

3.3. Other Women

Much of the work in contemporary South African and Zimbabwean fiction has been dedicated to the changing role of women in the last fifty years. Women are now finally using their voice. Female perspectives are getting the never before experienced center-stage attention. Female authors firstly mostly focused on writing 'counter-narratives' regarding gender and HIV/AIDS. However, using only female-authored works cannot create a meaningful 'transformative' discourse for the future as our society is not made of one gender and cannot be presented as such. As President, Nelson Mandela had all the power to revenge the part of the population that has been denied rights, was discriminated against, and was not given a voice. Yet, Mandela did not choose the path of revenge. He chose to cooperate, to work together with those who discriminated against them. He chose equality.

In order to 'even the score,' counter-attack is the easiest path, but one that does not prosper in the long term. Understanding someone who is different, and analyzing the way they behave in order to find common ground, is key to a more harmonious future. The interconnectedness of women and the HIV/AIDS epidemic requires equal representation and

²²³ Mungoshi, p. 50.

²²⁴ Orabueze, p. 249.

the exploration of various voices. Women and men should both be considered. This led to the decision to include, both male and female authors in this thesis. Again, how men experience and describe female characters infected with HIV might provide answers to the question of why more women are affected by the epidemic.

Aisha Matthews observes that men gladly pit women against each other as it gives them freedom and advantage. Unfortunately, ‘fighting’ with the members of the same sex is something women readily accept and practice almost to a point that they would rather see a man succeed than a fellow woman.²²⁵ Simone De Beauvoir asks why women are accepting this secondary position. She argues that even though ‘the one’ establishes himself as such by accepting his superiority, ‘the other’ is actually the one who decides who is ‘the one.’ To put it differently, if only men thought they were superior to women that would not suffice. Only by women believing so as well, gives the notion of male sovereignty credibility and pushes women to the position of the inessential ‘second sex.’²²⁶

Women, after all, are not a minority or a ‘special case,’ but half of the world’s population.²²⁷ De Beauvoir points the finger back at women writing they do not know how to unite, they do not know how to take, but only gain what is granted to them by men, and would rather form allegiances with the men of their social class than to other women, a primordial *Mitsein* women have not broken,²²⁸ perhaps due to the fact that De Beauvoir also estimates that “a free woman is the very contrary of a light woman.”²²⁹

The male author Charles Mungoshi’s heroine Serina, rejects and condemns other women. When she goes to an HIV-positive counseling meeting she talks to women who also got infected through their male partners but finds listening to them ‘heavy’ and ‘depressing’: “She sensed the heavy stench of the grapes-are-sour rejection syndrome, and she distanced herself away from them.”²³⁰ As “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark” removes itself from a

²²⁵ Matthews, p. 646.

²²⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, ‘The Second Sex’ in *Understanding Inequality: The Intersection of Race/Ethnicity, Class, and Gender*, ed. by Arrighi, Barbara A. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 77.

²²⁷ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p. 70.

²²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 78.

²²⁹ Caroline Evans, ‘On Rereading Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* After Thirty-Five Years,’ *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 41:1-2 (2013), p. 195.

²³⁰ Mungoshi, p. 50.

mere hatred towards men it does amplify certain biases against women, like the anecdotal hearsay that when women lose, their coping mechanism is revenge.²³¹

Assigning women only traditional roles of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ is no longer enough. “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark” deals with difficult issues. When men experience them, the descriptions are blunt and detailed, but most of all they are ‘hard.’ When women experience the same things, the descriptions are ‘beautified’ and ‘simplified’ as if women can’t handle the truth. When authors make a female character that stands out suffer for it, they go with the ‘expected’ storyline which might satisfy gender-conservative readers, but in the long term harm women and how they are perceived in society.

But there is also no sisterhood between Jonasi’s women in “The Polygamist.” It is ‘women against women,’ revenge is what they are after. Firstly, and immediately, towards Jonasi. This feeling is quickly substituted by the women wanting revenge against each other. Occasionally, physical revenge is what they are after, like when Joyce attacks Matipa. But for the most part, revenge against other women is on the psychological level, predominantly through gossip. They slander each other in front of Jonasi, and once they meet, they group as need be, and attack the singled-out one; Essie and Matipa against Joyce, Joyce and Essie against Lindani, Matipa and Joyce against Lindani, and so on, blaming each other for infecting Jonasi with HIV. Even Jonasi’s ‘death as release’ from AIDS does not reconcile them. Historically, women have always oppressed other women through a vicious circle of blame continuing and condemning women to the subordinate-sex position. Katie Hogan’s estimation is that such is also the case when it comes to AIDS meaning that the more privileged HIV positive women ‘oppress’ the less privileged HIV positive women re-confirming the general female subordination which is in no small part of their own making.²³²

Nyathi uses the female characters to show a ‘type’ of femininity. Joyce is the personification of a ‘proper woman’ type. She meets Jonasi when he is still in University and when he isn’t rich yet. Her wealthy family objects to the union, but she marries him for love. When she finds out about, first Matipa, and then Essie, she is traumatized and embarrassed. She wants to leave him but realizes that without any income of her own, and with four children, she

²³¹ Naomi Nkealah, ‘Female Sexuality under the Male Gaze: Reading Style and Ideology in Bole Butake’s ‘The Rape of Michelle’’ in *Style in African Literature: Essays on Literary Stylistics and Narrative Styles*, ed. by J. K. S. Makokha, Ogone John Obiero, and Russell West-Pavlov (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2010), p. 363.

²³² Hogan, p. 29.

cannot survive. So she stays with Jonasi and watches him sleep around. She endures the lovers and keeps the charade for the world. On the outside their life is perfect. They are rich, happy, in love, with beautiful children. But in reality, Joyce is deeply unhappy, drowning her misery in alcohol. She remains a housewife looking after the children and the house. At the end, when Jonasi's illness completely takes over, she is the one that looks after him and nurses him.

Joyce is a 'prisoner' of the previously discussed 'love trap.' She lists all the excuses from financial worries, staying with Jonasi for the sake of their children, that he will tire of others and want only her again, but in the end, admits that she remains because she is still in love with him. Essie is correct when she estimates that Joyce is the loyal, unwavering partner Jonasi initially wanted as she "believed in him, believed in him with all her heart."²³³ Therefore, after the polygamous reality of her marriage is revealed, Joyce is a broken woman crying herself to sleep every night:

*"He had belittled my dreams, belittled everything I believed in. Most of all he had belittled me. He said he loved me but Jonasi did not love anyone. He was incapable of it. He only loved himself."*²³⁴

Then HIV happens. The virus that kills so many brings her back to life. The first time Jonasi is hospitalized it hits her like lightning that she might be positive as well. They never used condoms and her mother warns her that 'as long as you have a man in your life' you are at risk of getting HIV. She has been tested before, but that was before she knew the truth. Fearfully, she goes for the test and is negative. This is the moment everything changes. She vows to take better care of herself and starts acting smarter. No matter how much Jonasi rages or hits her, she does not sleep with him without a condom. She also enrolls in an accounting school, so that she will have a profession. After walking the path from a 'broken' woman to a 'smart' woman, Joyce starts over, assuming agency for herself and for her future. The previous excerpt from her lowest point is juxtaposed with the following one that can be considered the climax of her character's development arch. She goes from 'he' to 'I' with first person narration reclaiming her life from 'his' to 'hers':

²³³ Nyathi, p. 51.

²³⁴ Ibid, p. 85.

*“For a long time, I thought that my life as I knew it was over and it was. The good thing was I could start over. It did not matter how old I was. This was something I could do without Jonasi. This was something I could do for myself. For me [...] I told myself then that I was going to be happy. Even if it killed me I was going to at least die trying to be happy. Without any hope I was no better than a dead person and as long as I was alive I owed it to myself to try.”*²³⁵

Matipa is a very different kind of woman than Joyce, the ‘confident woman’ type who thinks and behaves ‘like a man.’ She is educated and can financially take care of herself. Jonasi is her boss at the bank, and she wants him because he will boost her profile and help her career. Matipa is motivated by money and power and willingly accepts his proposal knowing he already has a wife. She is made desirable to other men by being with Jonasi, and targeted by jealousy as a trendsetter from other women: “I elicit that kind of reaction in most women. They are threatened by me. Look I am no beauty queen, far from it actually, but I make the most of what I have.”²³⁶ She has twins with Jonasi, her aforementioned ‘insurance.’

The fact that Matipa is so confident is very attractive to Jonasi. But hers is not ‘fake’ confidence. When she gets a sexually transmitted disease, gonorrhea, from him, she also gets tested for HIV. The results come back negative, but she starts wearing a female condom without telling Jonasi. The day he finds that out, he beats her until she is unconscious. She vows never to let a man do that to her again. She becomes one of the ‘heartless’ women and leaves him, along with their twins. She leaves Zimbabwe and starts a new life in England. She saves herself, but for the price of her children who thereafter consider Joyce as their mother. Only after Jonasi dies, does she come back to re-connect with the twins. She addresses the reader:

“I know a lot of you think I was a bitch to leave my kids behind but it’s not like I left them with strangers; I left them with their father. Don’t judge me. I did what I thought was right at the time. Jonasi took care of his own and I was certain my girls would be well taken care of. I knew Joyce was not going to be the stepmother from hell so I slept easier at night knowing they were loved and cherished. The decision to leave them behind had

²³⁵ Nyathi, p. 98 and 100.

²³⁶ Ibid, p. 19.

not been an easy one. I carried those girls for nine months before they tore themselves out of me. I know you don't believe me but it broke my heart."²³⁷

The fact that Matipa assumes that the reader is judging her for leaving her children behind as she is their mother, and therefore obliged to take care of them, serves as further proof of how successful the patriarchal motherhood/caregiver interpellation is.

Essie is a very realistic woman who intentionally becomes the 'available woman' type. Essie is Jonasi's first childhood love, and she always counts on that. That, and the fact she is always available to him which gets her very far. He buys her a house, a car, pays the school fees for her children, and she doesn't need to work because of his money. For Essie that is enough, and her availability is a small price to pay for the luxuries she receives. She even feels sorry for the woman who has to take care of Jonasi on a daily basis: "He was physically and emotionally draining and basically everything revolved around him. It was all about him."²³⁸

Essie doesn't know if he has other 'satellite' families like hers, and she doesn't care. When he finds someone new, and things are good, he stays away. When things get bad with the new woman, he always comes back to her. Her occasional, transactional, 'happy most of the time' marriage is enough for her. However, her availability comes with a price; HIV infection. When he dies, he leaves her nothing as she is not included in the will. The benefits she got from him end with his death. The burdens, like the child he conceived through rape, and HIV, stay with her. But even though all her life she depended on him financially, she does not give him the power in deciding whether she lives or not.

In Lindani, Jonasi finally meets his match in terms of sexual drive. She is the 'hypersexualized' type of woman, young and beautiful, who uses this to her advantage as much as she can. She sleeps with men in order to get things. She always has at least three boyfriends for financial influx. And she refuses to be exclusive with Jonasi until he marries her. It is unclear if they infect each other with HIV, or if they were both positive from before. When Lindani accidentally gets pregnant, the truth of her and Jonasi's HIV status is revealed. But for Lindani,

²³⁷ Nyathi, p. 100.

²³⁸ Ibid, p. 51.

this is just another hurdle life has tossed her way. Like Jonasi, she refuses to accept the diagnosis.

*“I’d show them that I was not sick. Sick people did not look the way I did [...] I was fine. We were both fine. We were both going to be fine. The minute I got out of hospital I whipped myself into shape. I went jogging every morning, Jonasi panting behind me like the tired dog he was [...] I decided then that the minute Jonasi and I got married I would also get a bigger house. Assuming he lived that long. I looked at him now and he was such a pathetic sight. Poor Jonasi. All our grand plans had come to nought.”*²³⁹

All her life Lindani only had her beauty. She didn’t have a chance to get an education leading her to a good job. Her looks are her ‘meal-ticket.’ For all four Jonasi’s wives the threat of HIV/AIDS is the turning point, but only for Essie and Lindani who are part of the poorest class, Jonasi was a life-jacket, a point discussed in a separate subchapter dedicated to ‘class.’ Lindani continues having sexual intercourse with men, even without protection, possibly infecting quite a few, because she has to. She has to remain beautiful to survive. However, while Jonasi and Lindani’s sexual transgressions are similar, they are met with double moral standards. Jonasi’s sleeping around makes him an ‘alpha’ male, successful, envied, and desirable, while Lindani’s ‘hypersexualization’ makes her a ‘bad girl’ that is often ‘slut shamed,’ in the vast majority, by the members of her own sex.

Nonetheless, Nyathi’s’ female representation is nuanced as none of the women are only good or only bad. Joyce is not only a naïve housewife, Matipa is not only a ‘heartless’ woman for leaving her husband and kids behind, Essie is not a romance-obsessed woman, and Lindani is more than just a beautiful mistress. Nyathi assesses that in a society, where women get an allowance on their payslip for personal grooming, there is no point in passing judgment for something men have been doing to women since the beginning of mankind. Each protagonist of the story sooner or later becomes a sinner, simultaneously a ‘victor’ and a ‘victim.’

It cannot be ignored that women perpetuate the patriarchal system’s ills and help sustain their own positions of subordination.²⁴⁰ Also worthy of worry, is the mistaken belief some women have, that official institutions will protect them, especially since they are predominantly

²³⁹ Nyathi, p. 143 - 145.

²⁴⁰ Matthews, p. 654.

male-led.²⁴¹ Unofficial networks and support groups are the only hope women often have, but the before-mentioned problem of the lack of inter-sex unity prevents a wider spread of connecting frameworks.²⁴² This can be seen in “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark” and in “The Polygamist.” Instead of pitting women against women, the two narratives lack a ‘female pact’ of women helping other women succeed, which, proven by examples, is something that both, female and male-authored novels, can be ‘accused’ of.

However, in “The Writing Circle,” for Isabel, Jazz, Carmen, Beauty and Amina, female friends are put above male partners. Amina makes this clear when she leaves a man for the sake of her friends when they need her: “We were friends and I did like him and thought that he was quite a lovely man, but my commitment was to Jazz, and to the women in the writing circle.”²⁴³ The women are first and foremost committed to each other, bound by the violations they had to endure and present a united front. By forming an interdependent sisterhood they re-claim control, assume agency in the sphere where they can, and take justice in their own hands. This does not suggest that killing and trying to hide the body of Isabel’s rapist is ‘right,’ but to highlight the fact that Isabel does not remain passive and defends herself by shooting her rapist during the forced sexual intercourse. In fact, such “morally and socially deviant women” shift the ‘dynamics of power’ exposing what the ‘expected’ is by going ‘against’ it.

While there have been reservations about reader identification when it comes to ‘deviant’ female characters, writers continue to explore such figures in order to change the way readers see women, especially when it comes to the myth that women are always only victims of crime, not the perpetrators, similarly to how the women in “The Polygamist” are written. ‘Flawed’ characters are the first ones who ‘dare’ to challenge dominant powers, and are as such invaluable in creating a ‘transformative’ discourse. South African writer Jassy Mackenzie has stated that she intentionally writes morally diverse female characters in the hope of channeling some of their inner power onto her readers. Men are not the only ones who feel rage, the need for revenge, the need for power, for action to fight back against unjust systems.

Another female writer from South Africa, Angela Makholwa, believes that it is empowering to read about women who can and do stand up for themselves, transgressive

²⁴¹ Matthews, p. 654.

²⁴² Uwakweh, p. 7.

²⁴³ Maart, p. 154.

women who find alternative ways of asserting power. Therefore, because of the occasional lack of them in real life, Makholwa creates the strong women she wants to see in the world, to change how women are perceived, and to aspire to be like them.²⁴⁴

The women of “The Writing Circle” are ‘deviant’ female characters. Isabel’s rape and potential HIV infection affect them all. Nevertheless, it should not go unnoticed that strong female characters are often juxtaposed with weak male figures suggesting that violence and domination over women are a way men ‘confirm’ their manhood. ‘Fixing’ the power dynamics between the sexes means that a man’s role in society will inevitably change, and not all men, or women, welcome such change. There is a need for a reciprocal ‘moral regeneration’ between gender(s), and an understanding that letting go of certain things while accepting some new ones, can lead to a society where all have the possibility to feel acknowledged, heard, and represented, by means of “nuanced and meaningful sociopolitical interventions.”²⁴⁵

So where does this leave Loveness? She is definitely not a ‘deviant’ woman, on the contrary, she is what Ntshanga would describe as a ‘cliché’ woman. And yet, even though it seems as if she has no free will whatsoever throughout the whole novel, at the very end of “Waste Not Your Tears” she too changes, and assumes agency, but her path is quite different. When it comes to coping with the HIV-positive diagnosis, Loveness leans on a powerful force of meaning-making; religion. The interconnectedness of fiction writing, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, gender and religion will be analyzed in its own subchapter. Even though Loveness thinks that she has met her destiny when she first meets Roderick, no matter how much she loved him, he did not accept nor appreciate it. Through conversations with a nun, Sister Gabriella, she starts to see that her own choices have brought her to where she is now, and how her destructive relationship with Roderick was based more on dependence than love. There is no place for hate towards Roderick in her heart, only pity. When he dies, it is Loveness who organizes the funeral.

Ndlovu inserts zoomorphism into the narrative to tell the ‘fable of Loveness and Roderick.’ She is often described being “as passive as an animal in the bush. Waiting for life to come and get her,” all the while ‘the vulture,’ Roderick, is out to get her. The novel is even

²⁴⁴ Sabine Binder, ‘Female killers and gender politics in contemporary South African crime fiction: Conversations with crime writers Jassy Mackenzie, Angela Makholwa, and Mike Nicol,’ *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 52:2 (2017), p. 270 - 271.

²⁴⁵ Ibid p. 276.

finished with another animal comparison when Loveness tells Gabriella: “You know Sister, if you see a lion in the path you run away. Roderick was a lion out to kill me, but I didn’t realize it and I offered myself to him. It wasn’t all his fault. But now the lion is dead, and I’m still here.”²⁴⁶ Loveness gets redemption, Roderick does not. She takes the role of Roderick in the organization counseling others on how to live a full life with AIDS, earning the respect of the people around her and even goes to the AIDS International Conference in Brussels, while Roderick’s name fades into oblivion. She has a new lease on life, and lives each day as it comes, as positively and effectively as she can.

According to a study published in the ‘Journal of Behavioral Medicine,’²⁴⁷ how HIV-positive women talk about their personal past, in a positive or negative way, influences their immune functioning. It is especially beneficial if positive affect and future tense words are used. In fact, if someone manages to connect a negative or stressful past event with a positive lesson or atonement, the immune system reacts positively. Therefore, talking positively about emotional personal experiences is beneficial to physical and mental health. Discussing hurtful experiences with someone, decreases depression and helps with increasing control over rage or pain. Additionally, describing things or presenting them to others in a positive way boosts and validates the original positive emotion as well as builds resilience. It should then not come as a surprise that “Waste Not Your Tears” concludes with Loveness learning to not only speak positively, but believe in what she is saying:

*“I never knew I could do something like this [...] This is my life now. And however short or long it may be, I’m going to do what I can with it. I wasted so much of my life and I know I don’t have much time left. I’ve got to do as much as I can.”*²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Ndlovu, p. 59 and 85 - 86.

²⁴⁷ Yudelki M. Firpo-Perretti, Mardge H. Cohen, Kathleen M. Weber, and Leslie R. Brody, ‘Past, present or future? Word tense and affect in autobiographical narratives of women with HIV in relation to health indicators,’ *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 41 (2018), p. 884.

²⁴⁸ Ndlovu, p. 83-84.

3.4. Religion

People look for explanations or for the meaning behind great disasters that they are faced with. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is no different. Conspiracy theories, divine punishments, biological warfare, anti-mass-vaccination theories, witchcraft, prophecies, even possessions, or population number control have all been put forward to explain the HIV virus and other diseases. Religious explanations are appealing because they not only offer explanations and solace about HIV/AIDS but also help to contextualize ‘modernity’ issues like capitalism and poverty. The religious map of southern Africa is diverse, but what unites the different churches and entities is that they have had to find a way to cope with the epidemic as so many of their believers have been affected by it in one way or another.²⁴⁹

Epidemics have always been a part of humanity throughout history. Where the HIV/AIDS epidemic is particularly delicate is that it affects not only sexual relations, which are extremely intimate and personal but also reproductive health, which influences the future of families, generations, even nations. Prior to the prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission (PMTCT) medication, this aspect was a key instrument of apocalyptic forecasts. Now, in the PMTCT era, the central figures of the epidemic remain women. In the past, women were supposed to be ‘re-created’ and ‘liberated’ by improved hygiene and childcare services. Nowadays, a behavioral change because of the epidemic is still expected from women. The famous ABC (‘Abstinence, Be faithful, use a Condom’) formula for HIV prevention is currently getting substituted by new ‘choice-based’ approaches to how women experience, practice and think about sex.²⁵⁰

Religion features in all four selected novels. In “The Writing Circle” Amina, a Muslim, alludes to the fights between Christians and Muslims, despite all people being cut from the same cloth. In “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark,” Serina’s Christian upbringing is continuously brought up. The husband who deserted her and their children is less criticized because he is a ‘respectable practicing Christian.’

²⁴⁹ Susan E. Henking, ‘More Than a Quarter Century: HIV/AIDS and Religion,’ *Religious studies review*, 34:3 (2008), p. 133.

²⁵⁰ Geissler and Becker, p. 5 - 6.

However, religion most prominently features in “Waste Not Your Tears” where it is a catalyst for Loveness’s transformation. Loveness continues sleeping with Roderick, even after her HIV-positive diagnosis and their son Solomon’s death, under the pretense that if Roderick couldn’t have sex with her, he would have it with another woman, and thus, infect even more people. Loveness even uses religion as an excuse repeating the words from the Bible and using them as it suits her: “‘Love is good and kind, not selfish, seeking for itself,’ she would say softly to herself, as if explaining to herself why she loved Roderick.”²⁵¹ As the novel progresses and it becomes clearer how Roderick is manipulating the help received from NGO’s and support groups, it is the relationship she builds with a young nun, Sister Gabriella, that leads her to find a genuine support system in such a group.

This is a reflection of real-life happenings as nowadays religious support groups play a vital role in the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Zimbabwe and South Africa in what Marian Burchardt calls the ‘NGOization’ of church-based activities, in the form of faith-based organizations or FBO’s.²⁵² In them, religious programs are drafted similar to the secular ones with many parallels and intersections. Contrary to popular belief about the reservations of religious institutions when it comes to talking about sexuality, FBO’s promote individual choice, sexual responsibility, ethical selfhood, as well as the more traditional premarital abstinence and fidelity.²⁵³

Under the term ‘medical sociality’, support group members such as Loveness, reconstruct themselves socially and morally, learn how to deal with the stigma that surrounds the disease, and get practical advice on how to organize their lives in the new circumstances. Because of the number of people they welcome, FBO’s are now a vital instrument in dealing with the social, material, and cultural aspects of the epidemic.²⁵⁴

In “The Polygamist”, after finding out about the cheating and the other wives, Joyce also turns to the Bible, but finds no solace in it:

²⁵¹ Ndlovu, p. 73.

²⁵² Daniel Jordan Smith, ‘Faith in the Time of AIDS: religion, biopolitics and modernity in South Africa by Marian Burchardt (Review),’ *Cambridge University Press: Africa*, 87:1 (2017), p. 223.

²⁵³ These estimations are based on Marian Burchardt’s fieldwork with FBO’s based in the biggest township outside of Cape Town, Khayelitsha.

²⁵⁴ Smith, *Faith*, p. 224.

*“There were no manuals for this kind of thing. I had combed the Bible looking for verses to deal with this and I could not find any. The Old Testament was rife with polygamous marriages: Leah, Rachel, Bathsheba ... I could go on but none of the verses delved into their emotions. There was no discussion on how to cope in such instances. And here I was, caught up in the middle of it.”*²⁵⁵

Joyce brings up an important issue in this paragraph. Despite polygamy being around for centuries, the impact on women, their feelings and thoughts, were never considered. Joyce also reminds Jonasi that “You are supposed to love me and me alone. You swore before God to forsake all others,” alluding to their wedding vows and the double standard in applying them.²⁵⁶ She is bound by them, he is not. She practices them, he does not. When his full blown AIDS develops and all other women and wives desert him, she takes him in and takes care of him until his death, acknowledging that he will forever be the father of her children, thus, she could not forgive herself if she just let him ‘waste away.’

Religious institutions, in particular, encouraged the archetypal good woman outlook with the previously discussed societal, familial, sacrificial, self-denying and sentimental discourses. None of the books criticize any of the churches and the role they play(ed) in women’s subordination. It seems, that this is still a too taboo topic to discuss openly, especially if one wants to get published. The southern African interpretative community, where religious leaders still have an important societal role, might reject a book criticizing a church – any church.

²⁵⁵ Nyathi, p. 84.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, p.150.

3.5. Class

While HIV infects the rich and the poor, the discrepancies when it comes to knowledge about, and access to, emancipation, medication and nutrition to name only a few, are enormous. The selected books show that the poorest women, like Loveness, Essie, Lindani and Serina, are treated the worst. It is no coincidence that they are the ones who get infected with HIV, while high-class born and University educated Joyce and Matipa do not. It is almost as if the poor women are ‘punished’ for wanting a better life, actually, double punished, for wanting to achieve it through men.

“The Writing Circle” highlights the interconnected topics of sexual violence and consequent heightened HIV infection rates. When it comes to class, poverty is often mentioned as a driving force of rape. However, the man who rapes Isabel is not a poor man, but someone who has ‘everything.’ He is the son of Beauty’s godmother Mary, a respected professor, who sends him to private schools and lives in the wealthiest part of town proving, again, that the decisive category to comprehend rape is gender.

Quantitative studies have shown poverty alone does not correspond to high levels of HIV prevalence.²⁵⁷ There is, however, one universally acknowledged truth, that the ones who have money are better taken care of. In this particular instance southern Africa is no different from any other part of the world. While money cannot protect a person from infection, after infection, money is vital. Maart touches upon this issue in her pre-ARV’s set novel by brushing on the topic of colonization while addressing the HIV positive British in South Africa who at the time could access ARV’s with the support of the British government, while South Africans, for various reasons, could not. Additionally, the Englishman Albert, exhibits ‘Western snobbery’ when talking about his positive HIV diagnosis estimating:

*“AIDS is treated with silence. It is a painful, silent death, and one I cannot undertake on my own. Perhaps for the lower classes it is a different matter, I don’t know, I suspect so, given their close proximity to one another ... well physically, in how they live.”*²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Chris Kenyon and Sizwe Zondo, ‘Why do some South African ethnic groups have very high HIV rates and others not?’, *African Journal of AIDS Research*, 10:1 (2011), p. 52.

²⁵⁸ Maart, p. 133.

The marked ellipsis Maart uses in his speech does not help Albert's case but intentionally amplifies the disconnectedness between classes. Even though the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic happened when both South Africa and Zimbabwe were already independent, it cannot be ignored that the consequences of colonialism, including the (health) systems colonization left behind, favored people of certain class and race. This is not to say that the exponential spread of HIV/AIDS and the embedded gender inequality is exclusively the fault of colonization and its extension capitalism, which of course it is not, but only to acknowledge that colonization is a contributing factor. The fictional women in selected novels engage in relationships to better their social standing. But they also do not want to contract HIV just so they can do it. The usually killer virus, brings them to life, so they better their social standing on their own by getting an education or finding a job.

3.6. Race

The majority of female characters included in the selected works of fiction in this thesis are black. The protagonists of "Waste Not Your Tears," "The Polygamist" and "Branching Streams Flow in the Dark" are black. However, the heroines of "The Writing Circle" personify South Africa's 'rainbow-ism.' Isabel and Beauty are black, Jazz is a Sikh Indian, Carmen is white and Amina is a Muslim. Again, Beauty is the one most sensitive to the connections race and HIV have with colonialism. She calls out British Tom with gustatory symbolism:

*"We are part of your ethnic spice, your little bit on the side from the main course of roasted White privilege pickled with British Empire. It's why White people like you come to Cape Town — to lie in the sun like roast pork. We are the peppercorns who flavour your palate. Your only interest in us is how well we serve your purpose."*²⁵⁹

In South Africa in particular, in order to further reconciliation²⁶⁰ and encourage 'rainbow-ism,' race has been put above gender. A study conducted in 2019 showed that amongst the HIV infected population in South Africa 24.1% were black women, 0.5% were

²⁵⁹ Maart, p. 56

²⁶⁰ James L. Gibson and Christopher Claassen, 'Racial Reconciliation in South Africa: Interracial Contact and Changes over Time,' *Journal of Social Issues*, 66:2 (2010), p. 256.

white women, 4.7% coloured women and 1% Indian women. Amongst men, 16.6% were black, 0.2% were white, 3.4% coloured, and 0.8% Indian.²⁶¹

In both South Africa and Zimbabwe, the black population is the majority. It has been proven that the black race does not have an increased susceptibility to HIV.²⁶² This leaves the question open to what is then the answer to the high HIV prevalence rate among the black race? Kenyon and Zondo prove that the answer are concurrent sexual relationships, the practice of polygamy among men in particular. While interestingly, the number of sexual partners in a lifetime is highest within the white population, these relationships are usually of a monogamous nature.

Monogamy has been introduced to southern Africa with colonization along with Christianity. However, by becoming Christian, married black men have not stopped having concurrent sexual relations. What has changed is that they were now more inclined to keeping such relationships secret, knowing that the Christian religion does not look favorably upon them. This secrecy has made it harder to link sexual practices and networks amongst the black African population and curb the exponential spread of HIV amongst it.²⁶³ While the ethics of concurrency in sexual relations is debatable, the epidemiological evidence is not.

The fictional women are right to be afraid of HIV infection. In fact, Roderick in “Waste Not Your Tears,” Jonasi in “The Polygamist,” Mike, Saidi, Albert, and even Serina’s father in “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark,” as well as Albert and the ‘rapist(s)’ in “The Writing Circle” practice concurrency in their consensual or non-consensual sexual relationships. That is why the topic of HIV/AIDS continues to be a threat. The lack of any impactful institutional campaigns to fight this phenomena, leaves the ‘burden’ of talking about this issue to the realm of the fictional.

²⁶¹ M. Mabaso et al., ‘HIV prevalence in South Africa through gender and racial lenses: results from the 2012 population-based national household survey,’ *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 18:167 (2019), p. 4.

²⁶² Kenyon and Zondo, p. 52.

²⁶³ Ibid, p. 51.

3.7. Sexuality

Colonization, capitalism, loss of land and livelihood, malnutrition, new infectious diseases, and the restrictions on sexuality and fertility have drastically altered life on the southern part of the African continent. Additionally, the appearance of HIV/AIDS has turned the bodily union, an act of gendered complementation, “into a source of death rather than renewal.”²⁶⁴ Geissler and Becker estimate that sexual ‘risky’ behavior happens because of gender inequality, familial or societal expectations.²⁶⁵ Many women prioritize the desire to have children. Drawing from Foucault, Judith Inggs brings attention to the fact that silence about sexuality in southern Africa represents “a discourse of sexuality which stigmatizes open discussion and silences voices which may otherwise transgress society’s boundaries.”²⁶⁶

As seen in the previous subchapters, the male ‘predatory sexuality’ discourse around HIV/AIDS is not only a form of men exploiting women, but also a way of transmitting the main ‘predator’ - the HIV virus. Therefore, HIV/AIDS functions as predatory on the medical and social sphere, in private and public domains.²⁶⁷ The sentimental and self-sacrificing discourses of women within the HIV/AIDS meta-discourse, like the ones personified in Loveness in “Waste Not Your Tears” and Serina in “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark,” prescribe to women the roles of moral guardians and caretakers.²⁶⁸

However, the representations of women in “The Polygamist” can make women’s experiences as HIV-positive individuals seem secondary and incidental. Having a potent sexual desire, like Lindani, and to an extent Matipa, is only possible for them because they dare to stand out. They are not afraid of going against male supremacy and gender hegemony despite knowing that the price they will pay for it is social ostracism.²⁶⁹ Matipa is a particularly ‘modern’ woman since she does not need Jonasi to be financially secure, but only for him to better her social standing, and because she ‘scandalously’ ‘chooses’ herself over her children.

²⁶⁴ Geissler and Becker, p. 10.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 5-6.

²⁶⁶ Judith Inggs, ‘Transgressing Boundaries? Romance, Power and Sexuality in Contemporary South African English Young Adult Fiction,’ *International Research in Children's Literature*, 2:1 (2009), p. 102.

²⁶⁷ Lara Buxbaum, ‘Risking intimacy in contemporary South African fiction,’ *Textual Practice*, 31:3 (2017), p. 526.

²⁶⁸ Hogan, p. 30.

²⁶⁹ Jennifer M. Kilty and Katarina Bogosavljevic, ‘Emotional storytelling: Sensational media and the creation of the HIV sexual predator,’ *Crime Media Culture*, 15:2 (2019), p. 288.

In black, high-class, urban Zimbabwe described in “The Polygamist” sex is no longer associated only with having children for the sake of the ‘traditional’ continuing of the family line and name. Sex is now also an expression of love and lust.²⁷⁰ The female characters are not only static, culturally representative figures, but have various desires and divided loyalties exhibiting ‘calculated’ sexuality. They change and grow. The women of “The Polygamist” have a well-calculated agenda. And in some sense, they all use Jonasi, who gets ‘played’ by his own trick. When he is sick, Matipa and Lindani are nowhere to be seen. He has served them for their purpose. They do, however, show up at the funeral. Matipa to ‘collect’ her children back, and Lindani, to find a new partner. Joyce describes her ‘performance’ at the funeral with the following words:

*“Lindani was not to be outdone and took centre stage by giving everyone a complete tribute of how Jonasi had changed her life and how much they had loved each other. Lindani had to be dragged down in a fit of tears. I almost applauded her for that little performance. She had managed to look like the grieving widow and give all the men in the room an unrestrained view of her golden legs in that mini dress.”*²⁷¹

Fear, anger, and disgust are emotions mobilized to construct the previously discussed predatory sexuality discourse. Consequently, ‘fluid’ sexuality, and sexual liberation, as well as openly expressing sexual desire, remain an unreachable goal for women. It is deemed as an undesirable trait, by men, and as shown by Joyce, partly by women. Such performances as Lindani’s, dubbed ‘pariah’ femininity, are seen as ‘contaminating’ to the individual, and the general society, and are thus unwanted. Corresponding cultural assumptions prevent women from attaining sexual freedom that is granted to men automatically, without being degradingly labelled as ‘loose.’²⁷²

Three decades into the epidemic discussing sex and sexuality in a fluid way is still a taboo. Strict standards and policing of women’s sexual conduct, rights to sexual pleasure, and discussions about sexual health, have proven to be ineffective.²⁷³ Inclusive conversations, and

²⁷⁰ Olney, James, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 201.

²⁷¹ Nyathi, p. 160.

²⁷² Kilty and Bogosavljevic, p. 283.

²⁷³ Ayana K. Weekley, ‘Saving Me through Erasure? Black Women, HIV/AIDS, and Respectability’ in *Black Female Sexualities*, ed. by Trimiko Melancon and Joanne M. Braxton (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), p. 188-189.

frameworks that consider women's desires, instead of restrictive strategies for only the female sex, can help overcome simplistic discourses that are no longer applicable to the fluid relationships people in Zimbabwe and South Africa now engage in. Similarly, contemporary (Western) media reports, visual portrayals, and even written works of fiction, still continue to present black skin color as a marker of promiscuity and disease, despite the fact that a more careful and nuanced approach is urgently needed. 'Racialized' sexuality shows the effect race has on the concepts of sexuality and gender.²⁷⁴ While representations of black 'pariah' femininity are commonly created to spark negative emotional responses,²⁷⁵ the appearance, and persistence, of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has brought to life, for some, the unsettled uneasiness connected to black female sexuality and the linked connotations about gender and scapegoats.²⁷⁶

In "The Polygamist," Sue Nyathi uses a mixed-method approach in representing the multiplicity of human relations. In addition to discussing gendered relations, she touches upon issues of class, showing that HIV affects both the rich and the poor, and on issues of race, contemplating the fact that AIDS is still deemed the 'disease of black people.' The novel highlights that for women, assuming agency is not always possible, or desirable, as they might not profit from attaining it. In its polyphony of included voices, "The Polygamist" is successful in highlighting a 'transformative' discourse to comprehend the complexity of polygamous unions, especially for women. The novel is also empowering in its understanding of the intricacy of the interconnected HIV/AIDS and gender issues, without being judgmental towards women.

Rozena Maart's "The Writing Circle" largely focuses on sexual violence towards women and its connection to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. There are two topics that commonly get associated with gender when it comes to rape; race and class. This often only furthers the already existing divisions and stigmatizations, and sometimes even prevents attention being put on the actual violence against women. Despite being rape victims, the high-class women of "The Writing Circle" are 'lucky' because none of their rapes result in HIV infection. In fact, the only people who do get infected with HIV in the novel are men, perhaps an act of 'retribution' on Maart's part.

²⁷⁴ Hogan, p. 130.

²⁷⁵ Kilty and Bogosavljevic, p. 293-294.

²⁷⁶ Hogan, p. 108.

Maart's book is one of the two books in this thesis that includes members of the LGBTQ+ community. Beauty's brother, who is a homosexual, gets infected and dies of AIDS. He was involved with Tom, a bisexual, that is now in a relationship with Isabel. When Beauty's brother and Tom were together they were both already HIV infected. The difference between them is that Tom is English, white, and rich, and consequently has access to antiretroviral medication, while Beauty's brother is poor and black, and cannot access ARV's. Carmen's ex-husband Albert also has full-blown AIDS. He is a bisexual but claims that his HIV infection is not a result of his sexual orientation, but of overindulgence and lack of protection. Despite not speaking with Carmen for years after their divorce he has returned to 'make peace' with her in the hopes that she will take care of him during his last days.

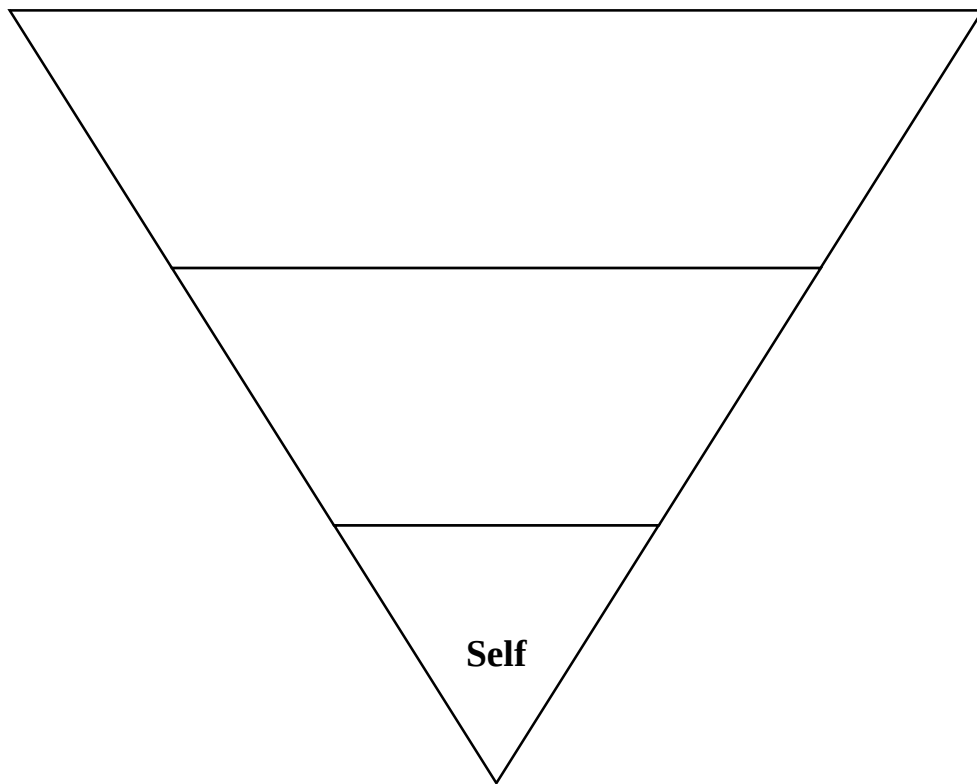
Maart takes a strong stance against any sexual orientation discrimination, which is clearly observed in Beauty's conversation with Albert. She makes it clear to him that being gay is not a sin, and that illness or death as punishments a person has to 'suffer' due to their sexual orientation are things that she is fundamentally against:

*"I do not consider being gay a sin, which you clearly do. My brother was gay, but I do not consider his life, the choices he made, or how he conducted his love life as sinful." My voice was raised and my temples were flaming. I was not going to allow him to take that tone of earned self-flagellation."*²⁷⁷

However, it should be noted that while Maart's decision not to 'give' HIV to any of her female characters, but to most of her male characters is problematic, in particular, because all the infected men are either homo- or bisexual, which unnecessarily perpetuates hurtful HIV/AIDS myths. Nonetheless, in "The Writing Circle," homosexual and bisexual characters are not beaten or murdered like in the upcoming novel "The Hairdresser of Harare" in chapter four. At the same time, even the bisexual men like Albert, still expect women, in his case Carmen, to be their caretakers. Maart's portrayal of women (and men) therefore teaches us that in trying to 'humanize' the HIV/AIDS epidemic, 'sympathetic' representations of 'good' women are at all women's expense.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Maart, p. 133.

²⁷⁸ Hogan, p. 32.



4. Women On Their Own

So far this meditation on the state of the art regarding gender in South Africa and Zimbabwe based on fictional female representation and examined on the case of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has shown that a book mirrors a book, that certain topics appear over and over again despite being written by writers with different backgrounds, in different styles, and for different audiences, but who have, nonetheless, noticed the same things. Certain topics like HIV testing, condom use, ARV's, rape, virginity, poverty, race, and class, keep re-appearing. The outlook of this thesis is an inward pyramid, with society and the top, women's relationships in the middle and the self-relationship at the bottom tip as no matter how intertwined with the political and societal expectations the fictional women are, their transformation either starts or ends with themselves.

The fictional women are thrown into the deep end in early childhood already. That is why the following subchapters are divided between female characters in their girlhood, where there is still an innocence of youth present, and adulthood. The chapter is concluded by taking a look at how the novels, despite grim circumstances, create a 'transformative discourse' leading to a collection or 'corpus of hope' for their female characters so they can make it on their own while navigating their relationships and managing societal expectations.

Judith Butler, drawing from Jean-Paul Sartre, talks about human beings' 'desire to be.' While discussing Sartre's "Being and Nothingness," Butler differentiates between sexual desire and 'existential' desire of what might be. Differing from Husserl, Hegel and Freud, Sartre saw the latter desire as a 'manifestation of choice' which cannot be reduced to the mere psychic as it is not simply given, but it is created and recreated indicating "a free agency prior to its own emergence," which Butler echoes writing that "to reflect upon desire is to acknowledge choices one has already made."²⁷⁹ Desire is not satisfied with the world as it is, but craves for how it could be, an "embodied self as that which it has implicitly always been, but never known itself to be."²⁸⁰ A perpetual reinvention, changed by lived experience, discourse and 'the other.'

²⁷⁹ Butler, Judith, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2012), p. 130.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 155.

Futhi Ntshingila's novel "We Kiss Them With Rain" (2018) is a story about how one male positive HIV diagnosis permanently alters four female lives of Zola, Mvelo, Nonceba and Sabekile. In twenty-two chapters, a third-person omniscient narrator describes a microcosm of what is right and what is wrong about HIV prevention, treatment, and care in South Africa. For the purposes of writing this thesis, an interview was conducted with Futhi Ntshingila which roughly mapped out the thesis layout.²⁸¹ When asked about what was the main aim of "We Kiss Them With Rain" Futhi answers that it was to narrate the story of women on the margins of society and the challenges they face on a daily basis with HIV/AIDS being just one of the many challenges they face.

Ntshingila's main objective was not to intentionally write 'HIV/AIDS fiction' but to highlight the lives of women, to showcase their human dignity and interactions, aspirations and dreams for a better life, and how despite class divisions, they are women who navigate life within the trenches of it all; AIDS, abuse, patriarchy and so on. By her own admission, Ntshingila mostly follows the construction of the characters with the purpose to deliberately delivering a 'message' through the voices of the characters and the context within which they find themselves. Her main focus is on telling a good story that can be read by all genders to show how the politics of marginalizing women can be crippling and disheartening.

Ntshingila says she didn't have a specific or 'intended' audience in mind when she was writing the novel but was mostly preoccupied with the telling of the story. For her, the story of the mother-daughter duo personified in Zola and Mvelo, is merely a part of the South African tapestry of stories, so Ntshingila was pleasantly surprised to see the book being so well received in parts of the globe she certainly did not have in mind. In her opinion, this goes to show that in its essence "We Kiss Them With Rain" is a human story that can connect with anyone, male or female, if they open themselves up to it.²⁸² The association of women with fertility and abundance becomes altered in the times of HIV/AIDS 'poisoning' breast milk, 'cutting down'

²⁸¹ These answers by Futhi Ntshingila are a part of an interview I conducted with her in July 2021 via email specifically for the purpose of writing this thesis (the final answers were received on the 19th of July 2021). The full transcript of the interview can be found in Appendix D of this thesis and will be hereafter referred to as 'Appendix D: Interview with Futhi Ntshingila' in the footnotes meaning that what is referenced can be found in that section of the thesis.

²⁸² Ibid.

mothers in their youth and changing family dynamics by giving nurturing roles to (female) siblings, grandparents or other relatives.²⁸³

As shown in the ‘Introduction,’ South Africa and Zimbabwe are countries where women are disproportionately affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The rising number of female infections and deaths have undermined the patriarchal dominance of men and stimulated women to assume agency. Learning from the long past of disempowering practices of men, works of fiction become an intervention, paving the path for women and offering encouragement. The women of “We Kiss Them With Rain” have found unexpected allies on the way; themselves.

“The Hairdresser of Harare” (2010) follows Vimbai, a female protagonist and first-person narrator, who works as a hairdresser. Her life with her daughter Chiwoniso, is turned upside down, when a new hairdresser, Dumi, starts working in the same salon and becomes an overnight success. However, when Dumi needs a place to live, and Vimbai offers him a room in her house, they start a semi-romantic relationship. HIV/AIDS features prominently in the story as a shadow connected with Dumi’s cheating, and through encouraging women to use the power they have to protect themselves. The underlying topic of homosexuality connects all the characters that hide ‘the secret.’ “The Hairdresser of Harare” is Tendai Huchu’s first novel and was published by ‘Weaver Press’ in 2010. He claims not to have had a specific target audience in mind when writing this book, but has noticed that outside of Africa he must often remind his readers that “The Hairdresser of Harare” is a ‘single story,’ and a fictional one, which represents only a fraction of the ‘actual’ reality of life in Zimbabwe today.²⁸⁴

Mary Helen Specht, in her review of the novel for ‘The New York Times,’ also warns readers about the ‘single story’ stereotype dangers. She is critical of the story’s lack of in-depth sociopolitical critique, but applauds the “vividness of its setting and characters.”²⁸⁵ However, Asante Lucy Mtenje argues that Huchu does get ‘political’ through side-characters Minister M and her husband Mr. M who closely resemble actual commanders-turned-politicians of the

²⁸³ Lizzy Attree, ‘Women Writing AIDS in South Africa and Zimbabwe’ in *Rites of Passage in Postcolonial Women’s Writing*, ed. by Gina Wisker and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (Brill: Amsterdam, 2010), p. 85.

²⁸⁴ ‘Interview: Huchu Tendai by Franz Kramer,’ *Weaver Press*, accessed on 12.04.2024, <<https://www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com/authors/interviews/636-tendai-huchu-by-franzy-kramer>>.

²⁸⁵ ‘Review of The Hairdresser of Harare by Tendai Huchu - Mary Helen Specht,’ *Weaver Press*, accessed on 12.04.2024, <<https://www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com/reviews/71-the-hairdresser-of-harare/932-review-of-the-hairdresser-of-harare-by-tendai-huchu-mary-helen-specht>>.

Zimbabwe National Liberation Army (ZANLA).²⁸⁶ Mr. M's affair with Dumi puts Minister M in a precarious position caught between what she is 'expected' to do as a politician, and what as a wife. Mtenje highlights that the gendered nationalism of the Zimbabwean nation-state is something associated with the masculine that is 'endangered' by the 'feminine' represented in sexual diversity. Elizabeth Glanville of 'The South African' writes that the reader can sympathize with the 'hopes' and 'despairs' of the characters, particularly of Vimbai and Dumi, but also of the Zimbabwean nation as a whole.²⁸⁷ Despite being one of the first Zimbabwean authors who made a homosexual person a central character in his novel, Huchu claims he has not encountered any local negative backlash against his book.²⁸⁸

Shimmer Chinodya's "Tale of Tamari" (2004) follows fourteen-year-old Tamari who is orphaned after both her parents succumb to AIDS a few months apart, and she all-of-a-sudden becomes the head of the family. She also has a thirteen-year-old brother Kuda. They are forced to take three tenants into their family house in order to be able to pay the bills. With "Tale of Tamari" Chinodya targets a teenage audience whilst addressing some of the most pressing issues of the young population. He examines how the girl's family, and the community in which she lives, cope with the aftermath of the AIDS-related deaths. Despite not taking a moralistic stance, Chinodya highlights the sexism, bullying, sexual violence, and financial corruption, Tamari has to face at such an early age because of HIV/AIDS. Her uncle Banda, who is supposed to be the one helping her, takes advantage of her youth and tries to sell her house, eventually ending up in prison. The arrival of her other aunt Loveness, who has been abroad for a long time, finally betters Tamari's life as she gets at least one adult figure to lean on. Her school also helps her in the end, and Tamari and Kuda even become involved in an AIDS prevention film.

As "Tale of Tamari" is told from Tamari's perspective with her as the narrator it starts with an 'innocence of youth' outlook and offers an uncorrupted, almost pre-interpellation view of the world. However, as the plot progresses, Tamari learns the hard way that adult life is

²⁸⁶ Asante Lucy Mtenje, "'Something Radical': Problematizing the masculine state in Tendai Huchu's 'The Hairdresser of Harare,'" *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 13:2 (2019), p. 173.

²⁸⁷ 'New Review: Hairdresser of Harare,' *Weaver Press*, accessed on 12.04.2024, <<https://www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com/reviews/71-the-hairdresser-of-harare/522-new-review-hairdresser-of-harare>>.

²⁸⁸ 'Interview: Huchu, Tendai by Fungai Rufaro Machirori,' *Weaver Press*, accessed on 12.04.2024, <<https://www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com/authors/interviews/859-interview-huchu-tendai-by-fungai-rufaro-machirori>>.

complicated. In the beginning, she believes that people will help her if she helps them, that only the HIV infected people who are ‘sick’ are affected by the disease, only to later realize that she and many others are also affected despite being HIV negative. Her aunt teaches her to not wait for ‘prince charming’ to save her, she must save herself first as a woman does not need to be rescued by a man. Even though the plot is not complex, intentionally due to its intended audience, Chinodya also questions the conscience of adults and their responsibilities to the youth. There are thousands of children who are orphans due to the epidemic, and without the support of their communities, families, and friends they are often left to beg on the streets and starve with the weight of adulthood put on them in their childhood.

Due to the immense spread of HIV/AIDS in southern Africa, the educational sector has taken note of the novel as an appropriate way of approaching the ‘delicate’ issues it addresses. Therefore, “Tale of Tamari” is nowadays prescribed as obligatory reading in the primary or secondary school curriculum in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Eswatini, Namibia, and Malawi. It is featured in the subjects about learning the English language and in the ‘African Literature in English’ subsection. In all of the above-mentioned countries, English is an official language, but it is only one of many official languages. Chinodya expressed his gratitude and relief that the book is being read by school pupils given the importance of the educating message it carries about HIV prevention and AIDS consequences to a readership in the period of their sexual awakening. It also means that each year, through the novel, thousands of children read about HIV/AIDS and its consequences, as well as read about Tamari, a girl, and a hero, a ‘girl-hero’ who inspires.

Chinodya also wrote the script for the film “Everyone’s Child.” The film, first released in 1996, was the first Zimbabwean film to be directed by a black woman, novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga. The film’s plot revolves around a character named Tamari and is a version of the story the novel tells furthering the reach of Tamari’s story.²⁸⁹ Encouraged by this fact, Judith Ingg suggests that “it is possible to write responsibly and encourage young people to respect themselves and their partners without sending out a message that sexuality always has painful consequences, or that it can never be pleasurable and fulfilling.”²⁹⁰ It is important that the

²⁸⁹ ‘Zimbabwe Film - Everyone's Child (1995)’, *YouTube*, accessed on 15.04.2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPvXeaNKn_E>.

²⁹⁰ Ingg, p. 112.

teenage sexuality aspect gets the attention needed. Only in discussing it can a degree of transformation and progress be achieved, impactfully benefitting adolescent, and other readers.

“The Uncertainty of Hope” (2006) is a novel written by Valerie Tagwira, a Zimbabwean medical doctor now living in London, which was released in Harare for a primarily Zimbabwean audience. Due to the fact that it is written in English and made available online, its reach has been more global than originally anticipated. The story is set in Mbare, a settlement on the outskirts of Harare, in the mid-2000s and follows two best friends, Onai and Katy, their daughters and families. Onai’s husband Gari is physically abusive towards her, which causes problems between the friends. Katy doesn’t understand why Onai doesn’t leave Gari, but Onai keeps on making excuses for him, how he will change, even though she has been hospitalized several times because of his beatings. Onai remains undeterred stating that for the sake of her children she is willing to lose everything, including her self-respect, as seen in the following statement she makes to Katy:

*“If what I’m doing for my children shows that I have no self-respect; then, yes, I’ve lost it – or maybe I did so when I decided to become a mother.”*²⁹¹

As seen in previous chapters, for fictional women, self-respect and self-protection are rarely a given discourse. They need to face hardships, be belittled, beaten and faced with losing everything, including their life by getting infected with HIV, in order to ‘gain’ access to self-love. In conversation with Ambrose Musiyiwa,²⁹² in which Tagwira labels herself a ‘mild feminist,’ she highlights how much respect she has for the suffering people of the Zimbabwean nation and that her book is an homage to all of them who struggle from day to day and somehow still manage to find the positives.

Tagwira also touches upon the review of her novel published in ‘The Standard’ which described her book as ‘political’ especially the parts describing ‘operation Murambatsvina’²⁹³ and how this caused fear in her family that she will be prosecuted because of it, showing that the fictional women are not the only ones who need to fear for their lives when they speak up.

²⁹¹ Tagwira, Valerie, *The Uncertainty of Hope* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2006), p. 6.

²⁹² ‘Interview: Tagwira Valerie by Ambrose Musiyiwa,’ *Weaver Press Zimbabwe*, accessed on 12.04.2024, <<https://weaverpresszimbabwe.com/authors/interviews/227-interview-valerie-tagwira-by-ambrose-musiyiwa>>.

²⁹³ A 2005 Mugabe-government-led operation ‘cleaning out’ and destroying settlements deemed ‘illegal’ by the government.

Tagwira, claims not to have been afraid, but admits she was hurt that the main thing the media have ‘picked’ from “The Uncertainty of Hope” is its political aspect(s). She believes the novel is about much more than a single operation, and that the stories, as well as opinions, of her characters, encourage the reader to think about situations, but ultimately, leave the decision of what is right and what is wrong to the reader. In a different interview, Tagwira again expresses her dismay about the media only taking notice of her book because of ‘Murambatsvina.’ She tells Shungu Sabeta that the book is written for Zimbabweans and describes various everyday struggles, in particular women’s issues and domestic violence, which have been ignored behind the smokescreen of ‘the political.’²⁹⁴

When asked if she thinks fiction writing is an effective way to get the experience of HIV/AIDS across, Valerie Tagwira replies that she always had the promotion of HIV awareness in her mind while writing the novel.²⁹⁵ In the medical school she attended, reading fiction was promoted as a means of health education. Nancy Armstrong argues that the reader doesn’t have to experience exactly the same pain as a character, but can nonetheless, by imaginative approximation, be compassionate and create a bond with the character.²⁹⁶ Notwithstanding, Tagwira worries about the small numbers of books being published in Zimbabwe, and the fact that even when they are published, very few people buy them. She believes that the recent international recognition Zimbabwean writers are receiving, like for example Tsitsi Dangarembga being shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2020, might help in this regard.

Despite the difficult topics “The Uncertainty of Hope” addresses, it has been added as a reading to the Advanced-Level English Literature curriculum in Zimbabwe. With this, just like with “Tale of Tamari,” generations of young women, and men, from the poorest townships to the middle and upper classes, read about Onai’s suffering, and Katy, Faith, and Emily’s alternative empowering narratives. Similar to “The Writing Circle” in South Africa, it took a while for “The Uncertainty of Hope” to reach its ‘intended’ audience, but the ‘actual’ audience which reads the book today can be warned, educated, empowered or even ‘triggered into action’ by the novel.

²⁹⁴ ‘Interview: Tagwira Valerie by Shungu Sabeta,’ *Weaver Press Zimbabwe*, accessed on 12.04.2024, <<https://weaverpresszimbabwe.com/authors/interviews/202-interview-valerie-tagwira-by-shungu-sabeta>>.

²⁹⁵ Attree, *Blood on the Page*, p. 154.

²⁹⁶ Nancy Armstrong, ‘The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction,’ *Contemporary Literature*, 55:3, p. 445.

4.1. Girlhood

Girlhood, a special in-between time in a woman's life is positioned between childhood and womanhood. The reason girlhood is so important is that it is a time in which identity, agency, and citizenship of a woman are formed. There is no universal age when a child becomes a girl, but most often, a girl becomes a woman when she gets her first period, even though marriage or motherhood are as well considered as the defining milestones because "patriarchy as a cultural institution has held the prerogative of delimiting the beginning and end of girlhood depending on the exigencies of hegemonic power."²⁹⁷

When 14-year old Mvelo in "We Kiss Them With Rain" finds out about her mother's HIV positive status she naively wants to cure her. In her child-like thinking, she even imagines the doctor replacing Zola's 'contaminated' blood and taking her own 'clean' blood. Mvelo is, together with her mother Zola, disempowered through their lack of money or any sort of financial stability, and through Zola's disease. Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi argues that in addition to patriarchy and poverty, the already very thin line that separates girlhood from womanhood has been blurred because of the consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The reasoning behind this is double-fold. Firstly, HIV infections are by far the highest in the women-of-reproductive age group. And secondly, due to the enormous death toll of AIDS, many children are orphaned and child-headed families are on the rise.

In the girlhood/boyhood periods, girls usually mature faster than boys and are thus expected to take on adult responsibilities. The developmental sequence 'finishing school, finding employment, marrying, and having children' is interrupted by, among other things, teenage pregnancies, but also by teenagers assuming adulthood by taking on the roles of their parents due to their premature deaths. The latter is what happens to Tamari whose "girlhood has been erased by a combination of AIDS and irresponsible patriarchy"²⁹⁸ personified by uncle Banda who tries to take her financial independence, and by Mkoma Mandla who tries to rape her, but she manages to lock herself in the toilet and scream for help.

²⁹⁷ Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi, 'Erasure of Girlhoods, Inscriptions of Womanhood: A Study of Erased Girlhoods in Selected Zimbabwean Fiction,' *Nawa: Journal of Language & Communication (NJLC)*, 4:2/5:1 (2010/2011), p. 243.

²⁹⁸ Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi and Juliet Sylvia Pasi, 'Mediating HIV/AIDS Strategies in Children's Literature in Zimbabwe,' *Children's Literature in Education*, 38 (2007), p. 246.

The incredibly high and ever-increasing levels of new infections amongst young people in Zimbabwe and South Africa can be seen as reasons that writers of young adult fiction write about sexuality and teenage sexual explorations in a particular way, or better yet, not write about it at all. Discussions about sexuality remain blank spots in texts, a topic which is hastily glossed over like in “We Kiss Them With Rain” or only hinted at, never to be openly discussed like in “Tale of Tamari.” Female sexuality, and within it virginity, is not to be mentioned until marriage occurs, especially, since, through a ‘good-match’ marriage, the family of the bride can better their socioeconomic standing.²⁹⁹ However, such a marriage can only occur if the bride-to-be is a virgin. Thus, female virginity is extremely precious.

This has encouraged practices, like virginity testing, in which the autonomy of female sexuality is repressed.³⁰⁰ Despite being attributed to patriarchal practices, virginity tests are conducted by women and are often even encouraged by mothers. In “Waste Not Your Tears” Zola, who early in her youth tarnished her ‘respectability’ and honor, wants that at least Mvelo has it prior to marriage, so she makes her daughter periodically endure the tests. Reluctantly, Mvelo tries to warn her mother that the virginity tests in the township surroundings make her a clearly visible and vulnerable target for rape but still goes in order to make Zola happy.

Aunt Banda in “Tale of Tamari” advises Tamari to wait with having sex and getting married until she finds a ‘good match’: “You hear that, Tamari dear [...] Don’t just rush to any man who says he loves you. Take your time.”³⁰¹ However, such silences and evasions are not beneficial for readers, in particular for the target audience of adolescent novels, teenagers, who do need explanations regarding their developing sexuality. The appearance of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has deepened the divide between hopes for open, constructive, and effective debates around teenage sexuality on the one side, and uses of restrictive measures, to an extent including literature, “to curb teenagers’ libido [...] to restrict and contain adolescent sexual behavior” on the other side.³⁰²

Even though writers want to educate their readers about responsible sexuality, they don’t seem to want to actually describe that sexuality. When Tamari starts to feel embarrassed about

²⁹⁹ Sandra C. Duvivier. ““Ou libéré?” Sexual Abuse and Resistance in Edwidge Danticat’s ‘Breath, Eyes, Memory’” in *Black Female Sexualities*, ed. by Trimiko Melancon and Joanne M. Braxton (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), p. 132.

³⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 123.

³⁰¹ Chinodya, p. 66 - 67.

³⁰² Inggs, p. 112.

the strange and unknown feelings she feels when she is around Clever, a boy that she likes, she complains that when it comes to sex “nobody had ever told her anything, nothing of substance anyway. It was all nuance and rumor.”³⁰³ She cannot ask her friends, for they are as clueless as she is. It is clear that she needs adult, preferably female, guidance, but her mother is gone, and she does not yet feel that close to her aunt.

Barriers to abstinence and the ‘ABC prevention of HIV’ model are shown in a survey conducted in six African countries, in which teenage female responders answered that sexual intercourse in adolescence can occur because of sexual violence, abuse of power, poverty, as a means of attaining food, necessary goods, jobs, scholarships, passing grades, because of peer pressure, heightening of social status, trying to be ‘urban’ or ‘modern,’ or due to fear of losing a partner.³⁰⁴ Additionally, there is a discrepancy “between women’s desire for children and the risk of HIV infection.”³⁰⁵ This topic surfaces again as, yes, some women do not use condoms, because they want to have children despite the risk of HIV infection. Again, in many African societies a woman’s worth is measured by her fertility, and failure to produce children results in social rejection and criticism.

The alternative presented is to be alone, however, a woman on her own is uncommon, ‘strange’ and a cause for ‘suspicion,’ like Mrs. Shava, the headmistress at Tamari’s school who repeats to the young ladies: “Be yourself girls. Never let men push you around but know what you want from life.”³⁰⁶ But even at her early age Tamari wonders:

*“‘Can a woman be happy living alone like that, without a man? What will people say about her? But does it matter what people say about her?’ Tamari thought about it, but she couldn’t say.”*³⁰⁷

This series of rhetorical questions show how deeply embedded a ‘fear’ of a woman on her own is, and how unaccustomed to the idea people are. Tamari’s confusion is a reflection of

³⁰³ Chinodya, p. 58.

³⁰⁴ Kate Winskell, Laura K. Beres, Elizabeth Hill, Benjamin Chigozie Mbakwem and Oby Obyerodhyambo, ‘Making sense of abstinence: social representations in young Africans’ HIV-related narratives from six countries,’ *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 13:8 (2011), p. 952.

³⁰⁵ Margaret Asalele Mbilizi and Linda Semu, ‘Globalization, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Feminist Perspective’ in *Strong Women, Dangerous Times: Gender and HIV/AIDS in Africa*, ed. by Ezekiel Kalipeni, Karen Flynn, and Cynthia Pope (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009), p. 25.

³⁰⁶ Shimmer Chinodya, *Tale of Tamari* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2004), p. 56.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

societal and familial pressures expecting a woman to always belong to someone. To stand out means to be alone. And to be alone, as proven by the examples from novels in previous chapters, is difficult. Again, Louis Althusser's 'theory of interpellation' comes into play, with women being hailed into an ideology that forbids, or at the very least condemns, their individuality.

One of the main contributions HIV/AIDS fiction can make is to destigmatize the disease both for HIV-infected, or vicariously affected, youth. By avoiding youth sexuality, a crucial aspect of representing how it is to live with HIV is missing. The descriptions of various human experiences are important, since they go beyond the statistics, beyond the medical and practical symptoms, methods, and routes of transmission. It is even more so important, as the epidemic cuts into the most intimate part of human relationships.

The reality of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is harsh, multi-dimensional, and multi-faceted, but avoiding certain aspects of it is not beneficial. In order to create a 'transformative' discourse, Hazel Tafadzwa Ngoshi calls for literary interventions as stories can be far more effective than data, especially amongst the youth, and applauds the inclusion of books like "Tale of Tamari" into school curriculums for two reasons in particular. Firstly, to show how difficult life with HIV is, and secondly, to exemplify how despite the hardships people endure and press on.

If sexuality is mentioned at all in young adult fiction, it is usually a negative experience, like Mvelo's rape in "We Kiss Them With Rain," or the attempted rape of Tamari. Mvelo is subjected to both virginity testing and to rape. Both can be attributed to her low socioeconomic position. She has only known one father figure, Sipho. When she goes to the meeting about her singing with Reverend Nhlengethwa she thinks of him as a father figure, as someone who recognized her gift and will make her, and her mother's dreams come true by helping her musical career to blossom. Mvelo also trusts him as she was brought up believing pastors are good people. When instead he brutally rapes her, she becomes pregnant and 'just another girl' from the statistics.

"He plunged hurriedly and brutally, tearing her world and her illusions to pieces. The eye, her innocence, was gone. Deflowered and destroyed. The thought of a virgin-checker looking at her with disgust distracted her from the burning pain coming from between her legs. She imagined a pained look of disappointment, shame, and helplessness from Zola, as Reverend Nhlengethwa towered over her with a look of satisfaction while he

tidied himself up. He had a smirk of a man content with himself, and did not say a word. The color of life left Mvelo from between her thighs onto the floor. An iceberg of frozen water formed in her chest, freezing her tears and her heart.”³⁰⁸

This lyrical description of Mvelo’s rape is full of symbolism of destruction and pain. Even in the worst moment of her life, she thinks of her mother Zola, knowing what this will do to their lives, the this will be the ‘iceberg’ that will sink their ship. Her desperation and helplessness is juxtaposed with the Reverend’s brutality and a simple smirk when he finishes ‘deflowering and destroying.’ Because of the status of her rapist, his crime goes unpunished, and Mvelo must live with the fact that he might do this to other girls as well. She is shell-shocked, but especially when she comes home and sees how Zola collapses after understanding what had happened. In an instance, when Zola’s “reason for living had been stomped on and trampled over,”³⁰⁹ both Mvelo and Zola are disempowered.

When asked about why Mvelo doesn’t get tested for HIV after her rape and becoming pregnant, especially after witnessing Zola’s illness, or why doesn’t she get her daughter Sabekile tested when she is born, Ntshingila answers that it is part of the real hardship that Mvelo was in.³¹⁰ She had kept the pregnancy a secret and she hadn’t thought of testing when she was preoccupied with so much. Her age, her thought process as a kid, and a lack of a good example also contribute to the absence of HIV-testing in her life.

Mvelo has an extraordinary gift that works on the actual and metaphorical level, her voice. It helps her escape reality. With singing, she transports herself to another time, another place, where there are no sorrows, no diseases, no violators. It is a place where she is free. Her voice is only hers, no one else has power there. Everybody who hears her sing can sense it, but especially her mother Zola. As she pushes Mvelo to follow her voice and make a career out of it, she unknowingly creates the situation that leads to Mvelo’s rape and changes everything for both women. After Mvelo is raped, Zola loses her voice, and Mvelo loses her mother. Zola dies of malnutrition and full-blown AIDS. Only after her mother’s funeral, when the ‘great burden’

³⁰⁸ Ntshingila, Futhi, *We Kiss Them with Rain* (Livermore: Catalyst Press, 2018), p. 11.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 12.

³¹⁰ ‘Appendix D: Interview with Futhi Ntshingila’.

of her disease is laid to rest, does Mvelo find her voice again as she can hear Zola saying: “Sing, Mvelo, you were born to sing.”³¹¹

Many women have been or still are being silenced like Mvelo who manages to ‘find’ her voice again at the end of the novel. When asked about the intended symbolism behind that, Ntshingila answers that while the brutal rape took Mvelo’s voice, the anger and the urge for revenge she feels afterwards brings back her voice and essence, which literally kills the rapist without her having to say much.³¹² It seems women can only be released from the ‘burden’ of caregiving through death. It happened with Loveness in “Waste Not Your Tears” as she was ‘released’ from Roderick with his death. It happened with Jonasi and his wives in “The Polygamist.” It happened to Serina with Albert and Saidi in “Branching Streams Flow in the Dark.” Again, the ‘death as release’ situation happens to Zola ‘released’ by Sipho’s death, and even to Mvelo being ‘released’ by Zola’s death.

However, additionally, justice is served to Mvelo in another way. One day Mvelo hears a sermon from a church she is passing: “Be men who can be counted on [...] you were born to be protectors my brothers. Come to God and give your pledge to protect His angels.”³¹³ These are the words of her rapist, pastor Nhlengethwa, and at that moment Mvelo knows, he has to be stopped before he ruins another life. She enters the church, takes off her clothes, and starts singing: “The forest is done, there is nowhere to hide.”³¹⁴ When Nhlengethwa sees her naked body still full of signs that she had just given birth, he collapses and dies on the spot. Mvelo puts her clothes back on and walks away. She is thereafter known as a witch in the neighborhood, but she is empowered knowing that judgment has been made by divine intervention.

Ntshingila likes to insert such moments of the supernatural or the uncanny into her narrative, moments in which her female protagonists receive foreshadowing insights about what they should do. On the night Zola dies, Mvelo has a dream in which she takes the power from the monster that is chasing her. Her dream gives her calmness and an understanding of what she needs to do next. Ntshingila builds her storytelling on the Zulu oral traditions which include dreams being prophecies. The dream makes Mvelo realize that in order to save her baby’s life,

³¹¹ Ntshingila, p. 21.

³¹² ‘Appendix D: Interview with Futhi Ntshingila’.

³¹³ Ntshingila, p. 115.

³¹⁴ Ibid, p. 116.

and her own, she must first give the baby a chance to survive by giving it away. When she leaves the baby she names Sabekile, meaning ‘frightening,’ on the front door of a house of an elderly white couple, she makes a pact with God, in a way her mother always did. If God will let her baby be happy with good people raising her, Mvelo vowed never to ask anything of God again.

What is noticeable is that there is a pattern of mother-daughter duo’s in the novels. Zola and Mvelo as well as Mvelo and Sabekile in “We Kiss Them With Rain,” Vimbai and Chiwoniso in “The Hairdresser of Harare,” Katy and Faith in “The Uncertainty of Hope.” The lessons learned from mothers conveyed to their daughters is that they have all paid the price for their innocence. Zola had Mvelo while still in high school with her then-sweetheart who died shortly after. Desperately wanting a father figure for Mvelo, she gets involved with Sipho, a local lawyer, who infects her with HIV. Vimbai in “The Hairdresser of Harare” also gets seduced in high school describing Philip’s courtship:

“I was a shy person those days. It’s not possible to be innocent without being shy [...] I was being wooed for the first time in my life. I stopped seeing my boyfriend and did not answer the desperate love notes he sent me. Phillip began to tell me how much he loved me. I received texts and late-night phone calls. That man had a way with words. I had fallen for him, but I couldn’t have known that lurking underneath his posh exterior lay a monster. There was a heavy price to pay for my naivety.”³¹⁵

Vimbai’s story resembles the stories of so many girls, from firstly being aware that a man wants only one thing from them, to succumbing to his charms. When she first meets him she is aware that he is a ‘sugar daddy,’ and is still in love with her high school sweetheart. But Philip’s persistence, coupled with the attention and gifts she is receiving ‘win’ her over. When she gets pregnant, she discovers that he is a ‘monster’ who has done the same thing to many girls before her. Once he gets them pregnant he immediately leaves them as he has no interest in being a father. The only thing that interests Philip is the thrill of the ‘chase’ after a woman.

Vimbai has to face the harsh truth of what has happened: “To be dispensable is a woman’s worst nightmare and I was beginning to live it.”³¹⁶ This is also the reason why she

³¹⁵ Huchu, Tendai, *The Hairdresser of Harare* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2010), p. 19-22.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 36.

later on holds on to Dumi so much. She realizes that he can be the ticket to a higher social class, for her, but mostly for her daughter, Chiwoniso. Vimbai bathes her daughter every night to check for signs of abuse. She knows how dangerous Harare is for women of poor social standing. Even though Vimbai has a house-girl, and can as such be defined as middle class, she knows of daughters that are raped, infected with HIV, or molested. Whatever happens, Vimbai vows to always protect her daughter from harm.

After witnessing the violence Onai is enduring because of ‘respectability’ of her marriage to Gari, Faith, the daughter of Onai’s best friend Katy, is very careful when it comes to sexually transmitted diseases, and protects herself when she is with her fiancé Tom. Faith, a law student, sees how many women are trying to find, and embrace freedom from their marriages, economic or health situations. The Katy-Faith mother-daughter duo understands that as women they do have choices, but must make wise decisions about them. Emily, Tom’s sister and women’s rights activist, works as a medical doctor. She wanted to become a doctor “to heal the sick,” but because of HIV/AIDS “now all she seemed to do was preside over the dying.”³¹⁷ She also notices how the female domestic violence victims she treats in the hospital never want to press charges against their husbands “to avoid compromising their marriages.”³¹⁸

As mentioned before, in “The Uncertainty of Hope” the intimate is placed within the political. Gari’s demise can be seen as an allegory of a ‘nation in crisis.’ Within the metanarrative of a political and economic crisis, women-endangering dimensions of patriarchy are highlighted.³¹⁹ The novel aims to educate its female readership to not accept gendered norms only because that is what is expected from them.³²⁰ When Tom jokes that Emily and Faith are trying to start a ‘feminist war,’ they counter that he only needs to “be a woman for a day to understand,”³²¹ as Emily points out that “women are the care-givers in every society. Doesn’t bearing so much of society’s ills and burdens entitle them, at the very least, to some respect and protection?”³²²

³¹⁷ Tagwira, p. 48.

³¹⁸ Ibid, p. 186.

³¹⁹ Oliver Nyambi, ‘The ‘new’ woman: Changing Zimbabwean female identities in Valerie Tagwira’s novel *The Uncertainty of Hope*,’ *English Academy Review*, 31:1 (2014), p. 43.

³²⁰ Lene Bull Christiansen, ‘“Respectable Women” versus ‘Small Houses’: Feminist Negotiations of Sexual Morality, Marriage and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe,’ *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 39:3 (2013), p. 525.

³²¹ Tagwira, p. 236.

³²² Ibid, p. 274.

Despite their young age, Faith and Emily could also be analyzed in the following subchapter “Adulthood” as there is a noticeable change between the ‘girlhood’ women and them as ‘young adults.’ One factor is definitely their older age than Mvelo or Tamari, but the other, a bit more optimistic factor, can be the success of HIV-awareness. Their peer, Melody, is in a ‘small house’ relationship with an older married man because he pays for her university fees. Originally, a ‘small house’ was a name for a junior wife in a polygamous marriage.³²³ Nowadays, a ‘small house’ refers to a mistress of a married man. The wife lives in the ‘main’ or in the ‘big house’ and is usually considered as the wronged party of the triangle. There are three ‘small houses’ highlighted in “The Uncertainty of Hope.” Next to Melody there is Sheila, Gari’s ex-‘small house,’ and Gloria, Gari’s current ‘small house.’ In society, ‘small houses’ are synonymous with immorality, corruption, and sinfulness. The wife is the ‘heroine,’ the respectable, moral character, worthy of sympathy, while the ‘other women’ deserve to be pitied, and come to bad ends.³²⁴

Upon Faith’s insistence, Melody is the only ‘small house’ who can, and does, give up her ‘dishonorable’ position voluntarily after she is confronted by her lover’s wife. She does so because she can. She has the option of asking her family for help, even though it hurts her pride, and survives because she did the ‘right thing’ and switched from one ‘type’ to another.³²⁵ The ‘young adult’ women, stand on the shoulders of their mothers, who had to learn the hard way, and made mistakes, so their daughters don’t have to make them. Even though Tagwira’s book title acknowledges that ‘hope is uncertain’ the younger generation of women finds hope because of the older one.

The method of ‘using your voice,’ as exemplified in Mvelo, shows the author’s intent through her fictional characters. The dedication of “We Kiss Them With Rain” written by Ntshingila, makes it very clear that she wrote the book in order to highlight the massive contemporary issues of women in South Africa, to address the discrepancy in HIV statistics and gender, and re-assure women that “your voices matter.”³²⁶ This also has a ‘life imitating art’ effect as Ntshingila takes a cue from her fictional heroines and also ‘uses her voice.’ “We Kiss Them With Rain” was first published in 2014 by ‘Modjadji Books’ in South Africa under the title “Do Not Go Gentle.” The title comes from a poem of the same name by Dylan Thomas,

³²³ Bull Christiansen, p. 515.

³²⁴ Ibid, p. 524.

³²⁵ Tagwira, p. 173.

³²⁶ Ntshingila, ‘Dedication’, i.

which one of Zola's neighbors recites at her funeral. This decision makes sense since the content of the poem mirrors Zola's transformation and departure from this earth.

Ntshingila wanted "We Kiss Them With Rain," which is the title of one of her HIV-centered poems, for the book, but her South African publisher suggested "Do Not Go Gentle," perhaps believing that an intertextual reference to an already famous work will help sell the book. However, when the book was to be published in America by 'Catalyst Press' in 2018, the title was changed. It no longer references someone else's work but references Ntshingila's. Thus, "We Kiss Them With Rain" is Futhi's poem that opens the 2018 edition. In it, Futhi as the author, and personified 'Mother Nature,' loves all the descendants of the victims of AIDS, loves all the AIDS orphans with rain, wind, thunder, sunshine, moonlight, and the stars. This loving 'Mother Nature' metaphor appears again right at the end of the book when Sabekile feels the raindrops touch her skin, and calls to Mvelo: "Look, Mama, God's kisses."³²⁷

Zola is the innocent, caregiving 'good woman' type. She needs to be that way; she needs to die of AIDS in order to help other women. Mvelo is the innocent victim turned strong by Zola's death, learning from Zola's example, not to only be a self-denying nurturing woman. Nonceba knows how to protect herself, but because of it 'pays' the price of not being the archetypal 'good woman.' She is a 'wild' woman that does not fit in the patriarchal discourse, and thus, does not become a wife and a mother in the traditional way. Sabekile is the sum of all of them. She is free, she doesn't have to make the same mistakes, and most importantly, she does not have to have AIDS in her life. Thus, Zola is empowered through Mvelo. Mvelo is empowered through Zola and Nonceba. Sabekile is empowered by all of them. We do not know what happens to Sabekile, nor do we get to know her point of view. But through reading about her legacy, the reader can hope that she will learn from the lessons of the remarkable women that came before her and went through all stages of character development and growth. Sabekile, as well as Ntshingila, is empowered by all her fictional predecessors, just as any reader can be.

³²⁷ Ntshingila, p. 137.

4.2. Adulthood

Sexual and reproductive rights are at the core of the HIV/AIDS problem for women. A disease, at first only hypothetical and abstract, has now knocked on the doors of women in southern Africa, saying that if they do not open, the only alternative is infection, for them, their partners, and their children. In this sense AIDS, de facto, demands subversion of patriarchy, and application of female agency. Without the protection of ‘innocence’ attributed to youth, adulthood is the time when women take matters into their own hands, and protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. There are three topics that particularly hinder female empowerment with regards to the epidemic and continuously (re)appear in the selected novels, which will be addressed in this chapter. The notion that a woman has to be ‘respectable,’ the difficulties of negotiating safe sex practices whilst also developing a healthy sexuality, and the taboos and secrecy still surrounding HIV/AIDS.

4.2.1. Respectability

One way or another, the archetype of the romanticized selfless, self-sacrificing woman again appears in every single novel. Onai in “The Uncertainty of Hope” was raised in a way that taught her to always persevere and endure anything for the sake of her children, which, she was told, is something that a ‘respectable’ African woman does. Onai cannot imagine herself becoming a ‘westernized’ divorced woman, especially since no woman in her family has ever gotten divorced, and she has no desire of becoming the first one:

*“How could she possibly face a world that despised divorcees; looked down on single mothers? Marital status was everything. It did not really matter how educated or otherwise skilled a woman was. A woman’s worth was relative to one man, her husband.”*³²⁸

The HIV/AIDS epidemic as the main catalyst of the plot surfaces key issues when it comes to the interpellation into the ‘marriage respectability’ ideology. The first one is that women are supposed to ‘accept’ the fact that inevitably all men cheat. Additionally, if they are violent towards their wives, that should be taken for granted as well. While men have to pay

³²⁸ Tagwira, p. 46.

roora³²⁹ prior to marriage, cheating and violence, are the implied prices women must pay for marriage, and consequently for the title of being 'respectable.' Onai's worst fear is not emotional or physical pain from the cheating or the violence of the beatings she is enduring, it is the 'impropriety' of divorce her friends are suggesting.

AIDS, in connection with alcoholism, which eventually kills Gari, 'solves' the problem for her. The shame Onai could potentially have to endure because of a divorce outweighs any sort of violence or infidelity for her. Despite Katy's objections that a woman is more than a husband's possession, Onai stays with Gari unable to face being divorced or single. For her, marriage was the only thing a woman can do to have a respectable social standing. Her social value is the value of her husband. She stays with Gari despite knowing that he has had at least two mistresses or 'small houses' as they are called in Mbare. The most important thing in a marriage, and in life in general, for Onai, is respectability. Onai's deep entanglement in the patriarchal web contributes to her low self-esteem and 'entrapment' in 'proper' marriage.³³⁰

Therefore, Katy is not the only 'liberated' female character she clashes with. Emily and Faith also do not understand why she clings so tightly to a husband who is obviously so flawed. Lene Bull Christiansen connects the role of women in Zimbabwe with building-the-nation ideas which consider the 'traditional' African marriage as one of its founding pillars.³³¹ Projecting patriarchal power and Christian values, 'the nation,' and with it 'traditional' marriage, obstruct discussions about female sexuality and delegate 'morally approved' status only to a married woman. Such associations have been criticized by feminists who claim that these projections are furthered into state law, exemplified in Onai's struggle for inheritance after Gari's death.

The novel clearly takes a stand for the side of the wife, therefore, the perspective of 'small houses' gets limited attention. Part of the 'immorality' of 'small houses' is their connection to sexual pleasure, something that is never spoken about openly in Zimbabwe when it refers to a wife, but is a vital part of becoming a 'small house.' With a wife, a man has sex for procreation, with a mistress sex is for pleasure. It is quite common, though not a rule, that 'small houses' are (former) prostitutes which makes the probability of HIV infection higher.

³²⁹ Bride price.

³³⁰ Oliver Nyambi and Tendai Mangena, 'Food, Gender and the Crisis in Zimbabwe: An Approach to Virginia Phiri's Highway Queen and Valerie Tagwira's the Uncertainty of Hope,' *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 61:4 (2020), p. 388.

³³¹ Bull Christiansen, p. 513.

Gloria, a working prostitute, knows she is HIV positive. That is why she is deliberately looking for a man who will ‘take care’ of her when she develops AIDS. She is looking for revenge against all the men for whom she risked her health and consequently her life. Most of the men saw this intention in her, but not Gari, the only man, in Gloria’s words, “stupid enough” to believe her.³³² However, Gloria doesn’t want ‘just’ a man, she wants marriage and the security that comes with it just like Essie in “The Polygamist.” The fact that she would be Gari’s second wife doesn’t bother her as she is pressed for time. Onai is presented as having ‘class,’ a moral and economic high-ground over Gloria. There is no solidarity ‘sisterhood’ between the two women.

Contrary, there is solidarity between Onai and Sheila, Gari’s ex-mistress, which is a fact that Onai is unaware of. Also a former prostitute, she now lives in an actual ‘small house’ in the backyard of Gari and Onai’s house. She already has full-blown AIDS, but due to the lack of available antiretroviral medication in Zimbabwe and her low socioeconomic status, there is nothing she can do about her deteriorating health. She does not even have enough money to buy food, though, in this, she is not alone, as the situation in Mbare is so bad, that people are selling their own ARV’s on the streets in exchange for food; the intimate and the political intertwining in everyday life. Sheila’s infant baby, who also has AIDS, has nothing to eat most of the days. Nevertheless, she is extremely grateful to Onai for allowing her to stay next to their house. Nobody else helped her, the mark of AIDS on her making her ‘untouchable,’ and disowned by her family.

Sheila is ‘crushed by life’ and has passively surrendered to whatever fate may have in store for her.³³³ She becomes what Onai would be if she did not assume agency. Once again, Sheila is punished and condemned, while Onai is celebrated. Tagwira’s juxtaposition of two female ‘types’ clearly has a favorite. One ‘type,’ personified in Onai, Katy, Faith, and Emily, is the ‘good one’ thus it survives and thrives through perseverance and empowerment. The other ‘type,’ personified in Gloria and Sheila, is flawed, defeatist, and ‘unworthy’ to be saved, therefore, such characters are killed off.

Religion can function as a collective response to problems or as a personal coping mechanism. The religious discourse can be understood from different conceptual perspectives.

³³² Bull Christiansen, p. 523.

³³³ Nyambi, *The ‘new’ woman*, p. 42.

It can be hurtful with regards to the epidemic when it preaches sexual morality and deems the infected as ‘sinners.’³³⁴ However, it can also provide support and ignite hope. Zola in “We Kiss Them With Rain” was empowered by her faith in God. She would insist on going to church with Mvelo even when she was at her weakest. She would make up her own prayers and would specifically address a female figure, the mother of Jesus, Mary, who became her confidant and energy resource.

Tragically, as the novel unfolds, it is Zola’s blind faith in all things religious that negatively alters Mvelo’s life. That is why the religious discourse in “We Kiss Them With Rain” can be classified as disempowering. As a reflection of her deep faith, Zola is almost obsessed with being a ‘respectable’ good Christian woman. Looking up to the black middle-class, she is convinced that if Mvelo will be ‘respectable,’ she can better her social positioning. Her strict policing of this notion prevents Mvelo’s social and personal development and transformation for a very long time. Only after Zola dies and Mvelo is taken under Nonceba’s wing, is she ‘released’ from ‘respectability.’

Zola can be read as a romanticized selfless, self-sacrificing woman, who gives up everything for the sake of her child. In opposition, there are two characters in “We Kiss Them With Rain” that can be understood as ‘heartless’ in terms of their connection with motherhood and children. Mvelo, leaves her child on the doorstep of a wealthy white couple’s house, while Nonceba does not want to have children at all, something that is a taboo topic in southern Africa where women are still expected to want, and have, children. In such a society conservative ideas flourish, amongst others, that a woman putting herself first is considered ‘heartless.’³³⁵ Nevertheless, in “Tale of Tamari” an exchange between Tamari’s aunts Loveness and Banda encourages choice-based decision making instead of society-induced expectations:

“I’ll tell you something for nothing, Aunty Loveness. You are single and maybe you think you will find happiness when you get married. Marriage is nothing but problems for many people. Maybe you did right to stay single.” ‘Oh no, no, Aunty Banda. There are many

³³⁴ Burchardt, p. 66.

³³⁵ Hogan, p. 119.

married people who are happy.’ ‘Then why are you not married, Auntie Loveness?’ ‘It’s just that I haven’t found the right man.’”³³⁶

Their conversation highlights the ‘transformative’ discourse that is not against marriage per se, but it is pro freedom of choice for women, especially considering the epidemic.

“The Hairdresser of Harare” lifts the veil that often covers ‘female’ issues in contemporary Zimbabwe. It includes simple small things of everyday ‘lived’ gender, like the lack of tampons and menstrual pads for women in shops. The novel reveals how women use cotton balls if they can’t get them instead. Vimbai describes the stereotype that follows female hairdressers of being ‘husband stealers.’ She also sheds a light on the fact that she as a woman owns a house on her own in Harare, is considered ‘strange’ as well as makes her an easy target for thieves. Moreover, the female hairdressers lift each other up, which is a welcome change, like when they encourage one of them, Yolanda, to go to night school so that she gets an education.

The beginning of the novel introduces a certain paradox. It presents a ‘violation of femininity,’³³⁷ since it attributes femininity to both women and men. Such ‘new’ men, personified in homosexual Dumi, and partially in Vimbai’s second brother, Fungusai, are a mixture of traditional masculinity and, in an African space, ‘provocative’ femininity as the female heroine exhibits ‘cynical pragmatism’³³⁸ usually reserved for men. Vimbai is not entirely naïve, nor completely passive. This premise gets tested as the story progresses and exposes spaces of vulnerability, spaces of growth, and spaces of possibility.

Vimbai’s second period of naivety, after the one in her girlhood, is during her platonic relationship with Dumi. At this point, she is still inexperienced with men, as she has only been with one man, the aforementioned Philip, before that. Additionally, she has never met a gay man, as homosexuality, or even talking about it, is a taboo topic. Therefore, she doesn’t know how to ‘recognize the signs.’ When she subconsciously starts suspecting something, she represses such thoughts, since she might get everything she ever wanted with Dumi; a kind man, a husband, and a new family, and would thus become fully ‘respectable.’

³³⁶ Chindoya, p. 66.

³³⁷ James Alexander, p. 51.

³³⁸ Mulry, p. 90.

Dumi comes from a very rich and influential family, so for him, money is not an issue. However, money is an issue for Vimbai. Additionally, he notices that Vimbai needs a man so that she is less 'suspicious' to society, and he needs a woman so that he is also less 'suspicious' to society. While his 'suspiciousness' comes from hiding his real sexual orientation, Vimbai is 'suspicious' only for being an independent woman who is not in a relationship.

There is only one thing the fictional women will not endure for the sake of their relationships, marriage and consequent 'respectability.' Death is the second key issue catalyzed due to HIV/AIDS. In a time, and in a place, where treatment is not accessible to all, Beatrice Tonhodzai answers what contracting HIV means for women: "You got it right - we are goners."³³⁹ To put it bluntly, the only thing women will not do for respectability, is die. Consequently, protection from HIV in the form of condom use and, in certain cases abstinence, become literally life-saving.

As a didactic feature of their plots, the authors are sending a message to the readers that if Onai, Katy, Faith, Vimbai, Mvelo, Zola and Nonceba, after everything they have gone through, can still insist on emancipation, so can the reader.³⁴⁰ From a feminist point of view, by standing up for themselves and protecting themselves from HIV the fictional women now finally 'deserve' the label 'respectable,' but this time in a sense that this is an action worth of respect.

³³⁹ Bull Christiansen, p. 517.

³⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 524.

4.2.2. Protection

Just like Loveness loved Roderick unconditionally, as analyzed in chapter three, Zola loves Sipho. However, when he leaves her for Nonceba, her softness vanishes. She remains soft on the outside but becomes pure steel on the inside. When Sipho and Nonceba brake-up he starts carelessly sleeping around but eventually returns to Zola. She lets nostalgia get the better of her, and for a brief moment lets her guard down. She sleeps with Sipho and gets infected with HIV. After that night she realizes that she is healed from his charm, but the damage has been done. She tells Mvelo the truth and pleads with her to always use protection.

Nonceba is the third female character introduced in the book and she is all that Zola and Mvelo are not but could be if they were luckier. Nonceba is always strict with Sipho about using protection and wearing a condom. In the end, this saves her life. She is the character Ntshingila introduces to educate the reader about regular testing and condom use. Intimate partner violence and financial dependency are often causes why women don't insist on protection. Nonceba is independent of Sipho on both accounts. When she realizes that Sipho simply assumes that protection is the responsibility of the woman, cracks begin to form in their relationship, especially since she is aware that the lack of protection use comes at a much higher price for a woman. She also knows how to walk away from a man, which is exactly what she does. Nonceba, just like Zola, but in a very different way, assumes agency. She loses the love of her life but gains a family through Mvelo whom, after Zola's death, she raises as her own daughter. She educates her about protection and condom use, and about leaving a partner if he cheats. After all the rage, sadness, fear, loneliness, and anger is released, they can now move forward and start again as a family.

Interestingly, in "The Hairdresser of Harare" Dumi is the character that starts the conversation about HIV-protection when he openly discusses his clients' sexual practices. Not only does he insist that condoms should be used every time, but also brings female condoms known as 'femidoms' to the hair salon, and demonstrates how to use them. The text can be read almost as an instructional manual for the use of femidoms.

Huchu intentionally informs the reader. With the awareness that for women, a man's refusal to wear a condom can be fatal, the aim is to lead to a conclusion one of the client comes up with, that femidoms give women power: "I like this. It gives me control because sometimes

men don't like to strap on."³⁴¹ The fact that Dumi encourages speaking so openly about such personal issues, helps remove the stigma from using protection as 'no one felt the least embarrassed.' A fact that surprises Vimbai, who is at first a bit taken aback talking about such personal things so freely. The salon even starts selling femidoms and hangs protection-promoting posters. As femidoms are good for business bringing in a little bit of additional money, the owner of the salon, Mrs. Khumalo, instructs that they should be offered to every client. The message of the right to protect herself also sticks with Vimbai, especially when considering Dumi's cheating.

Onai's story can be again compared to the one Loveness in "Waste Not Your Tears" experiences. Both women endure psychological and physical violence from their partners, Roderick and Gari. However, Loveness does get infected with HIV and her child dies from AIDS, while Onai and her children manage to stay HIV negative. The support Loveness finds in religion and with sister Gabriella, Onai finds in her friendships. The importance of leaning on (female) friends in times of HIV/AIDS is a recurring motif in many of the selected novels. One of the central cracks in Onai's marriage is Gari's stance on condom use. For him, they are only to be used with prostitutes and not with wives echoing the opinion of many men in southern Africa. He paid her father ten cows and an expensive coat so that he could marry Onai, now it is his right to claim what he 'paid' for, a parallel thought process to Jonasi in "The Polygamist." Nevertheless, Onai refuses Gari his 'conjugal right' because he refuses to wear a condom introducing a 'no condoms, no intimacy' rule:

*"Her biggest failure as a wife lay in refusing Gari his conjugal rights ... unless he agreed to use condoms. In a rare moment of rebellious-ness, she had told him clearly no condoms, no intimacy. She felt a twinge of guilt, then immediately forgave herself. What was a woman supposed to do with a philandering husband when the risk of HIV infection was so real? So real that everyone in a relationship was at risk?"*³⁴²

The marked ellipsis between 'conjugal rights' and 'condom use' highlights that for Onai all changes in a key turning point; the potential HIV infection. She is aware that if Gari infects her, she will die, and her children will be left motherless. Unfortunately, parallel to her refusal were the increased beatings she received from her husband. She too discovers the power of the

³⁴¹ Huchu, p. 39.

³⁴² Tagwira, p. 69-70.

female condom as Gari is so often drunk he does not notice she is wearing one. She calls femidoms a ‘blessing’ giving her freedom.

In 2005, antiretroviral medication was, among other things, not freely accessible in Zimbabwe, especially for the poorest population, therefore, HIV infection meant almost a certain death sentence. Onai’s twin brothers got infected and died. While she feels powerless in so many other areas of her life, she promises to herself that HIV is not going to become one of them. Action and agency are again transferred from men to women. Instead of using a regular condom, which has to be worn by a man, women, again, take on the responsibility to protect themselves by using a female condom on their body making it seem that men are not interested in protecting women or at least that male pleasure comes first.

Katy, the other key figure of “The Uncertainty of Hope,” is much more realistic about life and love than Onai. She is very aware of the dangers of HIV, even more so, as her husband is a long-distance truck driver, a very high-risk HIV infection group. When Katy suggests to Onai to go for an HIV test, Onai admits that she does not go out of fear of finding out her status. Katy helps Onai double-fold; firstly, confessing that she herself went for a test and that she is negative; and secondly, offering to go with her for hers. Valerie Tagwira acknowledges that when she went for an HIV test she took a friend with her, which made her calmer and braver.³⁴³ That is why she includes this bit in the novel, as something that should be encouraged.

In the novel, Katy acknowledges that she cannot afford to be naïve but must be pragmatic, even though she loves her husband John, she must protect herself, and cannot be in the dark when it comes to her health. Onai has always thought of Katy and John’s relationship as idyllic, that is why she is surprised to hear it. Nonetheless, shame, secrecy, and solitude, contribute significantly to the spread of diseases. It is noticeable even between ‘best friends’ like Onai and Katy who have never talked about their sexual lives with each other as it is not ‘respectable.’

Shame, above all else, contributes to both, the fast-spread of HIV, and domestic violence cover-ups, leaving the woman with the ‘duty’ of putting up the ‘happy family’ image since in

³⁴³ Lizzy Attree, *Blood on the Page: Interviews with African Authors Writing About HIV/AIDS* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 153.

a gendered Zimbabwean society publicly admitting abuse is equated with failure.³⁴⁴ However, it is precisely the fast spread of HIV/AIDS all around them, that helps the two friends break down this barrier between them, and stop the cycle of shame, humiliation, and silence, as they instead create a circle of trust and female solidarity.³⁴⁵ Katy reminds Onai, that ‘just one slip’ from John, can cost her her life. When Onai finally assumes agency and does go for the test she is once again assured by the staff that there is treatment, and support groups available, and that with knowledge comes power.³⁴⁶ After she finds out she is HIV negative she knows she is free, she can start afresh, and take better care of herself in the future.

4.2.3. Taboo

In “The Uncertainty of Hope” Gari’s alcoholism and womanizing increase in parallel with his failure to be the family’s main, and only, breadwinner. As he loses his job and spends all the remaining money on Gloria, his role in the core family unit is on the decline. He destroys Onai’s sewing machine so she is also unable to do what she loves, make clothes for sale. Additionally, Onai’s refusal of sexual intimacy on his terms ignites his violent side as violence is the only ‘power’ he has left over Onai. She, however, has had enough of not talking about the ‘taboo’ topics. In conversation with Katy the two friends express their new-found rage, which is especially for Onai, a big change from where she started in the beginning of the novel:

*“Women were always blamed, but it was the men who played around, boasting of their prowess; or complained that women put temptation in their way, as if they had no will or morals of their own. ‘How much better it would be ...’ Katy continued, ‘if we women were able to negotiate with our men about everything related to our sexuality without starting a war? Why should protection and birth control become a battlefield?’ ‘Maybe we lose our eligibility to negotiate when our men pay roora and our parents are happy to accept it. Aren’t we taught that we must always submit? Why, my own mother has told me that getting beaten is a woman’s lot. She can’t expect otherwise.’”*³⁴⁷

Tagwira does not make her female characters take the blame, but points the finger towards men, in this instance to Gari. Nyambi and Mangena call Gari’s toxic-masculinity and

³⁴⁴ Murray, *Constructions of Gender*, p. 22.

³⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

³⁴⁶ Tagwira, p. 339.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 336.

sense of privilege ‘the delusional dominating personality disorder,’ a term borrowed from psychology describing delusional male entitlement to women, “a self-reflexive product of the systemic domination of women.”³⁴⁸ Gari’s failure as a man, a husband, a breadwinner is allegorically shown in the ‘tea’ metaphor. Onai and the children long for the sweet milky tea they used to be able to afford. Now, when Onai drinks plain tea, the bitter taste reminds her how Gari ‘un-sweetened’ her life, and craving sugar, the sweetness of tea and life “was like an ache,” a symbolic everyday reminder of Gari’s failures.³⁴⁹

Gari’s emasculation happens parallel to Onai’s empowerment suggesting that a part of patriarchy must die in order for equality to be born. Metaphorically and literally, Gari’s death means Onai’s re-birth. The traditional marriage institution is being criticized ‘from within’ due to internalization of concepts like individual choice, condom use, the possibility of divorce, and speaking freely about sexuality.³⁵⁰ Onai’s connection to the beggar Mawaya, also known as Tapiwa, shows that Onai prefers temperate, responsible, moral masculinity.³⁵¹ It also shows the novel’s chosen best way forward; ‘moderate’ masculinity paired with ‘moderate’ femininity. Bhabha’s ‘equality in difference’ concretized in a work of fiction. It is not a coincidence that Tapiwa’s needs are exactly Onai’s skills, and Onai’s needs are exactly what Tapiwa can, and does, offer. When one part complements the other, a ‘transformative discourse’ is formed.

The novels write against another taboo, female sexual desire. In them, the bodily pleasures, as a common part of personhood, are openly discussed with regards to women. Though they do not belong only to the male sex, publicly, and often privately, discussions about, or desire for, bodily pleasures are entirely in the male domain. Thanks to the works like “The Hairdresser of Harare” and “The Polygamist,” (African) women can read that ‘the sexual’ is not necessarily only connected to reproduction, but also with their own pleasure. Vimbai, and many other women, have the right to challenge the gender status quo and be ‘Ms. Independent’ if they wish so. For the first time ever, Vimbai feels like she has power when it comes to sexual desire and articulating it: “I could do what I liked and I didn’t have to care for my reputation either.”³⁵²

³⁴⁸ Nyambi and Mangena, p. 389.

³⁴⁹ Tagwira, p. 59.

³⁵⁰ Bull Christiansen, p. 525.

³⁵¹ Nyambi and Mangena, p. 391.

³⁵² Huchu, p. 64.

Certain bodies are stigmatized, policed, and criminalized because they are not signified as ‘appropriate sexuality,’ mostly because they do not bring life into this world.³⁵³ If women are not contributing to the interest of the state as ‘mothers of the nation’ they are deemed useless. In addition to getting married, and having children, men are allowed other things, while women should only subjugate themselves to the biological imperative. However, it is an undeniable fact that (African) masculinity is undergoing a transformation “incapable of fitting into a single mold.”³⁵⁴

When Vimbai first meets Dumi she observes that he is very comfortable with his own masculinity.³⁵⁵ As a ‘soft man’ Dumi personifies a ‘space of ambiguity’ that challenges hegemonic masculinity. He is against violence, does not feel the need to confirm his manhood through sexual intercourse, and welcomes marriage and children. Dumi is a representative of ‘new men’ and ‘alternative’ masculinity. Not because he is a homosexual, but because he is a man who encourages the creation of mutually respectful relationships. In his work, Huchu envisions a generation of ‘new men’ that can become key figures in the new power balance between the sexes in Africa.

By highlighting queer relationships, “The Hairdresser of Harare” manages to destabilize fixed ‘normative’ gender categories.³⁵⁶ However, in a disappointing twist, Huchu succumbs to the male literary tradition and finishes his brave novel in a conventional way. After Vimbai finds out the truth about Dumi’s sexuality she gets him beaten up. But then, in a fit of remorse, she puts her life on the line negotiating with Minister M an exchange for his freedom. The novel ends with Vimbai exclaiming: “I want him to live his life to the fullest, without fear.”³⁵⁷ The problem is that by saying and acting so, she becomes the ‘cliché’ woman Ntshanga, Smith and Mungoshi also wrote ‘into-life.’ Vimbai’s storyline, her life, becomes ‘all about the man.’ She no longer cares whether she is safe, if her daughter is safe, as long as Dumi is. Despite exemplifying independence throughout the narrative, with this final act, Vimbai becomes another archetypal self-sacrificing ‘good’ woman. Only because of her ‘sacrifice’ is Dumi free to live life as he pleases, whilst she cannot.

³⁵³ James Alexander, p. 40-41.

³⁵⁴ Omonzejie, p. 153.

³⁵⁵ Huchu, p. 38.

³⁵⁶ James Alexander, p. 41.

³⁵⁷ Huchu, p. 189.

Once again, a man's plot resolution, is the end of the novel, while Vimbai's fate remains unclear, leaving behind a socially, sexually, and politically unfulfilled woman. Previously analyzed reviews by Elizabeth Glanville and Mary Helen Specht concur with the latter characterizing Vimbai as "burdened by cliché."³⁵⁸ Additional shorter reviews by Jackie May and Karen Jeynes which appeared in 'The Times' and in the 'Cape Times' respectively, both consider Vimbai's ending predictable, 'too obvious,'³⁵⁹ and even 'annoying.'³⁶⁰ "The Hairdresser of Harare" does not fully create a 'transformative discourse' this thesis aims for regarding women due to this 'disappointing' ending, but it does contribute to the 'transformation' of opinions and prejudices against homosexual men.³⁶¹

However, a 'transformative' discourse is created in "We Kiss Them With Rain." In addition to being disempowered financially, Zola consequently becomes disempowered physically. Whispers and gossip follow her wherever she goes as she is known as "the one who is sick with the three letters."³⁶² Nevertheless, Zola refuses to be disempowered psychologically following her motto: "Tomorrow is another day."³⁶³ Zola's reaction to being HIV positive is quite surprising, most of all to Mvelo. Zola suddenly becomes calm and wise. She is at peace with her diagnosis. She helps Sipho, who is getting worse by the day, as much as she can, which Mvelo does not understand. Why would her mother help the man who infected her with something that would eventually kill her?

Zola's power now lies in acceptance. That is how she assumes agency. Zola influences Mvelo's mood immensely. When Zola is good Mvelo is good, but when Zola is bad, which happens more and more often, Mvelo is even worse, suffering for her mother and for herself. Zola is well aware of this. She knows that if she becomes bitter or angry she will die sooner, and thus leave Mvelo on her own sooner. Zola shows kindness where none is expected. She helps Sipho to help herself, to help Mvelo, to help the three of them, and to keep busy, maintaining her sanity. Zola finds a new 'purpose' in her post-infection life; to live longer for Mvelo. She becomes an agent of awareness about HIV. It is because of her disease that she

³⁵⁸ 'Review of The Hairdresser of Harare by Tendai Huchu - Mary Helen Specht.'

³⁵⁹ 'Review of The Hairdresser of Harare - Cape Times,' *Weaver Press*, accessed on 12.04.2024, <<https://www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com/reviews/71-the-hairdresser-of-harare?start=20>>.

³⁶⁰ 'Review of The Hairdresser of Harare - The Times,' *Weaver Press*, accessed on 12.04.2024, <<https://www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com/reviews/71-the-hairdresser-of-harare?start=20>>.

³⁶¹ Matthews, p. 638.

³⁶² Ntshingila, p. 5.

³⁶³ Ibid, p. 3.

changes. The disease that destroyed so many, empowers her. It makes the once shy and weak Zola strong and brave. Even her inevitable death serves as proof that Zola has truly accepted and embraced her HIV/AIDS diagnosis.

The fact that such positive affirmation is beneficial to the health of HIV-positive patients is backed by medicine as an optimistic outlook benefits health as well as encourages healthy behavior. In addition, Hogan acknowledges that the overemphasis on being ‘special’ and ‘individual’ has hindered our ability to acknowledge other people’s pain and empathize with it. The lack of an open dialogue about the unjust experiences we encounter robs us of connecting with others seeing only difference where sameness also exists.³⁶⁴ That is why Zola posthumously addresses the gathered crowd at her funeral through a letter read aloud by one of her relatives. To fight the shame, stigma, and taboos surrounding the epidemic, in perhaps the most pivotal and blunt empowerment contribution of the whole novel, she writes:

*“It is my wish that people should know I died of AIDS. Not a long or short illness, as they tell us kills most celebrities. Not pneumonia, not TB, not insanity, not witchcraft, but AIDS. I give you permission to gossip loudly, not in whispers. Tell whoever cares to know that I lived positively with HIV, and died of AIDS.”*³⁶⁵

Zola is not afraid anymore to take on the taboo topic that is her disease. She is done hiding from gossip and pretending. This paragraph sums up the aim of this thesis when it comes to collecting works of fiction who are committed to transforming opinions about the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Of creating a ‘corpus of hope’ showing the reader the possibility of what can be and what can be overcome.

³⁶⁴ Hogan, p. 112 - 113.

³⁶⁵ Ntshingila, p. 21.

4.3. Corpus of Hope

One of the main aims of this thesis is to gather a corpus of works of fiction from Zimbabwe and South Africa which are written with a purpose to find hope within them. Hope, the possibility to change, to inspire and aspire for a different world, a world where a disease is just that, a disease. Hope has magical power of maintaining a person despite all odds, like it did for example for Nelson Mandela despite 27 years in prison. However hopeless a situation may seem, the power of ‘hope’ pushes us to go further and continue trying until we succeed. The fictional female characters manage to ‘concretize’ the ‘uncertain’ hope despite the various hardships they face, and thus serve as perhaps the best example of the positive ‘purpose’ that literature can convey to its readers.

Before examining the ‘fairy-tale-like’ hopeful endings, the beginning of this subchapter returns to one of the initial questions asked of why the ‘corpus of hope’ of this thesis is ‘constructed’ by works of fiction writing. When analyzing Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe’s work, critic James Olney argues that the work of an artist, the work of a novelist, goes contrary to the traditional African communal way of thinking and living. Olney highlights that African artists, especially novelists, embody the cultural anthropology method of the Western individualistic ideal of expressing the communal through the prism of a singular view. Just as traditional African dancing cannot be judged by the standards of European ballroom dancing, Olney distrusts Western individual analysis of the African group experience.³⁶⁶

When it comes to juxtaposing traditional African storytelling and the Anglophone (African) novel, Olney describes the former in terms of historical, sociological and cultural fiction, a ritual, or even an anthropological drama; and the latter in all the complex dramatization of human relationships implied by the traditional ‘novel’ in a ‘Western sense.’ Consequently, if African art and stories are explained with Western methodology, this might mean that they are written more for the Western reader than for the African reader, especially if they are written or published in English and not in one of the indigenous languages.

Olney goes as far as claiming that the novel is a ‘Western invention,’ thus its ideas and ideals are entirely “non-African.” In his book “Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature,” he argues that the way characters are described, the way they think and function in

³⁶⁶ Olney, p. 163.

Achebe's novels is "non-African," presenting an African personality that does not exist, and is in stark opposition to how 'actual' 'real' Africans would describe someone.³⁶⁷ Something similar is argued by Spivak, as her answer to the 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' question is no, they cannot, not when the Western academic field is unable to relate to the 'other' with anything other than its own paradigm.³⁶⁸

However, descriptions are the author's prerogative in works of fiction, as is the undeniable influence European colonization has had on the people of Africa. Achebe himself argues that by writing novels he honors his African legacy just like his ancestors did, but he is doing it in a symbolic figuration of his own.³⁶⁹ He returns to the past, not because of nostalgia, but to find roots of the present.³⁷⁰ Just like Achebe, who chose quotes from Yeats and Eliot as titles for his first two novels, so did Futhi Ntshingila include the words from the poem 'Do Not Go Gentle' from Welsh poet Dylan Thomas in her work. At Zola's funeral, her friend named 'Cleanman' begins to read the first verse of the poem, but is interrupted, as the mourners shout that Zola was not old, or a man, insisting that Cleanman "stop this English nonsense."³⁷¹ The South Africans in the story do not want Zola, one of their own, to be sent off in a 'non-African' way with English words written by an Englishman, by someone so foreign, someone who was the oppressor, and not one of them, thus seemingly agreeing with Olney.

Yet, Futhi Ntshingila, by her own admission, doesn't follow any literary formats but builds her written work on the legacy of Zulu oral traditions and folktales that are widely known as anecdotes in townships and squatter camps. By mixing facts and fiction she tells "the stories of those whose stories would otherwise never be told."³⁷² She specifically focuses on stories about empowering women in particularly disempowering circumstances, as an homage to all the strong women that surround her, whose stories and sacrifices she knows of, and now honors in her work. Using the HIV/AIDS empowerment writing techniques such as acceptance, justice, prevention, legacy, and others, are a way Ntshingila uses her authorial intent as an heiress of both, the African and Western writing and storytelling traditions.

³⁶⁷ Olney, p. 168.

³⁶⁸ Spivak, p. 308.

³⁶⁹ Olney, p. 178.

³⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 198.

³⁷¹ Ntshingila, p. 18.

³⁷² Olney, p. 142.

Just like the strong female characters she created, Futhi is empowered, and empowers, by using her unique ‘blended’ voice. Female-authored stories such as “We Kiss Them With Rain” are important as novels, as works of fiction, without being confined to a ‘subsection.’ Someone who reads them might make a better choice because of reading them. That choice might save their life. The true power of such narratives is not simply in their roles as texts, or in the gender of the person who wrote them, but as an intervention in the public sphere that shapes the politics and culture of our time.

Futhi Ntshingila empowers her fictional women through her own experience. There are bits and pieces of the autobiographical in “We Kiss Them With Rain.” Like the character of Mvelo, Futhi also studied journalism and worked as a reporter. She credits two incidents inspiring the narrative. The first one is in trying to understand women who get infected with HIV by their partner but continue to love him. She explores this unconditional, dangerous surrender to love in Zola and Sipho’s storyline of “being smothered to death by love laced with poison.”³⁷³ The other inspirations are the hardy and tough people living in the townships, who despite diseases, murders, rapes, natural disasters, xenophobic outbursts, alcoholism, death, and destruction surrounding them, know how to survive, to go on, and keep the normalcy going. She claims she needed to write down the stories of these everyday heroes, whose stories would otherwise not be known.

All fiction writers are biographers of their characters. Biography enters a story and retells it slightly altered. It is a leap into the imaginary, an invention, choice, releasing it from “the weighty facticity of history,” a desire mediating “the present through the past that produces it, and through that mediation, produce the past anew.”³⁷⁴ And it is done through words on the page, which overcome difference, project the desire, and facilitate its satisfaction.³⁷⁵ The (auto)biographical eventually transcends the personal and begins to represent a mixture of traditions, culture, the social, and the individual.³⁷⁶ Just like her fictional women, and contrary to common belief, Ntshingila made it out of poverty by educating herself, working hard, and knocking on doors until one opened: “Hard work and luck met up and made my life and the

³⁷³ Ntshingila, p. 140.

³⁷⁴ Butler, *Desire*, p. 173.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 174.

³⁷⁶ Olney, p. 184 - 185.

lives of many others a reality that can be perceived as hopeful.”³⁷⁷ Now, she gives hope through her work.

Sentimentality, in works of fiction written by women, is one of the key points of interest of this research, as on the one hand compassion, sympathy for, and with, the characters, draws attention to their problems and issues. On the other hand, the use of sentimentality often ‘reduces’ the narratives to ‘chick flicks’ or ‘romantic’ novels as if ‘women’s fiction’ is a subsection of literature, while ‘men’s fiction’ is the norm. Katie Hogan points out that sentimentality can be used in women’s favor, breaking silences about how it feels to be an HIV-positive woman.³⁷⁸ Ironically, what may be considered ‘romantic’ behavior of women, is actually often a well-calculated maneuver by women to better their socio-economic situation. For example, Mvelo assumes agency by providing Sabekile a socially stable, and economically well-situated home, where she has all the chances of breaking the negative cycle of her family, and where she can prosper, get educated, and develop healthy relationships.

The initial diagnosis of being HIV positive is usually followed by shock and feelings of alienation. It may feel like an individual experience, which of course it is, but it can also be dealt with on a collective level. By employing the ‘using your voice’ method, the infected can better cope with their ‘new’ reality of dealing with physical and psychological pain. However, based on Burchardt’s research, women are more ready than men to speak about their situation and join support groups which can provide relief from loneliness and revive their sense of hope.

Social re-inclusion via support groups can ‘normalize’ parts of the situation and offer support in times of need. The ‘femininity’ of admitting weakness can be an unlikely ally to women in the fight against AIDS. Such confessions help create social networks much needed in coping with diseases. As the discourse of ‘manly men’ dictates that they should not admit weakness, they only confide in partners or family members and seek no other support groups. Thus, in the long turn, in trying to preserve their culturally constructed ‘manhood,’ men actually cause damage to themselves and those closest to them.³⁷⁹

In “We Kiss Them With Rain,” Mvelo gets almost a ‘dreamlike’ ending. The people she left Sabekile with, turn out to be related to Nonceba. The baby stays with them, but Mvelo sees

³⁷⁷ Ntshingila, p. 145.

³⁷⁸ Hogan, p. 121.

³⁷⁹ Burchardt, p. 75 - 76.

her almost every day, as she continues pursuing a career in music while also studying journalism at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. When she falls in love with Cetshwayo she never forgets Nonceba's advice and her mother's lesson about HIV and condom use. The book closes with an empowered and wise Mvelo who knows she can handle life's future challenges. Referring to this 'fairytale' conclusion of the novel, Ntshingila points out that the story is grim but realistic, and its ending is hopeful and realistic too: "Not everyone comes out of the cycle of poverty but, with determination, people do make something of their lives [...] I think the ending is a fairy tale only if one believes every person who starts out poor ends up poor."³⁸⁰

Additionally, the romantic happy ending Ntshingila writes goes against the restrictive 'respectability' by openly talking about sex and shows HIV positive women (of color) deserving of love, not 'punishing them' for having the virus and diminishing them only to the status of a victim."³⁸¹ Because Mvelo, Sabekile, and Nonceba get a 'happy ending' in the book, some have interpreted it as 'unrealistic' and 'fairy-tale-like,'³⁸² but Ntshingila diplomatically addresses such judgments "as a state of mind of the person who does the judging."³⁸³ Women are no longer suffering in silence. They are reaching for the Bhabha-defined 'third space of enunciation.'³⁸⁴ In "We Kiss Them with Rain," through different characters and their varying perspectives, Ntshingila is successful in creating a 'transformative' discourse, hopefully not only empowering women but also inspiring men as well.

Re-thinking the use of language that creates scripts in which men are the only protectors and defenders of women can help break down such stereotypes. Feminism supporting the African female consciousness in literature does not wish to 'punish' or work against men. It does, however, wish to point out areas of injustices which men can help improve. Confrontation, and looking for oppositions in terms of the 'either-or' logic, is not useful in a world that is interconnected and complementary. Consequently, producing narratives that create new, different patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving, requires new approaches instead of following old patterns.

³⁸⁰ Ntshingila, p. 144.

³⁸¹ Hogan, p. 124.

³⁸² Ntshingila, p. 144-145.

³⁸³ 'Appendix D: Interview with Futhi Ntshingila'

³⁸⁴ Attree, *Women Writing AIDS*, p. 49.

Just including women in the novels does not suffice anymore. It matters how these fictional women behave, how they speak, what kinds of relationships do they have with men and other women, and what kind of a role do they play in the public and private spheres. If they remain silent, submissive, and secondary then a 'transformative' discourse is not formed. The way we are represented inevitably influences who we are or what we can be. When harmful gender stereotypes are not resisted but are simply reproduced, not just in literature, but in any sphere, the vicious cycle continues. Only by questioning marginalization, oppression, univocalization, and socially constructed phenomena assumed as natural, will new ways of thinking, self-creation and agency awake and flourish.

The fact that the ending of "The Hairdresser of Harare" takes a disappointing turn with regards to female empowerment has been described in the previous subchapter. However, the ending of "The Uncertainty of Hope" can also be labeled as 'problematic' in terms of a feminist reading. Onai's success or 'happy ending' is achieved by her securing a job, a source of income, and housing for her, and her children. However, she does not achieve that by her own work or merit. Her most prominent achievement(s) are 'given' to her by a man.

In "Tale of Tamari," Tamari is thought that she should not expect 'prince charming' to save her, she must save herself. Yet, Onai is saved by Tapiwa, her very own 'knight in shining armor.' It is something that can be seen as diminishing her self-fulfillment and independence from men. Tapiwa gives her the job she needs, exactly when she needs it the most, in a business that he owns, and Onai's family will live in a house that he owns. The 'excuse' Tagwira gives for such a development is that this is Onai's 'reward' for her kindness to Tapiwa when he was a beggar. Onai's kind-heartedness is put above her professional abilities making it seem as if her kindness is more important than her education, experiences, or qualifications.

However critical about the ending a feminist literary analysis of "The Uncertainty of Hope" is, it also applauds the focus on a number of gendered pressures women in southern Africa face on a daily basis. Tagwira's iconoclastic representation of women through Onai advocates proactivity and self-actualization. The protagonist's insistence on protection 'save' her from HIV infection, and consequently 'save' her life. Onai survived because she refused subordination, because she dared to defy, and allowed herself to ask for what she deserves.

Even though the book's ending might not offer a 'feminist intervention' subversion, it does create a 'transformative' discourse that is a "carrier of a compromised feminist message."³⁸⁵ While in her marriage, Onai is the subordinate and Gari is in a position of total power, her 'mutually beneficial business relationship' with Tapiwa, is a partnership in which Onai has a socially and economically active role. Onai's transformation starts with her self-reconciliation and transition from being a housewife to a businesswoman. However, it is finalized, and this is where Tagwira foreshadows a positive future direction of society as a whole, by cross-gender cooperation.

Onai is what Eleni Coundouriotis calls an 'improbable figure,' a character who despite circumstances achieves 'the impossible.' All the odds are against Onai, she loses everything, and yet, her misfortunes are not seen as weaknesses, as she manages to find a way out and soar. The reader's expectation of her failure, or at least HIV infection, is subverted as the unexpected happens. Such improbable figures who have been faced with human rights abuse often emerge from the rubble of humanitarian disasters.³⁸⁶ No longer weak, resentful, silent or subordinate Onai perseveres, knowing that, like everything else, suffering ends one day, and that she has come out stronger on the other side.

In their 2015 article which focuses on "The Uncertainty of Hope," Nelson Mlambo, Jairus Kangira, and T.C. Smit from the University of Namibia reflect on surviving 'against-all-odds,' resilience theory, 'surviving and adapting,' and 'worst-case-scenarios' within African literary studies.³⁸⁷ They suggest that Tagwira's approach to overcoming hardship is a successful antidote to the prevailing Afro-pessimism. This is reflected in Faith's words and the explanation that follows the marked ellipsis:

*"Hey, the situation is bad, but it's not that bad ... At least if you believe that people have the ability to change their own lives, rather than just assume fatalistically that somehow the future will improve of its own accord."*³⁸⁸

³⁸⁵ Murray, p. 23-24.

³⁸⁶ Eleni Coundouriotis, 'Improbable Figures: Realist Fictions of Insecurity in Contemporary African Fiction,' *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 49:2 (2016), p. 236.

³⁸⁷ Nelson Mlambo, Jairus Kangira and T.C. Smit, 'Critical Reflections on Surviving against all Odds in Valerie Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope*,' *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 2:2 (2015), p. 48.

³⁸⁸ Tagwira, p. 351.

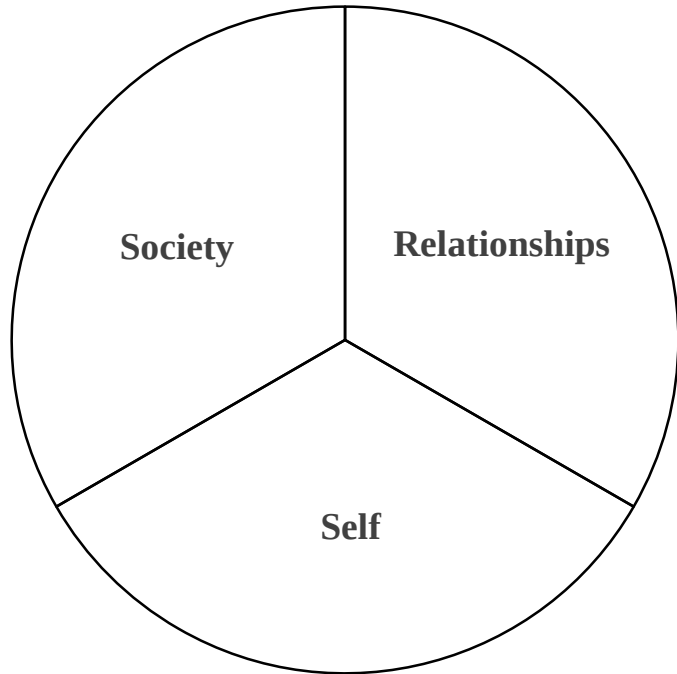
Onai's survival and eventual success is built on suffering, self-denial, practicality, and perseverance. The more she has to suffer, the more resilient she becomes building an 'always on guard' 'survivor personality' day-by-day. Living a 'purposeful life' is the conviction that makes Onai an "inspirational model of hope."³⁸⁹ Through her tight-knit group of family and friends, Onai manages to build a support system of 'strategic alliances.' Other characters in the novel like Katy and John exemplify the 'pragmatic morality' needed to survive times of crisis. Emily's activism, Tapiwa's lived 'ubuntu,' and Faith's 'faith' in the value of education, show further approaches to achieving endurance.

Onai's story transforms and creates hope that good people come to good ends. Hers is a story of survival against the odds, improbable but true, which makes "palpable a new sense of potentiality for the future,"³⁹⁰ not just for Onai, but for anyone. Mvelo, Zola, Nonceba, Sabekile, Tamari, Vimbai, Chiwoniso, Katy, Faith and Emily find ways to cope. They fight the pressures of 'reactive' societies, they build relationships with friends, family and amongst themselves which function as a safety net in hard times, overcome religious, racial, class and sexual differences, and most importantly, they learn how to love and appreciate themselves, calm and secure in the notion that anything life 'throws' at them, they can 'handle.'

These women know that when they suffer, this suffering is amplified because of how loved they are. To put it differently, they know from first-hand experience, that the pain and burden of disease are not solitary experiences and do not belong to only the infected. Every friend, every family member, every partner who loves the infected person suffers as well. By moderation and gender complementation, these fictional women help in creating a transformative and empowering 'corpus of hope.'

³⁸⁹ Mlambo, Kangira and Smit, p. 51.

³⁹⁰ Coundouriotis, p. 236.



5. Conclusion

5.1. Answering Back

Before the concluding remarks a quick look back at the research questions from chapter one is provided. Chapter two highlights how myths, denialism, and conspiracy theories about HIV/AIDS are extremely dangerous and powerful. They go from rumors to truths, whispers to rumbles, linger in the collective unconscious long after they are created, and have hurtful material consequences. The dominant anti-West, anti-HIV/AIDS, anti-ARV's, anti-condom use, and virgin cures have caused havoc and 'murdered' thousands, but have been particularly restrictive for female emancipation and protection.

Instead of falling prey to 'compassion fatigue' that nothing will ever change for the better, female characters and their communities self-organize awareness campaigns, and show solidarity instead of search for scapegoats. The fact that public figures and officials have a responsibility in raising awareness instead of monetizing on human tragedies is clearly pointed out in the novels. The 'epidemic female justice' is inclusive, remedial, emphatic, personally and emotionally involved, principled, and ethical, conscious of both, systemic oppression, and empowerment potential.

It can be said that the 'lived experience' of epidemics, alters the 'interpretative community' of readers of HIV/AIDS fiction, as well as re-ignites interest in it. Fictionalized 'narrative witnessing' has enormous 'discursive potential to transform.' Therefore, it can be concluded that 'reading with care' which can be here translated into 'lessons learned' from the HIV/AIDS epidemic as described in the works of fiction, can help with understanding and coping with present-day epidemics. Nevertheless, if the 'lessons' from the past are not taken into account, the 'lecture' will be repeated.

If storytelling is understood as an identity project, both the HIV/AIDS fiction author, and potential reader, have a responsibility to, based on the 'lessons learned,' 'react' differently in the future. In the novels, the existence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is questioned, as are the suggested and proven routes of transmission, and preventive measures. Routine volunteer testing is seldom used. Nevertheless, 'living positively' by taking care of the body and the mind, in addition to making 'safer choices,' are on the rise for women. Meeting like-minded people

or people in the same situation results in ‘safer’ life choices. The guardians of ‘morality’ when it comes to disease outbreaks are those who hold the power; those who have money when the outbreak occurs.

The most commonly used literary figures are metaphors, similes, allegories, exaggeration, repetition and, interestingly, (marked) ellipsis. The use of the latter to omit spans of time in novels is especially poignant in applying ‘reading with care’ when it is marked with the three dots as it leaves much (intentionally) unsaid, prompting the reader to fill in the gaps. Visual, auditory, olfactory and gustatory imagery is also very common. When ‘reader identification and emotional attachment’ wishes to be heightened by the author, the third person narration is substituted by the first person ‘I’ narration.

Including further chapters, the male-authored works of fiction included in this thesis are not gender-balanced as the female identity is presented as ‘static’ by a dismissive masculinist pose. Gender essentialism is featured in unrealized female protagonists, who remain passive, internalize submission, and accept stigmatization. Women are presented as ‘vindictive,’ especially towards each other; they ‘use’ other women, but are rarely allowed to ‘use’ men. Female characters are ‘muted’ and ‘voiceless’ clichés, by-products used to tell male stories. Their assigned position in the narrative is secondary. Seen through ‘masculine reason’ women ‘perform’ their gender. There is no ‘female pact’ formed as women rely on institutions that sustain modern society. Their ‘unliberated’ voices in male novels present a microcosm of the patriarchal system’s dynamics. Different avoidance strategies in accepting HIV-positive status are used, the most prominent being drug use and suicide, however, they are all employed by men.

The use of the ‘vulnerability’ paradigm in works of fiction does not help in the creation of a ‘transformative discourse.’ As proven by the books analyzed, women can be both ‘victims’ and ‘victors.’ The same goes for men. Both women and men, exhibit ‘controlled schizophrenia’ in order to comply with the ‘dominant’ culture. In the novels ‘successful’ masculinity is associated with power, sexual preference, being ‘active,’ by self-definition, and self-determination. Contrary, the ‘archetypal good woman’ is passive, naïve, subordinate, ignorant, self-denying, self-sacrificing, caregiving personification of virtue, morality, and domesticity, showing no interest or knowledge of assuming agency. The novels write against the perception that a woman who insists on equity is ‘heartless,’ and against the illusion that every woman

wants to be a mother. Motherhood can also be seen as a way of entrapment making women be caretakers of children, men, and parents. However, marriage, including polygamous marriage, is seen as 'security' for women.

Generally, the masculinities found in the novels are predominantly described as negative such as hegemonic, aggressive, and 'invincible' in an ironic way. There is a wider variety of femininity; from 'proper' and 'broken,' to confident, available, dependent, and hypersexualized. Occasionally admitting weakness is described as 'feminine.' Female solidarity is seen as a 'weapon of the weak,' and failure of 'mobilizing support' as hurtful to men. The sexualities featured are 'calculated,' 'predatory,' 'fluid,' and racialized. Nevertheless, while considering both female and male authored works, 'new' discourses are offered by imagining a 'speculative model' of human existence, one in which masculinity is 'altered' and 'transformed' in favor of both sexes, in which issues of class difference, HIV protection, and sexual desire with regards to bettering female lives are openly discussed, and in which consciousness is given a 'gender neutral' status.

The creation and application of a 'transformative discourse' is 'tested' by addressing sexual violence against women, by addressing the silences, barriers to abstinence, and condom use for young women, the most vulnerable group when it comes to new HIV infections, and by analyzing the 'respectability' of marriage. In all the above-mentioned cases, the novels are successful in creating thought-provoking narratives which have the potential to 'transform.' The subsequent responsibility in creating a 'corpus of hope' belongs to both the author and the reader, the creator and the interpreter. When asked on a metaphorical, and literal level, why men rape, 'questioned' and 'undermined' masculinity, are put forward as answers.

However, the 'discourses of resistance' formed, suggest that emasculation of one sex doesn't necessarily result in empowering of the 'other' sex. Instead, writing against stereotypical representations and 'transgressive' complementary gender-sensitive characters, are introduced. Reader identification is influenced by writing and interpreting 'into life' what the writer and reader want. Race and class are occasionally used as 'smoke screens' to not separately address the issue of gender, however, the issues are interdependent.

Religion, positive reappraisal, tactical use of sexual relations, and reproductive health as a future-creating power are the meaning-making mechanisms used by female characters in

order to protect themselves from the epidemic and subordination. The techniques of female disempowerment described in the novels are poverty, religion, respectability, virginity, and virginity testing, as well as sexual violence, especially rape. The techniques of female empowerment applied are acceptance and positive affirmation, finding 'your voice,' justice through 'death as release,' the supernatural, daring to 'be different,' and the legacy of powerful women. The return to the past is not always nostalgic, it can be a way to find roots in the present. Sentimentality cannot be 'abused' in order to degrade female-written novels to a 'subsection' of literature. Similarly, a 'happy ending' is frowned upon only if it is written by a woman; if it is written by a man it is considered 'justice.'

The 'gender discourse' versus the 'disease discourse' problematic is realized on the principle 'either/or' meaning that the book either writes in favor of 'humanizing' the epidemic, or in favor of women. Predominantly, men are still considered as the 'producers' of knowledge who impose their cultural arbitrary onto women. However, only by taking into consideration the interconnectedness of these issues can the issue of HIV/AIDS be resolved.

Disease outbreaks, as moments of crisis, can be in terms of gender, perceived as both, opportunities and disasters. On the one hand, 'crisis' is a 'catalytic agent of change,' showing gender 'fault lines' and subversive potential. However, when it comes to the case of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, a 'transformative discourse' has been more thoroughly realized within the realm of 'disease,' and not within the realm of (female) 'gender,' hence the higher numbers of infected women. The outbreak of HIV/AIDS in southern Africa created a hierarchical list of priorities, and gender was not at the top. Generally, political and economic issues were seen as more pressing than the epidemic in both Zimbabwe and, especially, in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Nevertheless, it is precisely such 'order of affairs' that contributed to the 'biblical' proportions of HIV/AIDS in the region. When the disease was finally made number one, issues of gender were again pushed to the second position which led to the current situation, where there are over 2 million more women than men infected with HIV in the two countries. Thus, the question of when, and if, women will become the number one priority of the two countries remains open. Potential HIV infection is the decisive factor for female characters to change their lives and aim for self-empowerment.

Even though they have been addressed and analyzed during various parts of the thesis, the final ‘answers back’ refer to the four hypothesis presupposed in the introduction and answer them in a nutshell.

Based on the analysis, the first hypothesis that ‘*Female focused HIV/AIDS fiction is written to empower women*’ is true, though more so for the selected female authors than male.

The second hypothesis that ‘*Narrative witnessing of the HIV/AIDS epidemic can help in dealing with other epidemics*’ can also be confirmed, and the subsequent closing remarks subchapter will quickly highlight this meaning in the ‘post Covid-19’ era.

The third hypothesis claiming that ‘*The physical aspect of the disease is levelled by mental strength*’ is true as only the mentally strong characters manage to overcome a potential, or very real, HIV positive diagnosis. Interestingly, only one of the female characters, Ntshingila’s Zola actually dies of AIDS, while the majority of male characters either die of AIDS or take their own life, indicating that writers of fiction credit women with having more mental strength when it comes to coping with the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The final, fourth hypothesis, that ‘*Self-transformation is intertwined with societal and relational discourses*’ is confirmed. Communality is put above individuality when it comes to women’s empowerment within the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the ‘female’ approach is proven to be more successful than the ‘male’ one, thus, more HIV positive women survive longer than HIV positive men.

5.2. Closing Remarks

This thesis has shown that women's HIV infection is far from accidental and secondary. After critical reflection, producing sympathy, 'compassion traps,' and placing women in the 'respectable' moral 'caretaker' roles is not only no longer acceptable, but also blocks the paths of responsible social and personal transformations. Literature about HIV/AIDS can challenge, question, or serve as a source for social policies. Some of the novels are 'trailblazers' because of who wrote them, when and where they were written, and about what they were written. Others are trailblazers because of how they were perceived, how they 'transformed,' or keep 'transforming' their readership by providing a new perspective on female issues within the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

While a full attack or counter-attack 'on all fronts' through the use of either exaggerated 'fundamental' characters or ideas on the one side, or overtly sentimental and compassionate characters on the other side, is very appealing, slower, partial, 'soft' influence has more long-term benefits. Women in fiction are no longer 'written to be liked' nor are their fairy-tale endings which come about due to coincidence instead of actual 'need to work on' achievements. In this light, the most effective 'transformative discourse' is the one created through or by moderation.

In light of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, discussions about sex, sexuality, sexual pleasure, and sexual health with regards to women's rights can no longer be pushed aside. As the personal becomes political, suffering in silence prevents women from reaching the 'third space of enunciation.' Judgmental labels women are deemed to when they do not comply with the dominant male culture in South Africa and Zimbabwe, are hurtful, and even potentially life-threatening. As Ayana K. Weekley puts it: "After more than three decades of this epidemic, we can and must do better than this."³⁹¹ Joanne M. Braxton adds that especially women caught in the middle of the devastating HIV/AIDS storm must know "that hatred destroys by silence, by trivialization, by the pretense that nothing we have to say is worth anything simply because we

³⁹¹ Weekley, p. 188-189.

are saying it.”³⁹² Those who presume hierarchy over women can no longer arrogantly assume which sex is more important, which should rule, and which should ‘survive.’³⁹³

According to Jacques Derrida, for men, the potentiality of HIV infection has irreversibly tainted the ‘pure’ emotion of sexual desire, the intersubjectivity, the rapport to the alter ego.³⁹⁴ In the worst-case scenario, because of HIV/AIDS, the consequence of having unprotected sexual intercourse is death. However, for women, that desire was never ‘pure’ as, even if sexually transmitted diseases are put aside for a moment, the potentiality of unwanted pregnancy is always present. Thus, the ‘risks’ for women are invariably higher than for men. The sexual disease ‘battleground’ can only be ‘demobilized’ by a mutual ‘surrender’; writing can be a powerful tool for imagining ideas and alternative realities for the future.

There were very few books about HIV/AIDS in the beginning stages of the epidemic in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Out of those, virtually none were about women. Then there was a spike in published works of fiction about the epidemic around the year 2010, as HIV/AIDS prevention promotion and awareness campaigns increased, and there was ‘pressure’ to make ARV’s generally accessible for ‘poor’ African countries. However, as HIV/AIDS became a ‘manageable,’ ‘livable’ disease, we are now witnessing a slow, but steady, decline in writing and publishing on the matter.

When the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic forced people to quarantine at home, a renewed interest for ‘epidemic fiction’ amongst the global audience occurred. The enormous toll of human lives epidemics/pandemics claim, can lead to despair. Thus, suddenly, works pulled out of the ‘corpus of hope’ like the ones gathered and analyzed in this research, were of the utmost importance. Firstly, in reassuring the reader that, even though they might feel so while they are unraveling, epidemics are not singular experiences. They have been present throughout human history, and yet, people always survived, they persevered. Fiction has served, and continues to serve, as a source of consolation and solace that everything will be all right. And secondly, for women, and for other marginalized groups, gender-aware HIV/AIDS fiction can show how to assume agency even in the direst of circumstances.

³⁹² Joanne M. Braxton, ‘Being Present, Facing Forward’ in *Black Female Sexualities*, ed. by Trimiko Melancon and Joanne M. Braxton (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), p. 191.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Attree, *Women Writing AIDS*, p. 87.

The analyzed stories can be seen as ‘allegories’ of the two selected nations. Geissler and Becker estimate that Africans are currently in a state of ‘abjection’ because of the economic turmoil beyond their control, local political and military conflicts, the individual ‘new ways’ of life which go contrary to the ‘traditional’ communal ways, and due to disease outbreaks literally ‘attacking’ their bodies.³⁹⁵ Globalization, fluidity, and hybridization have changed South African and Zimbabwean societies, but even without them, the old must always give way to the new, that is the nature of our human existence. How the ‘new’ is constructed, either as a borrowing from the ‘old,’ a mix between the ‘old’ and the ‘new,’ or by something completely ‘new’ is opened and not predetermined by the past.

Regarding the potential future research about ‘epidemic fiction,’ it remains to be seen if the post-Covid-19 era will result in new works of fiction being written about the HIV/AIDS epidemic or, more likely, new works will focus on the ‘new’ Covid-19 pandemic or other diseases, and mention HIV/AIDS only in combination with the more recent outbreaks. What can be clearly stated is that gender-aware fiction written by female, male, or non-binary authors about HIV/AIDS, Covid-19, or any other epidemic/pandemic outbreak, is a crucial part of dealing with them. Additionally, there is a lot of potential in further developing the ‘reading with care’ theories with how reading influences ‘real-life’ decision making. Empirical research in reader response with a combination of disciplines like literature with sociology or anthropology could result in works like “Literature and Transformation: A Narrative Study of Life-Changing Reading Experiences” (2020) for which Thor Magnus Tangerås created a method of ‘intimate reading,’ though his ‘experiment’ was met with mixed reviews.

The ‘triple oppression’ of women in the shape of race, class, and gender, suggests that HIV/AIDS is an epidemic driven by men even though women are contracting the disease at a faster rate. Nonetheless, what can be observed in the analyzed works of fiction is that when men write about HIV/AIDS, they write about a plague that is ‘destroying’ humankind. When women write about HIV/AIDS they write about how men have tried to oppress and ‘destroy’ womankind.

Using Althusser’s interpellation on female empowerment analysis wishes to indicate that women are/should also be the holders of capital and power. Althusser presupposed that ‘the economical’ sphere, the capital, is always the strongest. However, women in South Africa and

³⁹⁵ Geissler and Becker, p. 11.

Zimbabwe facing potential HIV infection can easily tell him that this is not true. Death is stronger than capital. When death knocks on the doors, no amount of capital will help. Thus, by protecting themselves from HIV/AIDS and consequential death, women hold the ultimate power.

Equality between genders is far from being realized, in the two selected countries, in Africa, on our planet. Even in fiction, in a world where anything is possible, the discourses of the real world sometimes prevent it ... And sometimes they don't. In a quote featured in the opening chapter of this thesis, Spivak calls the United Nations or international NGO's "the real players in a dominant feminist collectivity crossing borders."³⁹⁶ 'Reading with care' can launch an 'NGO for the mind,' for the imagination, and train the imagination to transform the reader's fantasies, so that fantasies of gender equality in the realm of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, will become reality in southern Africa and beyond. The desired complementation/reciprocal circular co-influence model version of the future spheres of influence has no sharp edges like the triangular models have. The 'corpus of hope' created by a 'transformative discourse' concludes that if it can be imagined, it can become true.

³⁹⁶ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p. 54.

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Appendix

A. Abstract

B. Zusammenfassung

C. Thesis Author CV

D. Interview with Futhi Ntshingila

A. Abstract

The overall theory this thesis introduces is a ‘composite comparativist’ experience of literariness, a method of close reading dubbed ‘reading with care.’ It focuses on the ethics of reading critically, imagining new forms by listening to texts for alternative world formations that stand against identity politics. It is a re-making of the world as textual, transcending what is, and creating what could or might be. The Spivak-Butler based ‘reading with care’ concept is concretized in the thesis with Louis Althusser’s theory on ideology and interpellation, explaining, changing, and dismantling the dominant discourses, as defined by Michel Foucault, about HIV/AIDS and women. The tool used for this task is the ‘transformative discourse’ which shows what ‘reading with care’ can do. The aim of the ‘transformative discourse’ is establishing a Homi Bhabha-inspired ‘equality in difference’ concept to gather a ‘corpus of hope’ based on reciprocity, moderation and complementation as an alternative for simple overpowering. To answer the overall research question of what empowers women within the realm of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa and Zimbabwe based on the twelve selected novels, the inward shaped pyramid structure of society/relationships/self is presupposed. In this structure ‘society’ entails mostly the political with female reactions and reactions to future potential epidemics, ‘relationships’ include women in relation to men, family, other women, religion, class, race and sexuality, while ‘self’ is constructed by growth through periods of women’s lives.

B. Zusammenfassung

Die übergeordnete Theorie, die diese Dissertation einführt, ist eine 'komposite vergleichende' Erfahrung von Literarizität, eine Methode des genauen Lesens, die als 'sorgfältiges Lesen' bezeichnet wird. Sie konzentriert sich auf die Ethik des kritischen Lesens, stellt sich neue Formen vor, indem sie auf Texte hört, um alternative Weltformationen zu finden, die sich gegen Identitätspolitik stellen. Es ist eine Neugestaltung der Welt als textliches, das überwindet, was ist, und schafft, was sein könnte oder sein mag. Das auf Spivak und Butler basierende Konzept des 'sorgfältigen Lesens' wird in der Dissertation mit Louis Althusssers Theorie über Ideologie und Interpellation konkretisiert, die erklärt, ändert und die dominanten Diskurse, wie von Michel Foucault definiert, über HIV/AIDS und Frauen abbaut. Das Werkzeug, das für diese Aufgabe verwendet wird, ist der 'transformative Diskurs', der zeigt, was 'sorgfältiges Lesen' bewirken kann. Das Ziel des 'transformativen Diskurses' ist es, ein von Homi Bhabha inspiriertes Konzept der 'Gleichheit in der Differenz' zu etablieren, um ein 'Korpus der Hoffnung' zu sammeln, das auf Gegenseitigkeit, Mäßigung und Nachsinnen als Alternative zur einfachen Übermacht basiert. Um die übergeordnete Forschungsfrage zu beantworten, was Frauen im Rahmen der HIV/AIDS-Epidemie in Südafrika und Simbabwe anhand der zwölf ausgewählten Romane ermächtigt, wird die nach innen geformte Pyramidenstruktur der Gesellschaft/Beziehungen/das Ich vorausgesetzt. In dieser Struktur beinhaltet 'Gesellschaft' hauptsächlich das Politische mit weiblichen Reaktionen und Reaktionen auf zukünftige potenzielle Epidemien, 'Beziehungen' umfassen Frauen in Beziehung zu Männern, Familie, anderen Frauen, Religion, Klasse, Rasse und Sexualität, während 'das Ich' durch Wachstum durch Lebensperioden von Frauen konstruiert wird.

C. Thesis Author CV

Education:

- **Dr. Phil.** in Comparative Literature, University of Vienna, 2017 - ongoing;
- **Dr. Phil.** in English and American Studies, University of Vienna, 2015 - 2020;
- **MA** in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, University of Vienna, 2012 - 2015;
- **BA** in History, University of Maribor, 2009 - 2012;
- **BA** in English Language and Literature, University of Maribor, 2009 - 2012.

Scholarships, fellowships, rewards:

- Academic year 2022/2023; - for founding the group 'Early Career Researchers for Decolonizing Global Health' hosted by King's College London (United Kingdom);
- Academic year 2021/2022; - for a stay at Université Paris Cité (France);
- Academic year 2019/2020; - for a stay at the Central European University (Hungary/Austria);
- Academic year 2018/2019; - for a stay at the University of Pardubice (Czech Republic);
- Academic year 2017/2018; - for a stay at Goldsmiths, University of London (United Kingdom);
- Academic year 2016/2017; - for a stay at the Comenius University in Bratislava (Slovakia);
- Academic year 2015/2016; - for a placement with the HIV/AIDS Section of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (South Africa/Mozambique/Austria);
- Academic year 2013/2014; - for a stay at the University of Paris - Sorbonne (France);
- Academic year 2012/2013; - for being amongst the most talented students from the Republic of Slovenia (awarded for several years);
- Academic year 2011/2012; - for being amongst the most talented students from Maribor (Slovenia) (awarded for several years); - a special reward for being among the top 5% of students of the University of Maribor (Slovenia);
- Academic year 2010/2011; - a special reward for being among the top 5% of students of the University of Maribor (Slovenia); - for a stay at the University of Bergen (Norway).

Employment outside of Academia:

- **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC):** HIV/AIDS Section and Section on Synthetic Drugs;
- **European Commission:** Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI - EU EOM);
- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR);**
- **Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE):** Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR);
- **Pimlico International Consulting.**

D. Interview with Futhi Ntshingila

The following is the full transcript of the interview with Futhi Ntshingila, author of “We Kiss Them with Rain”, conducted via email in July 2021 (the final answers were received on the 19th of July 2021).

PZ (Polona Zajec): What is the main aim of your novel “We Kiss Them with Rain” and why did you feel it was important to write about women’s experience of the HIV/AIDS epidemic?

FN (Futhi Ntshingila): *My main aim was to narrate the story of women in the margins of society and the challenges they face on the daily basis. HIV/AIDS is one of the many challenges they face.*

PZ: Which writing techniques or mechanisms did you use to get the ‘purpose’ or ‘intention’ of the novel across?

FN: *I mostly follow the construction of the character with really feeling like I have to deliberately deliver a “message” through the voices of the characters and the context within which they find themselves.*

PZ: Why doesn’t Mvelo get tested for HIV after her rape and becoming pregnant (especially, after witnessing Zola’s illness)? Why isn’t Sabekile tested?

FN: *It is part of the real hardship that she was in. She had kept it secret and I hardly think she thought of testing when she was preoccupied with so much. Also, remember her age and her thought process as a kid already burdened with so much.*

PZ: Many women have been or still are being silenced like Mvelo who metaphorically and literally ‘loses’ her voice only to ‘find’ it again at the end; what was the intended symbolism behind that?

FN: *The brutal rape took her voice but not for long. The anger and the urge for revenge bring back her voice and essence which literally kills the rapist without her having to say much.*

PZ: Mvelo, Sabekile, and Nonceba get a ‘happy ending’ in the book which some have interpreted as ‘unrealistic’ and ‘fairy-tale-like’³⁹⁷; how do you comment on such judgments?

FN: *I’ve always seen this as a state of mind of the person who does the judging.*

PZ: When writing “We Kiss Them with Rain” who was your target audience or which readership did you have in mind? Has the ‘actual’ audience differed from the one you ‘intended’ it for?

FN: *I didn’t have a specific audience in mind. I was mostly preoccupied with the telling of the story. It was a pleasant surprise to see the story being received in parts of the globe I certainly did not have in mind. I have simply seen it as a part of the South African tapestry of stories. It is a human story that can connect with anyone male or female if they open themselves up to it.*

PZ: Why has the title of the novel changed from the original South African release title “Do Not Go Gentle” to “We Kiss Them with Rain” for the North American release?

FN: *“We Kiss Them with Rain” was my original title for the book but my South African publisher suggested “Do Not Go Gentle”. When the North American publisher heard of my original title, they loved it and chose to go with it.*

PZ: Is the decision to write in English as a worldwide ‘lingua franca’ prevalent amongst South African writers?

FN: *Yes, English is part of the mental colonization that was meted out on us. There is a revival of languages but the economic viability is crippled by the continuous education in English, leaving very few preferring to read in local languages.*

PZ: Do you see parallels between the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the current Covid-19 pandemic, especially considering gender (in)equality?

FN: *I think both these pandemics highlighted the inequalities of our societies.*

³⁹⁷ Ntshingila, p. 144-145.

PZ: Would you say that HIV/AIDS fiction is predominantly written to highlight the human experience dimension of the disease for the infected and the vicariously affected? Did you write a female-centered story to empower its female readers?

FN: HIV/AIDS just happens to be one of many issues faced by women. I didn't write the story for it to be "HIV/AIDS fiction". My main objective was to highlight the lives of women in the margins of society, to show their human dignity and interactions, and that despite class divisions in the end they are women who navigate life within the trenches of it all; AIDS, abuse, patriarchy and so on. They had aspirations and dreams for a better life. I try to focus on telling a good story that can be read by all genders to show how the politics of marginalizing women can be crippling and disheartening.

