



Analysing the Plight of HIV-positive Women in South African Society as Represented in Sindiwe Magona's *Beauty's Gift*

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Abstract

Statistics show that South Africa has one of the highest rates of HIV/Aids in the world, with a prevalence of 18.9% of adults afflicted, and women much more vulnerable to the infection than men. Although anti-retrovirals are widely available, social injustices such as poverty and the low status of women contribute to this gendered disparity. In the novel *Beauty's Gift* (2008), the author Sindiwe Magona relates a narrative in which four women lose their best friend to Aids, prompting them to take decisive action as women who play a significant role within the domain of the family. The Aids activist Jackie Achmat has called this novel "one of the most important books about HIV/AIDS in our country." This article examines the fictional representation of the plight of HIV-positive women in South Africa through an analysis of the characterisation and the author's representations of socio-cultural injustice suffered by these women. The paper further explores the advocacy and agency of these women characters during the time of sickness. With respect to stigma and discrimination, in the context of HIV and Aids, I argue that despair and hopelessness thrive in situations where women are plagued by sickness. I further argue that shame and secrecy are social conditions that perpetuate the spread of HIV, leading to a common response of silence. Lastly, the representations of bereavement and grief are analysed in this article. My examination of the agency of women characters in the chosen novel is underpinned by the theory of African feminism, which engages with, critiques and develops Western feminism, influenced by African women's resistance to Western hegemony and its legacy within African culture. Charged with the duties of transforming societies through both intellectual and pragmatic approaches, African feminists illuminate ways women manage and challenge multiple oppressions. Using this theoretical lens that reveals ways in which Magona elicits identification and empathy on the part of readers, which can assist in stimulating positive change as depicted in *Beauty's Gift*, thus re-imagining and reconfiguring the Rainbow Nation.

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Introduction

Literature is the mirror of society, reflecting problematic features, failures to provide social justice, and attempts to live with dignity and hope. It is deemed as a product of society as the language depicts events and situations that have occurred in society (Itieba, Barasa & Mudogo, 2023). Literary texts are therefore representations of society and reality (Njoki & Ogogo, 2014: 70). Despite the fact that Sindiwe Magona's narrative, *Beauty's Gift* (2008), is fictional, her literary work is an expression of the plight of HIV-positive women in South Africa. Therefore, the work is by no means a mere imaginative representation.

The novel makes a significant cultural contribution by addressing the high rate of HIV and Aids prevalence in South Africa. Through representations of everyday life, the novel displays the need for gender justice and an appreciation for women by providing a social commentary on the strength of South African women in the face of adversity. The novel reveals that despite stigmatisation and other negative effects, women can find equanimity and purpose through a network of mutually supportive friendship between women, thus expressing hope and a new-found sense of optimism in the South African nation.

This article opens with a short synopsis of the novel. I then provide a brief historical contextualisation of HIV/Aids in South Africa as well as an overview of critical responses to the novel. Theories of African feminism and womanism which underpin the focal literary analysis are outlined. This critical analysis is an examination of Magona's representation of characters' responses to the socio-cultural circumstances facing HIV-positive women. The article further focuses on a discussion of advocacy and agency of women infected, as well as those affected by the HIV and Aids menace. Additionally, an analysis of stigma and discrimination, shame and silence are examined in this research and lastly, an analysis of bereavement and grief are explored.

In the novel *Beauty's Gift*, author Sindiwe Magona explores the issue of HIV and Aids, a theme that is relevant to South Africa at present. The novel starts with Beauty's funeral and then traces her short life. It foregrounds marriage and life that are plagued by HIV and Aids. The narrative relates how four women, Edith, Cordelia, Amanda and Doris, lose their best friend to Aids, prompting them to take decisive action as women who play a significant role within the domain of the family. Beauty's relationship with her husband, Hamilton, is characterised by subordination, and her journey of illness is marked with suffering. Hamilton ruins Beauty's life and is depicted as a sexual predator who displays hegemonic masculinity. Beauty in her last words to the surviving four friends intelligently advises them to avoid reckless sex and warns them to stand up for their rights, even in their marital associations. To each, she extends her wish for longevity. The novel displays appreciation for women by providing a social commentary on the strength of South African women in the face of adversity. It draws attention to the fact that women's gender shapes their experience and destiny.

In the South African nation, the first two decades of the HIV and Aids pandemic were marked with considerable mystery, disgrace and silence (Van Dyke, 2001). In the post-1994 era, when the new government was legitimate, it did not take effective action against Aids, turning its attention to other matters that were judged to be more important. By the late 1990s, the nation became known as having the highest HIV and Aids infection rates globally, with the worst hit province being KwaZulu-Natal (Motsemme, 2007). There were different responses to the new disease. Some dismissed it outright while other people claimed that it



was an invention by moral conservatives to stop people from enjoying life. It had become clear that Aids was not a myth as there had been a marked increase in the death of economically active young people (Fourie, 2006: 7).

The UNAIDS 2017 Report provides vital factual information, particularly with reference to the vulnerability of women. HIV and Aids in South Africa is still a prominent health concern. According to the report, HIV and Aids in South Africa remains the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age in the country. Young women and adolescent girls in particular account for a disproportionate number of new HIV infections among young people living with HIV (Mayer & Beyrer, 2007).

Demonstrating the plight of women from recent history, Edwin Cameron, a judge of the Constitutional Court of South Africa and a gay rights activist, in his autobiographical book, *Witness to Aids* (2005), foregrounds the case of Gugu Dlamini, a 36-year-old woman from Richmond Farm, near Kwa-Mashu in Kwa-Zulu Natal, who was stoned and stabbed to death because of disclosing her HIV status on the radio. Her attackers accused her of shaming her community by announcing her HIV status in public. The case was later dropped because of lack of evidence. This societal attitude is typified by denialism that borders on outlawing disclosure with regard to HIV and Aids infection. Drawing from the above disturbing example, in this sense, the South African rainbow society can be said to be in the throes of a collective conscience.

Various scholars have studied Sindiwe Magona's works with particular focus on the theme of HIV and Aids. Attree (2010 a) examines how women re-define and re-construct notions of femininity and gender when writing about HIV and Aids. She notes that "the widespread transmission of HIV and Aids and high infection rate among women in Zimbabwe and South Africa have meant that ideas and images of the disease have frequently focused on women and female sexuality" (2010 a:7). Attree further argues that definitions of sex and sexuality should be continually examined when linking women to HIV and Aids in both medical and fictional narratives.

Attree (2010 b) maintains that when the associated social and cultural implications of infection with HIV are considered, fictional representations contribute significantly to our understanding of the impact of HIV and Aids on communities and individuals and provide a much-needed basis for humanising an epidemic which is unimaginable statistically. The Aids activist Jackie Achmat has called the novel, *Beauty's Gift*, "one of the most important books about HIV and Aids in our country". Muchativugwa Liberty Hove (2014) argues that in *Beauty's Gift* "Magona consciously extends the visibility and legitimacy of this formation that mimics a genderised quasi-political organisation. It becomes commensurable with this political legitimisation that *Beauty's Gift* is a book with a mission, one that advances an ontological integrity of the subject womanhood" (533).

On a general note, regarding the HIV and Aids, Edwin Cameron responds to the stereotypes associated with Aids. In his autobiography, *Witness to Aids*, he offers a multi-faceted meaning of Aids and highlights the various connotations of HIV and Aids to those diagnosed with it. He states that: "Aids is a disease. It is an infection, a syndrome, an illness, a disorder, a condition threatening to human life. It is an epidemic, social crisis, an economic catastrophe, a political challenge, a human disaster" (2005: 42). Basically, Aids affects people on many levels: societal, economic, political, physical and psychological. As previously noted, however, women are disproportionately affected by the pandemic.



Beauty's Gift provides a description of women characters and their activism through an investigation into the life of Beauty. In this article, I argue that, despite stigmatisation and other negative effects, women are shown as finding equanimity and purpose. Therefore, this paper, through the examination of *Beauty's Gift*, highlights effects of identification and empathy on the part of readers by revealing the plight of HIV-positive women through an analysis of the characterisation and the author's representations of socio-economic and cultural burdens suffered by these women, as well as their agency in the epidemic during the time of sickness and grief. The other aspects to be covered are stigma, shame, silence and grief.

African Feminism

The paper is guided by African womanism, a strand of African feminism. African feminism is concerned with the criticism of texts from a historical consciousness of gender imbalances between dominant patriarchal systems and subservient femininity. Conceptions and perceptions of stereotypical representations can be accounted for by the philosophical thrust of feminist interpretation. Womanism as a theory was introduced in literary studies by Alice Walker (1983). It is dedicated to the completeness and survival of a whole people, female or male. According to Walker, a womanist is a woman who "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strength... [and is] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (Walker, 1983: xi). Since then further developments of these ideas have taken place.

Nnaemeka (2005) suggests that African feminism is an ideology that promotes harmony between women and men. She believes that African feminism should consist of creating a kind of third space wherein everything in relation to African women should be discussed and negotiated through compromise. For her, African men and women are complementary because they need each other in order to survive and develop their society. Nnaemeka summarises:

African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts (Nnaemeka, 2003: 378).

While the main focus of the narrative in *Beauty's Gift* is on women characters, there is also mention of male counterparts and the powers accorded to the social roles of masculinity. For instance, Zingisa, a male character in the novel, takes up the role of protecting his mother after the death of his father Zakes (2008: 162). Nnaemeka objects the dominant trend in the traditional feminism which constructs barriers between masculinity and femininity. She rejects any sex or gender separation.

Notable theorists of womanism include Ogunyemi (1985). The ongoing contributions of Ogunyemi (2007) to women's studies as applied to literary texts are relevant to this research. She demonstrates how women are viewed and how they function in critical times. She explains how heritage is passed on, in spite of dismal situations stemming from colonialism, post-colonialism and poverty. Ogunyemi's theory coincides with Magona's themes of advocacy and agency of women in the time of sickness.



Eze (2015) offers a recent analysis of African feminism. In his theory of feminist empathy, he addresses the rebirth of feminist thinking in recent African writers. He argues that:

Feminist empathy is the ability to feel oneself into the experience of a woman in undeserved suffering. It comes to fruition when we switch perspective with a woman experiencing unfairness, injustice, or oppression because of her gender. That is, she suffers because of the position to which society has forced her body (Eze, 2015: 311).

Beauty's Gift centres on similar issues. The article examines in depth the socio-cultural injustice suffered by women in the novel. Therefore, the thrust of the narrative succeeds in portraying the plight of HIV-positive women in South Africa.

Fictional representation of the plight of the HIV-positive women

This article examines the fictional representation of the plight of HIV-positive women in South Africa through an analysis of the characterisation and the author's representations of socio-cultural injustice suffered by these women. Patriarchal power subordinates women. The rejection surrounding the existence of HIV and Aids dominates the cultural and social reaction in the entire South African space, thereby bringing about distinct negative responses to the epidemic. Thinking about women and how specific constraints and opportunities of their time shape their response towards HIV and Aids identities, Magona displays in her novel awareness of the intricacies associated with accepting the reality of the HIV and Aids menace with candour in her conservative community. The novel highlights the devastating effects of patriarchal control and intolerance within the family. Beauty is subdued and overwhelmed by her husband's dictatorship. Hamilton limits his wife's access to her friends and relatives while covering up Beauty's sickness. The novel foregrounds: "It is the same-day, and the day after that, and every time he says that Beauty can't come to the phone, she's in a meeting, they have visitors, she's resting" (39). Hamilton embodies patriarchal ideals and displays shades of hegemonic masculinity.

The dominance of the above problematic version of masculinity is challenged in the textual world, and the fact that the most negatively portrayed character, Hamilton, thrives in the novel, highlights the injustice of culture in the society. The concern with culture means a rejection of oppressive cultures and traditions that permit the oppression of women. Far from suggesting that these should be praised, Magona's repeated negative positioning of Hamilton's character suggests a community that is deeply flawed. The novel invites the reader to be critical of the society in which these events play out. Through the description of the setting of *Beauty's Gift*, which foregrounds socio-cultural problems, Magona encourages the reader to see the textual world negatively, suggesting that such cultural and social systems result in the denial of women's liberty and security, leading to a catastrophic end. Millett (1990) illuminates the consequences of living in a patriarchal society with stereotypical views about women. She asserts that most world cultures are patriarchal in nature, with the family being a representative of patriarchy in the society at large. She states:

The oppression of women is not only economic; that's just a part of it. The oppression of women is total and therefore it exists in the mind, it is psychological oppression. Let's have a look at how it works, for it works like a charm. From earliest childhood every female child is carefully taught that she is to be a life-long incompetent at every sphere of significant human activity, therefore she must convert herself into a sex object (Millett, 1990 [1969]:8).



From a human rights perspective, Beauty's confinement to the domestic realm confirms a harsh customary culture. It is obvious that South African women have frequently been exposed to undesirable patriarchal structures. In the African context, divorce holds a symbolic value of disgrace, shame and dishonour. That is why women in the same predicament as Beauty's opt to suffer in silence rather than come out of abusive marriages.

The paper additionally explores the advocacy and agency of women characters during the time of sickness. The novel responds to Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994:10) challenge that the African female author has two main responsibilities: to tell the story of being a woman first, and secondly to describe the world from an African woman's perspective, instead of being shackled by negative self-image. A critical textual analysis of the novel raises a discussion which focuses on the plight of women in South Africa. It offers a fertile ground for re-configuring both space and subjectivity of women living with and affected by HIV and Aids. *Beauty's Gift* presents women who break the silence of private experiences and speak the unspeakable.

Beauty finds courage to speak up so as to save her woman friends, Edith, Amanda, Cordelia and Doris from a similar fate: "The low hushed voice is but a whisper. [...] 'And tell the others. Tell them to what I say to you now. I have Aids,' Beauty whispers. 'Aids.' She closes her eyes and draws in a long, long breath, then sighs and lets her body settle into the bed" (2008: 74). The female body is positioned as an active interface of advocacy. Magona refuses to replicate a problematic gender dynamic which is oppressive to women and challenges the notion of gender by creating a female character who embodies agency and whose courageous confession acts as an object lesson to her community of supportive women friends. This reason explains why Beauty consciously embraces disclosure despite the fact, as her father observes, "she was forced by her husband to be silent about the nature of her illness" (96). Hamilton's abuse mirrors common practices in the South African society. The narrative therefore lays a solid foundation in reflecting the realities of the society. It succeeds in capturing society's different responses to HIV and Aids, with emphasis falling on women characters. The tone of Beauty's declaration is deliberately meant to underscore Magona's redemptive strategy. It is this stance that fortifies Beauty to raise awareness and mobilise her friends to live and take good care of themselves. This is an act that is interpreted as a call for strong resolution and determination to influence her woman friends to take decisive action to fight the scourge of HIV and Aids within the domain of their families and societies.

Beauty is not the only woman character in the novel who acts inspirationally. Mrs Mazwi is a pillar of her community. Her embodiment of advocacy provides a key transgressive theme of agency that is traditionally missed in most societies. In Mrs Mazwi, Magona presents a liberated woman. As observed in *Beauty's Gift*, Magona gives her celebrity status. She is actively involved in the affairs of her community and greatly respected (84). Her position as a retired teacher in the novel is interpreted as a position of trust that extends beyond the heart of the community. During the funeral of Lungile, one of the Sonti twins, she articulates her concerns, explaining:

"That is how it is going to be with Aids. Very soon, all our families will have at least one person infected with HIV. One, if we are lucky. What has happened to the Sonti family will happen to many others. The same way a family may have two or three daughters who become mothers before they are married, or sons who become fathers



before they are married, so it will be with Aids. Our families will be affected, in exactly that way!" (2008: 85).

Mrs Mazwi discusses a distinct pattern of the spread of HIV and Aids at the family level. From her utterance, the novel's reader gains a wider understanding of the prevention, treatment, and reduction of vulnerability. The African womanist inclination of the novel reveals the women's imperative role in engaging both men and women towards taking a liberating step. While the pursuit of socio-cultural autonomy is needed, one to which any reader will respond, the novel is also firmly located in a South African nation where this particular challenge is presented as a microcosm of a nation that needs reform. Through Mazwi's utterance, the novel seems to suggest an all level engagement in playing a fulfilling course of the epidemic. Therefore, from the perspective of the family, as expressed in Mazwi's words above, the psychological and emotional scars suffered by most families in South Africa due to HIV and Aids cannot be overstated.

With respect to stigma and discrimination, in the context of HIV and Aids, I argue that despair and hopelessness thrive in situations where mostly women are plagued by sickness. The terrain of HIV and Aids has shifted from infection to societal attitudes and prejudices. Magona fearlessly explores the concept of shame and stigma. In the context of the African culture, HIV is connected with sex, a topic considered taboo. Therefore, silence and secrecy become coping strategies for people living with HIV. Shame and stigma often accompany this group of people. It is thus difficult to promote disclosure and openness about the pandemic in most ethnic South African communities. Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *Aids and its Metaphors* (1988) address the intersection of meaning and disease. In the earlier text she writes, "Illness is not a metaphor, and the most truthful way of regarding illness, and the healthiest way of being ill, is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (1978:24). Metaphoric beliefs allow potentially harmful myths to collect around a disease. This further governs characterisation of those suffering from Aids and in turn gives rise to moral judgement.

Still in the context of stigma, Magona chooses enlightenment to HIV and Aids in order to dissipate misinformation and myths, which in this case includes denial, stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and Aids. Magona exposes the level of ignorance by her characters through Cordelia's conversation with Gabula: "Homosexuals?' asked Cordelia, her eyebrows arched. 'And that gives them Aids, in your opinion? Because heterosexual people do not die of Aids?' But irony is often lost on people blinded by their own brilliance" (2008: 44). Portraying reality, Magona firmly opposes such stereotypes, and endorses hopes for female agency. Gabula embodies a homophobic view; therefore, it is on grounds of such mistaken views and obliviousness that makes Magona contend that lack of communication creates an environment where there is no voice to address the cause of infection among the most affected female gender, including those who are vulnerable. This misrepresentation comes in various forms, and lack of knowledge and communication leaves women dangerously exposed, as Magona reveals by pointing a condemning hand at Gabula. His utterance disturbs the reader when he accuses the female gender of being the source of HIV and Aids. He paints women negatively as he states that "Everybody knows that is how men get Aids." By extension, in his mind he concludes that the Sonti twins got Aids from their girlfriends, accusing them that "they will give Aids to other brothers, unless they also die!" (69).



Gabula represents the terrible impact of unawareness, whereas Cordelia is represented as a symbol of the voice of reason in the novel. She questions: “But if a man sleeps with more than one partner, how can he be absolutely sure his girlfriend is the one who gave the disease to him?” (69). By uttering these words, Cordelia’s steadfast dedication prompts her to articulate the crisis of motherhood: “African mothers, faithfully married women, are killed by men who will not stop sleeping around!” (70). She casts a wary eye upon this idealistic conception that puts women at risk. The above extract therefore serves to emphasise the reality of the situation that is faced by widows in South Africa. It is on such grounds that characters like Cordelia in the novel advocate for the concept of awareness in order to confront the stigma placed on women.

The paper further argues that shame and secrecy are social conditions that perpetuate the spread of HIV, leading to a common response of silence. Magona’s challenge to the version of stigma and discrimination conventionally celebrated in traditional societies in South Africa is complemented by the way in which she manipulates the characteristics of the archetypal female character: “[She] raised a hand in salute, like the anti-apartheid leaders of old, ‘let us fight back! Don’t let the busy-tongued gossip stop you from testing! Don’t let him stop you from getting the medicine you need!’” (2008:85). Mrs Mazwi is a fictional spokesperson of the views of Magona herself. With regard to stigma and discrimination, a nuanced reading thus suggests that Magona criticises contemporary society’s elevation of shame and humiliation over love and care.

Contrary to the negative depictions in the novel, through the description of the setting of *Beauty’s Gift*, which foregrounds socio-cultural problems, stigma and discrimination, Magona encourages the reader to see the textual world positively. The novel uses the second Sonti twin’s funeral as a platform for HIV and Aids campaigning. Unlike Beauty’s funeral, denial and silence have been replaced with frank talk and action about HIV. This is evident in the way the funeral is organised: “three girls and three boys line up at the gate to the humble family home. Each hold a basket of red ribbons, which they hand out as people walk in”. Worldwide, red ribbons symbolise the fight against HIV and Aids. The boys and girls in the funeral give out pamphlets on HIV and Aids along with the programme. Communication comes not only in the act of verbalisation but is also registered in the deliberate campaign against the spread of HIV. Read this way, coming out in the open society to talk about HIV and Aids assumes a redeeming element, where the ultimate objective is to galvanise the South African rainbow society from its blind pretense in the face of the pandemic.

Finally, Magona activates readers’ active sympathies by her poignant representations of bereavement and grief in *Beauty’s Gift*. The novel presents a grieving mother: “Dear God! When and how did Mamkwayi turn over this cruel new page where it is written that parents shall bury their children?” (2008:59). The reader is invited to experience this loss in the family space through the point of view of Mamkwayi as she journeys to an understanding of anguish through HIV and Aids. Here, Magona evokes sympathy for feminine subjectivity. The author believes that women bear the social and economic burden of the death of their children due to HIV and Aids. Coping with the loss of a family member or a close friend is one of the hardest thing to deal with as it leaves emptiness and pain that cannot be explained. Nordal notes that:

When we lose a spouse, sibling or parent our grief can be particularly intense. Loss is understood as a natural part of life, but we can still be overcome by shock and



confusion, leading to prolonged periods of sadness or depression. Sadness typically diminishes in intensity as time passes, but grieving is an important process in order to overcome these feelings and continue to embrace the time you had with your loved one (Nordal, 2001: 1).

Amanda, Cordelia, Edith and Doris mourn the death of their friend Beauty. They think that Hamilton should be the one dead as they strongly believe that he is the one responsible for their friend's death (2008:15). Amanda feels empty and depressed following the death of her friend. In the description of the close ties between Beauty and her woman friends, Magona highlights the intensity of loss and grief that women bear. Magona therefore utilises shared grief as a vehicle to convey her message of hope and resilience in the time of loss.

Magona's *Beauty's Gift* offers women a convenient choice of stepping out of the shadows of fear. Likewise, Eldred Durosomi Jones draws conscious attention to the following: "The duty of an African woman writer is first to find an objective treatment of womanhood and the problems of womanhood and to correct the misconceptions about women" (1987: 2). In the novel Magona conforms to Jones's concept of an African woman writer. She upholds a radical course illustrating the experience of women through her character Beauty, who achieves agency by refusing to be silenced by the confines of Aids stereotypes, through the concept of supportive female friendships, and through the outspoken utterances of the retired teacher, Mrs Mazwi, who promotes progressive thinking in her community. Understood this way, the representation of the prominent role of women is defined within the prism of activism, that translates to social awareness and empowerment. Magona's novel holds central the importance of love and affection in the time of Aids to a South African rainbow nation. Her literary task of bringing closure to Beauty's death suggests how society can contribute to the bold attempt to use women's voices to invoke women's commitment and devotion.

Conclusion

Magona's critical engagement with the HIV and Aids pandemic in *Beauty's Gift* offers a template of positive change in a South African community's perception. For instance, the platform for HIV and Aids campaigning in the second Sonti twin's funeral attests to Magona's paradigm shift in her literary representation of shame, silence, stigma and discrimination. This resonates with the concept of a collective civil society approach to re-imagining the future of the rainbow nation. The body of this research is built on womanism which provides an overarching feminist framework. In *Beauty's Gift*, womanism serves as the rallying-point of South African women in their struggle to efficiently assert their humanity in the face of the malevolent attitude of the men towards their self-fulfilment in life. Using this theoretical lens enables me to reveal ways in which Magona elicits identification and empathy on the part of readers, which can assist in stimulating positive change as depicted in *Beauty's Gift*, thus re-imagining and reconfiguring the Rainbow Nation through foregrounding womanist techniques of negotiation, compromise, activism and true gender complementarity leading to social harmony.

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