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## NEGOTIATING MOTHERHOOD AND PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS IN SINDIWE MAGONA'S *TO MY CHILDREN'S CHILDREN AND FORCED TO GROW*

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### Résumé

La vie des femmes dans les sociétés patriarcales n'est pas de tout repos. Plusieurs écrivains ont pris l'initiative de faire connaître leurs combats et d'exhorter les gens à leur accorder beaucoup plus d'attention. L'autobiographie en deux parties de Sindiwe Magona traite de la tension qui existe souvent entre les aspirations personnelles des femmes et les attentes placées en elles dans les sociétés patriarcales. Plus précisément, Magona utilise la forme autobiographique comme un moyen de donner son point de vue sur les arrangements sociaux et les institutions qui régissent les relations familiales et la pratique de la maternité en Afrique du Sud durant l'Apartheid. L'objectif de cet article est de réfléchir sur la difficulté de Magona à construire sa subjectivité féminine en tant qu'intellectuelle et mère, en raison de la nature conflictuelle du discours patriarcal sur la maternité et sa pratique durant la période de l'Apartheid et la période postapartheid. Notre objectif principal est de produire un travail scientifique basé sur une approche et une méthode qui nous permettront de contribuer aux études sur le genre et les femmes mais aussi à la littérature africaine. Pour ce faire, notre analyse s'appuie sur une variété de théories : le post-colonialisme, le marxisme, le nouvel historicisme, la théorie de la réponse du lecteur, la critique littéraire psychanalytique et le féminisme. Tout d'abord, nous avons souligné les avantages de l'utilisation par Magona de l'autobiographie épistolaire comme stratégie textuelle pour dénoncer la triple menace à laquelle sont confrontées les mères noires qui travaillent. Ensuite, nous avons démontré, à travers l'histoire de Magona, que l'emploi des mères de la classe ouvrière viens avec ses propres dilemmes car les femmes peinent à concilier leurs différents rôles.

**Mots clés :** *Apartheid, Autobiographie, maternité, études, Travail.*

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### Abstract

Life is quite tough for women in patriarchal societies. Several writers have taken it upon themselves to make known their struggles and urge people to pay a lot more attention to them. Sindiwe Magona's two-part autobiography deals with the tension which often exists between women's personal aspirations and the expectations put upon them in patriarchal societies. More precisely, Magona uses the autobiographical form as a medium through which she gives her insight on the social arrangements and institutions governing familial relationships and the practice of mothering in South Africa during the Apartheid. The purpose of this article is to ponder over Magona's struggle to construct her female subjectivity as both an intellectual and a mother because of the conflicting nature of the patriarchal discourse on motherhood and its practice in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid era. Our main objective is to produce a scientific work based on an approach and a method that will enable us to contribute to gender and women's studies but also African literature. To ensure this, our analysis leans on a variety of theories: post-colonialism, Marxism, new historicism, reader-response theory, psychoanalyst literary criticism and feminism. First, we have highlighted the perks of Magona's use of the epistolary autobiography as a textual strategy to denounce the triple jeopardy black working mothers face. Then,

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we have demonstrated through Magona's story that employment for working class mothers carries its own inherent dilemmas as women try to reconcile their multiple roles.

**Keywords : Apartheid, Autobiography, Motherhood, Studies, Work.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich (1986) defines motherhood as both "*the potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (p. 13). Indeed, the patriarchal institution of motherhood has made several women feel insecure about themselves. The way these women apprehend motherhood can sometimes be quite problematic and may ruin their lives or that of the people around them.

Thus, it is of utmost importance to rethink concepts such as womanhood and motherhood, so as to help women in patriarchal societies to understand themselves both as mothers and daughters but above all as full human beings. Magona's epistolary autobiography is in some way an invitation to reflect on this issue as her story is a testimony to the struggle women, especially mothers, go through in patriarchal societies.

The purpose of this article is to ponder over Magona's struggle to construct her female subjectivity as both an intellectual and a mother because of the conflicting nature of the patriarchal discourse on motherhood and its practice in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid era. Is it the pick of selfishness to have interests other than one's children? Why is it so difficult for working class mothers to secure decent jobs? How has the Apartheid and patriarchal system disfavour black working mothers? These are some of the questions that we will try to answer to in this article.

Our main objective is to produce a scientific work based on an approach and a method that will enable us to contribute to gender and women's studies but also African literature. To ensure this, our analysis leans on a variety of theories: post-colonialism, Marxism, new historicism, reader-response theory, psychoanalyst literary criticism and feminism.

First, we have highlighted the perks of Magona's use of the epistolary autobiography as a textual strategy to denounce the triple jeopardy black working mothers face. Then, we have

demonstrated through Magona's story that employment for working class mothers carries its own inherent dilemmas as women try to reconcile their multiple roles.

## **1. THE EPISTOLARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY, A MEANS TO DENOUNCE INJUSTICE**

Generally, in patriarchal societies mothers whose lives do not revolve entirely around their children are seen as being selfish. In her second autobiography, Magona (1992) clearly exposes this bias: "My alarm grew with the discovery that I was expected, calmly and mother-like, to await old age and death. My sole and consuming interest had to be the children" (p. 79). Mothers, who like Magona decide to further their education, are often criticised for having another interest other than their children.

With a little bit of sarcasm Magona (1992) writes: "As I carried books with the surreptitiousness of a kleptomaniac, derision followed me from real, non-sense mothers who, highly satisfied with being mothers and nothing but mothers, found my behaviour rather weird if not wanton" (p. 79). During the Apartheid period, black single mothers were often preoccupied with everything but studies. Poverty was their daily lot and most of them could not fathom why a mother like them would even think about going back to school.

They would not refrain from showing their disapproval. As a result, Magona (1992) second-guessed herself all the time. She admits: "I wish I could say I braved such scorn because the opinion of others mattered little to me. That I was a trendsetter and not one to swim with the tide. But I would be lying. I was a frightened little person who thought everyone else but me had a survival kit up her sleeve" (p. 80). The opinions and criticisms others make tend to prompt some student mothers like Magona to have second thoughts about their choice to further their education.

This is specially so because women in patriarchal societies generally suffer from the Antigone complex. As a matter of fact, they are socialised to constantly put their loved ones' welfare –especially that of their family–before their own. It is quite crucial that women in patriarchal societies start to stand up for themselves and refuse to let their needs and emotions be discarded. Writing an autobiography is one way through which they can affirm themselves by sharing their experience and making it count. On this issue Siphokazi Koyana (2002b) argues:



The use of an epistolary autobiography as a textual strategy while Magona constructs her female subjectivity succeeds in allowing her to dramatise the discrepancy between the voice of social reason and the voice of personal experience (her own emotions, imagination, and intuition). [...] we, the readers, are allowed to eavesdrop on a woman teaching her great granddaughter about that tension between social expectations and genuine feelings. Since the audience is asked to identify with the addressee of the following generation, these texts, therefore, present Magona with an opportunity to mother the entire nation by engaging in specific didactic practices while producing work that fulfils more than the need to put bread on the table to sustain the immediate family (p. 51).

For black South African women writers like Magona, writing is not only an art form, it is also an act of bravery. It is especially so because few are the women who embark on this journey of denouncing the injustices that plague their lives. As Magona (1992) discloses in her autobiography, she herself was initially reluctant to express herself through creative writing in spite of encouragements from her literary-inclined friends:

Despite such encouragement, I did not embark on a writing career. I did not know I could write. I did not know anyone like me who did. Even the Xhosa writers I knew of were much older, all men, none of whom lived in or near Cape Town ....  
I am convinced my case is not peculiar. What wealth lies buried in our hovels, to be dug up one day? Daily battles just to exist sap energies to an extent hard to imagine (p. 184).

When women relate their daily struggle, they will ineluctably denounce the patriarchal system and the oppression it exerts on them. Thus, autobiographies written by women are most of the time political even when the writer does not intend it to be so. Anne McClintock (1991) highlights this unavoidable convergence between the personal and political aspects of life in the personal narratives of South African women:

... being a perpetual minor in the eyes of the law and under the permanent tutelage of a male relative, being “endorsed out” of one’s home on marriage and forced to depart for a husband’s “Bantustan” often hundreds of miles away, being ineligible for residence rights without the signature of a male relative, pregnancy, birth, and child raising under the most perilous of circumstances: these are not problems that are faced by white men or white women. These problems are not even faced by black men. Far from being universal problems, they are problems that confront black women alone, and they were written into South African statute books at identifiable historical moments (pp. 202-203).

Reading the autobiographies of South-African women writers like Magona is essentially experiencing history through the glance of a triply oppressed person. The reader is therefore pushed to reconsider the way he sees this group if he has any bias against them. Thengamehlo Harold Ngwenya (1996) argues: “[m]ainly because of the historical or referential status of this mode of writing, women autobiographers are in a position to create a counter hegemonic

discourse by re-defining their roles and identities to oppose cultural and political institutions from which they are excluded” (p. 185). Leigh Gilmore (1994) also highlights the political implications of autobiographical writing in relation to hegemonic discursive practices:

If subjectivity, figured by the autobiographical I, is produced in relation to discourses and institutions, then autobiography, the “genre” most explicitly identified with self-representation, can be taken as a participant in that production. If we then also regard autobiography more broadly as part of a historically and formally changing discourse of self-representation, it is possible to interpret it as a political site on which human agency is negotiated within and against institutions on the grounds of truth. If this is so, then autobiography may also be a site of resistance, especially as it engages the politics of looking back and challenges the politics of how the past and the present may be known in relation to a particular version of history (pp. 79-80).

Most definitely, Magona’s autobiography is of those sites of resistance since it produces a counter hegemonic discourse and incites women to redefine their role as mothers and professionals. As she denounces in *Forced to Grow*, people criticise her for daring to go back to school after her divorce and subsequently moving abroad, accusing her of abandoning her children. However, as she explains, this is the only way she has found to improve her family’s living conditions in a society which does not accommodate the needs of divorcees. Writers like Magona (1992) use literature to express their pain and frustration. As she points out in her autobiography, the predicament of women like her foster exquisite pieces of art such as the poem she talks about in this passage:

This led to another poem, or was it a prose piece? Anyway, it was about the back-to-front arrangement that life is. We choose careers long before we even know who we are, never mind what we are about. What is the use of the wisdom we accumulate after we have bumbled our way through most of our life? The emphasis of this piece was on the unfairness of our biological ripeness coming so much earlier than our mental or intellectual maturing. I had three children. When I had them, what had I known about what having a child meant? (p. 187).

Poems and autobiographies are forms of art that are widely used by women to seek the cathartic effects of literature. Autobiographies are also a way for some mothers and grandmothers to build a bridge between them and the next generation. As Magona (1992) explains to her great-grandchildren, writing a memoir is a way to show to posterity how life was back then:

So, my child, that is the story of your great-grandmother. That is the story of where you come from.  
Here I am, thousands of miles from home, for the ancestors have seen fit that as of now I dwell among strangers. Perhaps, for now, that is the only way I can fulfil my duty to you, my child. The only way I can tell you: This is how it was, in the days of your forebears.

Therefore, forget that I am sitting on a four-legged chair instead of a goatskin or a grass mat. Forget that we meet through your eyes instead of your ears. Listen, for my spirit, if not my flesh, is there with you (pp. 231-232).

In *Forced to Grow* this closing invocation reminds the reader of the constant presence of the imagined great granddaughter. Indeed, the two-part autobiography opens with a salutation addressing the “Child of the Child of [Magona’s Child]”, hence the title of the first part, *To My Children’s Children* and the second and last part of Magona’s autobiography ends by addressing this great granddaughter again. Thus, one can say that Magona’s autobiography is an oral text rendered into written form. Koyana (2002b) confirms this claim:

This two-part autobiography is also an ‘oral’ account framed or preserved in written form. Since theirs is an oral tradition, the narrator would rather the addressee heard from her own lips, but fearing that her people no longer live long lives, she writes to keep her words in this manner. This transcribed orality serves several functions. It shows the impact of European intervention [...]. Secondly, it allows Magona to reclaim the traditional role of African women as efficient storytellers who instruct the young about their history and their cultural mores while entertaining them. Finally, the literary ‘oral’ tale conflates or merges Magona’s double heritage, enabling her to manipulate it in order to transcend limitations that might have stifled her as a new writer (pp. 51-52).

Indeed, this new mode of sharing one’s story is quite effective because not only does it reach the people who are contemporary to the writer but it will also be available for posterity. On this matter, Ngwenya (1996) explains that Magona addresses in her autobiographies not only her great granddaughter but also all her people. Thus, she made sure to publish a Xhosa translation of *To My Children’s Children*:

It is clear therefore that she sees the task of telling the story of her life as her duty to posterity. Thus her autobiography has as its intended primary audience the younger generations of Xhosa ‘children’. Magona has ensured that the book reaches the majority of her Xhosa speaking readers by publishing a Xhosa translation of *To My Children’s Children* in 1995. Apparently she hopes that her grandchildren will learn something useful about their culture and the challenges facing them within that culture as it adapts to the values of Western philosophies (p. 200).

It is also good to note that even though nowadays the channels through which these stories are conveyed are in most instances not oral but written, the goal is still the same: To tell young generations about where they come from and where they belong to. She who holds the narrative about the past has a great influence on the next generation and how they perceive the world. The theorist and philosopher H el ene Cixous (1976) may be right to say in her most influential essay that a woman “must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the

indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history” (p. 880). This is exactly what Magona does.

For quite a long time women have been denied their basic right for education. Therefore, it becomes all the more a duty for the women who are lucky enough to have been educated to make their voices heard and immortalise their experiences and thoughts through literary works. When Magona and her peers relate their own stories or that of other female protagonists they are giving a voice to the marginalised women around the world who suffer all kinds of abuses at the hands of men but also at the hands of their own peers but have no platform to share their sorrow with the world.

Thus, to pave the way for African women to a regained freedom, African women writers’ works abound with strong female characters like Magona and Mandisa who despite their difficult circumstances decides to take their lives into their own hands. However, these women are exceptions not the rule. In general, women in patriarchal societies lack self-reliance. Magona and her peers create such powerful characters to set off examples for women all over the globe and show them that they can and should take their emancipation.

In this sense, literature can be an effective way to build women’s confidence. It can help in the reshaping of women’s relationship with femininity in general and motherhood in particular. As Cixous (1976) observes, “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (p. 879). So it is clear that the literary world needs more women like Magona.

However, the matter is more complex than just giving poor black women access to education. As one can see with the example of Magona, after their studies, it is quite difficult for these women to have decent jobs regardless of their qualifications, let alone to have the same privileges than men or white people. Furthermore, as Remi Akujobi (2011) explains, in patriarchal societies, “[n]o matter the skills, the desires and the talents of a woman, her primary function is that of motherhood, at least in Africa” (p. 4). Therefore, women who like Magona dare to go against the tide should be celebrated.

## **2. The Inherent Dilemmas of Employment for Working Class Mothers**

While relating her own experience of motherhood, Magona implicitly questions the feasibility of a domesticated motherhood for working-class black women. She only succeeds in finding a little balance in her life by accepting the help of other women demonstrating thus the importance of what the social theorist Patricia Hill Collins calls othermothers.

Hill Collins (2000) uses the term “othermothers” to designate women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities. Koyana (2002a) observes: “African and African-American communities have long realized that vesting one person with the full responsibility of mothering may not be wise, hence the role of othermothers” (p. 72). In her second autobiography, Magona (1992) expresses the positive impact these othermothers have in her life, especially after her husband abandoned her with all their children:

And it has been my luck that I have found helping hands along the way as I journeyed forth. People have given me encouragement when my spirits flagged, have bandaged me when I bled, fed me when hungry, shown me the way when I had strayed, held up the mirror so I could see myself. These people, all of them, irrespective of race, sex or class, I call my mothers. Some have even been younger than I am. But I call all of them my mothers, for they have helped me become (p. 140).

In Apartheid South Africa, the way working-class black mothers and middle-class white mothers bring up their children is quite different. As Cheryl Walker (1995) observes, the classes these women belong to dictate the way they bring up their children. Koyana (2002b) explains it pretty well:

Good Mother’ for white middle-class women is defined as someone who cares physically and emotionally for her children (even if she leaves most of the gruelling work of physical care to her black domestic worker; Walker 425). For working-class black mothers, on the other hand, ‘the Good Mother’ is the one who provides financial support and discipline, even if she is not there for the day-to-day care of the child. Often she counts on the older children to do the gruelling work of physical care, but may also count on neighbours and relatives to assist them (p. 46).

Although working-class black women may want to spend more time with their children, they cannot afford to do so because Apartheid and capitalism maintains them in a state of perpetual poverty. A patent example is the fact that the concept of breadwinner in Apartheid South-Africa is in disfavour of women. Single mothers like Magona (1992) have to resort to raising their qualifications to compensate for this injustice. She writes:

Because I was married (I never did get a divorce), I could only be given annual contracts, temporary posts. Permanent posts were for real breadwinners – all men, irrespective of their marital status, and also unmarried women. I was not a breadwinner in the eyes of the Department of Bantu Education, my three children and their errant father notwithstanding. And so I counted on the thin crop of teachers

with matric to entrench myself in a teaching post. To compensate for the great sin of being married, I would become matriculated (p. 45).

To add insult to injury, it is only a minority that can afford to go further in their studies because poverty is the daily lot of people in the townships. In many ways single mothers are at a disadvantage in the working force. To keep their jobs some of them have to play superheroes and fulfil their work to perfection and never ask for permissions to take their children to hospital or other such unexpected occurrences. Magona (1992) shares her own experience in this matter:

For example, mindful of the reluctance of principals to have women with children on their staff, I never used mine as an excuse for either lateness or absence. If a child needed to go to the clinic, I found someone who wasn't working to take the child there. [...] Indeed, the principal wasn't aware I had children until the middle of my second year at Moshesh. And that fact happened to slip out during a conversation when he challenged me saying, 'What do you know about children, Mistress? You have no children.' 'But I do have children, Sir! I have three,' I replied smiling, much to his astonishment (p. 47).

Magona's case is not an exception but the rule. This is why working single mothers generally go through a burnout at a point or another in their lives. As Moira Mikolajczak (2020) has demonstrated, it is true that parental burnout is distinct from job burnout and depression even though they are quite similar. Yet, it is worth mentioning that in working single mothers' case parental burnout often co-occur with job burnout and depression.

This is due to the fact that just like Magona, they are poor and have to work long shifts while at the same time trying to be there for their children. Yet, no matter how hard some single mothers work to give a better future to their children, sometimes the environment in which they are living and the political system in place make it impossible for them to take themselves and their children out of the ditch. Magona (1992) laments:

Working full-time and part-time, studying by correspondence, I had failed in two important criteria: I did not have enough money to leave for the children and I had failed one of the six papers I was doing for my Honours in Psychology. How I wept! I needed desperately to run away from my children. I had to flee from the daily reminder that I was raising three people to be locked up, forever, in a poverty that would exceed anything I had known (pp. 188-189).

Magona's situation poses again the issue of the compatibility between motherhood and studies or motherhood and work. Even though several advances have been made concerning woman's rights, mothers are still at a disadvantage in the education spheres and in workplaces. Up until now, some women wrongfully lose their jobs when they become pregnant. Also, being a working mother is a huge challenge, especially when it comes to finding someone to mind for

the children when the mother is out working. It becomes all the more complicated if the mother is poor. Magona (1992) relates her struggle:

Landing a teaching job was the first step out of penury. However, it brought to focus a whole range of problems inherent in the very position of African women in the pecking order. The most pressing of these is certainly that of child-minding. African women, themselves hopelessly disadvantaged and the poorest of workers, cannot afford paid child-minders, and so depend on older children or on each other for this most important function. This requires goodwill from others and such skill in interpersonal relationships as would dazzle an experienced social worker (p. 36).

Moreover, due to the “motherhood penalty”, the gender wage disparities between men and women is still significantly wide. The motherhood wage penalty is a direct result of employers’ bias, social norms, and discrimination. Mothers are forecasted to be paid less for each child they have, but men are often paid more when they have children. While working mothers are not seen in a favourable light, fathers are valued by employers for the mere fact that they have children. They are instantly believed to be more committed to their work, more stable in their life and more deserving.

The motherhood penalty is so insidious that a woman can be married and childless and still face this discrimination because employers consider her at particular “risk” of becoming pregnant. Working mothers are often judged for appearing less committed to their jobs than to their children. Paradoxically, mothers are also judged if they appear more committed to their job than to their children. This is the double-bind that mothers face.

In addition to that, managers are less likely to grant mothers flexitime while on the contrary they are much willing to do so for fathers. For all these reasons, working mothers are generally struggling to conciliate their work and their personal life. This in turn has a huge toll on their self-esteem for they can never be good enough mothers or good enough professionals. Poor single mothers like Magona are obliged to substantially raise their qualifications to be able to cater for their children’s needs. In doing so, the label of bad mother is often stuck on them because generally their entourage does not understand why they are so professionally driven.

In *Lâchez-nous l’utérus ! En finir avec la charge maternelle* the journalist Fiona Schmidt (2020) speaks about her frustration at what she calls “la charge maternelle” which can be loosely translated as “The maternal burden”. According to her, it is an insidious and proteiform pressure put on people on the issue of motherhood and parenting. It is the sum of prejudices ingrained in people’s mind from childhood and which present desired, radiant and benevolent motherhood as the norm, a non-negotiable part of female identity and the only worthwhile life

project. The common discourse articulated around women is that one is not really a woman until she becomes a mother.

Schmidt also contends that even mothers suffer from prejudices related to the maternal burden. It is almost impossible to be seen as a good mother until one negates herself and makes her children the centre of one's world. Indeed, the maternal burden weighs indifferently on women who do not want children, on those who do not know if they want one, on those who cannot have one, on mothers who are overwhelmed, depressed, indifferent, absent or unavailable, on mothers whose lives do not revolve around their children, etc. The maternal burden is quite prevalent in Africa and its diaspora because African women's identity is generally reduced to that of wife and mother. Consequently, women like Magona (1992) who also want to pursue a career end up being frustrated. She fumes:

How unfair, I thought, that I had gone to all the trouble I'd been through trying to be something when, apparently, that did not matter one jot in the end. I had stayed in school long enough to be something; my parents scraped together enough to help me become something, but all I was allowed to be was wife to my husband (pp. 31-32).

In some way, the fact that her husband abandoned her is a blessing. However, it came with another set of problems. She struggled financially to support her children. From Magona's story one can see how difficult it is to be a single mother and work and/or study at the same time. Frequently, women who are in such situations feel guilty and inadequate as mothers for they are obliged to give precedence to their career if they wish to be able to give a better future to their children. This is the case for Magona (1992) who does not have much time to share meals with her children or keep up with domestic shores. She would love to spend more time with her children and bond with them however her financial situation does not allow her to do so:

More and more, living with me began to look hazardous. I couldn't get their laundry done. I wasn't there most mealtimes on most days. And the menace of the car was growing in the townships – narrow streets, old cars in dire need of repair, and unlicensed and often drunk drivers contributed generously to that development. Thembeke, older, more capable of doing things for herself, posed the least problem. But the younger children highlighted my inadequacy as a mother and the question of their safety. While I toiled by day, studied by night and attended this or that meeting in between, Sandile prowled the streets in search of adventure (p. 97).

The abyss between her and her children widens as she moves abroad to better their financial situation. Even though Magona did not just walk out and leave her children high and dry for absolutely no reason, she is still racked with maternal guilt, especially so because even



though she is working all the time, she is still struggling to make ends meet. The fact that she is judged by her peers and seen as an unworthy recipient of the gift of motherhood adds to her feeling of inadequacy. Due to the prejudices people have about single mothers like Magona, they are most of the time put in positions where they feel the need to justify themselves all the time. If their lives do not revolve solely around their children, they are made to feel that they are bad mothers. With some degree of frustration and pain Magona (1992) explains her choice:

What I do will benefit all of us eventually: that has been my guiding principle. I was not leaving them for purely selfish reasons. I had never done that. Always, at the root of most of what I have done were the children. If I became a better anything, wouldn't that make me a better mother? Better able to provide for them? Give them the things they need? And when any rewards have come my way, we have all rejoiced at their coming, certain in the knowledge they were for all of us, the children and me (pp. 197-198).

Even though Magona (1992) sometimes acts as if she is confident in her decision, on several occasions she grapples with a feeling of guilt about being away from her children. Her coping mechanism to move past this horrible feeling has often been to try to compensate her absence with money be it in the form of gifts or good living conditions. She confesses: "To assuage my guilt at leaving the children, I installed electricity in the house, telling myself I was doing so to compensate them for my absence. That cost me about six hundred rand. I bought a fridge. I already had a gas stove: we kept that" (p. 194). Notwithstanding that, the feeling of guilt is ever-present.

Mothers in patriarchal societies are expected to be nothing but mothers. They should live and die for their children. It is almost seen as the peak of selfishness for a mother to have dreams of her own, to have plans that are not necessarily related to her children. Oddly enough, as Magona (1992) relates, it is not only men who put this harsh expectation on mothers, other women too tend to think this way:

The censure came from women as well as from men. Their agreement about the correct behaviour for women with children chilled me to the marrow. Married, divorced, widowed, single mothers were lumped together. Mothers, it was clear in the minds of the vast majority, had no business being anything else. But I had dreams yet (p. 79).

Notwithstanding the fact that some women are sometimes the very reason why mothers like Magona feel inadequate, forming positive relationships with other women is crucial to keep mothers mentally sane. A strong sisterhood network can be quite helpful for women who are so overloaded with their duties as mothers that they have difficulties taking care of themselves or having other activities which are not related in anyway with their children. As Magona (1992)

points it out in her second memoir, this is a life-saver especially for poor working mothers like her because they obviously cannot afford the luxury of paying a childminder:

My situation was difficult but not disastrous. A lot of women, for a variety of reasons, are not in employment even as domestic workers. Those women, my neighbours, became my stand-by child-minders. I trusted them in cases of emergency when it seemed the children would have to be left to their own devices or I would have to skip school. I would barge in at some poor woman's house on my way to work, children in tow, and say: 'Please help. Are you going anywhere or can I leave the baby here today?' If she agreed to mind Sandile, I would also leave the girls' food with her.' (p. 38).

But for the help of her own mother and other women, Magona (1992) would not have been able to work and achieve all the things she did. She expresses her gratitude: "If I didn't get the job, it would not be because she had failed to do *her* job – to help me all she could. That's Mother for you. Ever prepared" (p. 32). Black people tend to have a more inclusive way of seeing the concept of family. Generally, different generations live under the same roof and they all help in the rearing of the children. Or, if the extended family does not live in the same household, children are sometimes sent to stay with them. As Magona (1992) explains, this system not only saves on childcare and takes some of the load off working parents, it also strengthens the bond between children and the other family members:

With our extended family system, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives have access to our children – as help in the home, as company and to enable us to cope better by having fewer children actually living with us. Or for no reason at all except that the child would like to go and live with them or they would like to have the child living with them.

Such arrangements are an integral aspect of our wholeness. We are a family-oriented people and our families are gloriously more inclusive than those of white South Africa (pp. 88-89).

Again, even though in most countries there are laws that are put in place to ease the situation of mothers in the workforce, a lot of changes are yet to be made to make workplaces more welcoming to these women. Till now, women are discriminated against when they have children. The overwhelming majority feels compelled to either have to sacrifice their relationship with their children or lose their jobs.

A patent example is that of women who want to breastfeed exclusively their children but are compelled to give them formula milk because there are no rooms in their workplaces dedicated for women who want to pump and express their breastmilk to send it to their childminders. This is all the more frustrating because the World Health Organization urges women to breastfeed exclusively up to six month. This can trigger mother's guilt in some

women who want to give the best to their children but are compelled to choose between breastfeeding and having money to put clothes on their children's back.

Furthermore, as Magona has related in her autobiography, working mothers are stigmatised in Africa and other parts of the globe. Even though some may celebrate the steps made by governments around the world to make education accessible for women, the label of bad mother and bad wife is still stuck on women who after or during their studies decide to have a career, especially if they have big responsibilities in their workplaces. Mothers are often put to the pillory if they have high aspirations. Nevertheless, working mothers should not give in to peer pressure by flagellating themselves for having other areas of interest outside of their family life. Yet, it is easier said than done. It takes quite a lot to disregard other people's opinions, especially if the person herself has been brought up to hold the same views.

## CONCLUSION

By pondering over Magona's *To My Children's Children* and *Forced to Grow* we have shown the impact of patriarchy and Apartheid in the life of black South African mothers. The system itself made it difficult for black mothers to have decent jobs, own properties, or simply have a political voice. Furthermore, even when against all odds some black women like Magona were able to secure good jobs, or had the opportunity to further their studies, they were seen as being selfish for not making their lives revolve entirely around their children. Therefore, most of them were often grappled by guilt.

However, even under such difficult circumstances emancipation was made possible through education and determination. From this article it is clear that the autobiographical form, especially when it is written by a person who belongs to an oppressed group, is quite political. In Magona's case, not only does her autobiography serve as a bridge between her and the next generations, but it also carries a political and a therapeutic dimension in the sense that it allows her to voice her frustration and anger at a system that marginalises black women, especially single mothers.

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