

Mayadevi Shah

The representation of women in Laretta  
Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die*

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## DECLARATION

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my daughters, Michelle and Candice, who have always been my purpose and my passion.

## CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	5
Chapter 1: The novel, the author and literary representations of South African women	6
Chapter 2: The representation of women in the novel	18
Chapter 3: African women and the challenge of Voicing	43
Chapter 4: Conclusion	59
References	63

## ABSTRACT

Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* depicts the lives of rural African women who lived under apartheid rule in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. The dissertation examines Ngcobo's representation of African women's participation and their agency in the resistance struggles against colonialism, settler colonialism (apartheid), racial supremacy, African patriarchy, and literary and the dominant language systems.

The primary method of analysis involves an examination of the novel which is located in the political context of the resistance struggles, the social context of patriarchy and the theoretical context of postcolonial African feminist criticism. By drawing on a range of feminist theories, the dissertation examines the specificity of African women's lives in terms of race, class and gender roles. The dissertation will also examine the different strategies that women have used to survive and to resist race, class and gender oppressions.

Ngcobo's novel provides an apposite framework to explore women's experiences of subordination and how they challenged and even overcame the political and social forces that worked against them. Women's agency in the liberation struggle has been largely ignored and undocumented in literary and even in many feminist projects, which leaves an under-researched gap in African literary studies.

The dissertation examines Ngcobo's work as a literary activist articulating the challenges of representation and voice. Representation is understood to mean speaking or acting for oneself and/or others, while voice is the capacity to speak. It is the key issue reflecting empowerment and agency. These concepts form the basis for analysis and the construction of arguments. It is used to examine the challenges faced by women who have been marginalized in literary discourse, as women and writers.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCING THE NOVEL, THE AUTHOR AND LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* (1990) is a retrospective novel set in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. It foregrounds the difficult and courageous lives of poor, rural African women in Sigageni living under apartheid rule. Sigageni is a fictional village which Ngcobo locates between Mzimkhulu and Ixopo in rural KwaZulu-Natal. The novel chronicles the predicament of women caught between the apartheid system of government, settler colonial patriarchy, and African patriarchy. It examines the vital though often unrecognized role that African women have played in ensuring their survival and resisting their oppressions. Ngcobo's representation of African women's participation in the resistance struggles and their agency in enacting their roles and responsibilities is a bold innovation, drawing upon a range of women's struggles against apartheid in the 1950s. It can be viewed as an attempt to salvage a South African legacy often undocumented and ignored in literary and even many feminist projects.

Following Ngcobo's lead, *And They Didn't Die* (referred to after this as *ATTD*) will be read using an African feminist approach that is based on an examination of women and questions of gender, as well as the interlocking issues of race and class. The analytical method focuses on the following key concepts: representation, subjectivity, agency, participation, empowerment, resistance, voice, gender, race and class. Representation is understood to mean speaking or acting for oneself and/or for others, while subjectivity refers to a person's experiences, feelings, point of view, and sense of selfhood. The concept of agency refers to having the means to produce an action or an outcome either in the private/domestic or the broader social and political arenas. Agency includes the concepts of participation, empowerment and resistance. Participation refers to a person's ability to take part in an activity of sharing in common with other people, while empowerment refers to the powers individuals and groups develop to speak and act for themselves. Ngcobo gives authority to her characters by equipping them with the power to speak for themselves. Individual participation and participation in collectives allows for the assertion of agency. Resistance refers to both individual and collective behaviour

against oppression. During this period in South Africa, it refers to people's efforts to change the social and political forces that violated their basic rights. All of these concepts work together and reflect the development of agency. Voice is a key issue reflecting agency in a literary text, and *ATDD* shows that it is the capacity to speak that secures women's empowerment. Through the articulation of voice, subjectivity is expressed. Ngcobo constructs her characters who articulate specific experiences of marginalization and a range of responses to oppression and poverty. These interlocking issues form the basis for analysis and the construction of arguments. They are used to examine the challenges faced by women who have been marginalized in literary discourses, as women and as writers.

Throughout the novel, Ngcobo argues that being oppressed in apartheid South Africa had much to do with being black. The novel demonstrates that all women do not share the same experience or knowledge of ostracism and racial discrimination. Carol Boyce Davies (1986: 16) argues that while there are similarities arising out of women's lives globally, there are also "differences which point to the specific types of oppression African women face in various cultures". She points to the danger of ignoring difference when formulating theories about women. The novel creates ample space for the exploration of difference since the representation of South African women's experiences is individualized and context bound. Ngcobo (1989: 52) maintains in the "Women Under Pressure" interview that the "European Feminist struggle is not exactly the same as that of an African woman". This serves as a warning against uncritical application of western feminist criteria to African literature and society. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) offers an indication of the extent to which African feminist writers are "engaging with other feminist discourses" in an attempt to define the experience of difference. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997: 151) argues that the work of African feminists seeks to question gender relations "from and within their specific cultural spaces and social locations". Her view suggests that western feminism may be underdeveloped and may not do justice to women's integrated nature. This may be the reason why many western feminist theories have been criticized and still are, for the explicit weakness of ignoring differences between women in terms of race, class and gender roles and geographical locations. However, we are drawn to the cautionary warning of Amina Mama (2001), who asserts in the online *Feminist Africa* interview with Elaine Salo that "western feminists have agreed with much

of what we have told them about different women being oppressed differently and the importance of class and race and culture in configuring gender relations". Her view may serve as an encouragement to many postcolonial theorists to frame their own experiences according to its own norms.

The African feminist struggle is different from the western feminist struggle in that it includes the survival of both men and women as it accommodates a mutual understanding between the sexes. Stratton (1994) argues that this may be the reason why some postcolonial writers like Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta prefer using the term "womanism", a term coined by United States feminist Alice Walker. Womanism is used as a critique of and a response to a white-dominated feminism, where the focus is on the balancing of power between men and women. The concept of womanism is communally oriented and therefore addresses the destiny of people who have been oppressed by colonialism seeking the survival and progress of all African people, including women. However, Amina Mama (2001: no page reference) complicates this argument, countering that "changing the terminology doesn't solve the problem of global domination". She proposes that African feminists engage with the contradictions and not be trapped by false universalisms. She argues that the experiences of women of excluded groups are different therefore they should structure their specific experiences according to their own social-cultural contexts. Western feminists' pioneering work has afforded postcolonial feminists a perspective and a platform to develop and voice their views. An important element of Ngcobo's work is that she does not simply work against the views of western feminists. She does not allow the subject position of western feminists to dictate her own as an African feminist.

*ATDD* tells a story of Jezile Majola, a young woman living in rural Sigageni. She is married to a migrant labourer, Siyalo. Jezile has two daughters, S'naye and Ndondo, and a mulatto son Lungu, resulting from a rape. Readers journey step by step with Jezile as she experiences the limitations of being an African woman in South Africa under apartheid rule. She sets out to challenge racism and other socio-cultural prescriptions that cause her oppression and succeeds in the struggle by offering her children educational opportunities so that they could learn "the importance of justice as a virtue" (Ngcobo 1990: 228), and find ways to resolve the problems of their socio-political

oppression. Jezile represents the millions of women who courageously battle to unify the political and personal aspects of their lives by resisting their oppressions. The novel draws on a long history of what women actually did to survive and resist settler colonialism (apartheid) and African patriarchy.

Ngcobo's intimate knowledge of the politics, geography and the farming practices of the locale she describes, and her faithful portrayal of rural African women, establish her as a realist writer. Her observation of 'ordinary' rural women enacting their 'everyday' roles and responsibilities, given the strictures of the society depicted, as well as the depiction of society itself, is a distinctive feature of the novel. *ATTD* seeks, as Margaret Daymond (2003: 255) says, "a more objective account of events, their causes and effects". The novel describes experiences that are familiar to most rural African women and victims of apartheid. The oppressive apartheid and patriarchal environment is the integral element in the dramatic complications in the plot. For these reasons the novel can be understood as an enactment of an important part and little known aspects of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

The author uses events in the lives of the characters to set up the plot, and as she does this she challenges apartheid and patriarchal logic. The narrative straddles the microcosm of Jezile's family and the macrocosm of South Africa's political crisis. Characters are tested by their social and political environment (including African patriarchy and apartheid oppression), and their moral worth is conveyed by a narrator whose values of simplicity, hard work, humility, self-correction and faithfulness will resonate with the reader. The novel begins by depicting a distinct moment of African women's resistance against apartheid and patriarchy and ends up considering the option of revolutionary violence as a means of ensuring liberation.

Ngcobo's style exposes the spirit of her individuality as she combines fiction with both history and personal experience in apartheid South Africa. The memories of her life as black woman in South Africa exercise a strong effect upon her writing, which is suggestive and paradoxically simple. Ngcobo's choice of the English language was difficult and inescapable under apartheid. As she says in the interview with Margaret Daymond (1992: 97), the English language is "a colonial, apartheid residue". However,

Ngcobo chooses to draw on the global power of the English language to give voice to women's experiences in apartheid South Africa. This makes it possible for African women's resistance and their struggles for survival to be communicated to people fighting similar struggles elsewhere in the country and the world. Unfortunately, Ngcobo's use of the English language excluded her own people from gaining access to the novel.

The author's choice of third person narrator makes the narrative presentation appear objectively outside and above her characters. Such a technique suggests the writer's concern to express a version of historical 'truth' at the same time as inviting confidence in the story's historical accuracy. The narrator's impartial rendering of events invites readers to draw their own conclusions about African women, African women writers and the representation of women in literature. Through this strategy any moral judgements are transferred from writer to reader. In the course of the fifteen chapters which constitute the novel, readers become deeply acquainted with the narrator as speaker, character, and spectator of events.

The author takes the history of women's resistance and the silencing of women's voices as well as her own personal understanding of similar women's lives to guide her work. In writing *ATTD*, Ngcobo opens up a space for poor, rural women's voices, and visibility. She challenges sexist ideologies and rigid conventions that keep women silent. As Cecily Lockett (1996: 23) argues, "any form for critical writing that sheds a light on the topic of 'women', women's lives, of the writing, of their presences and absences in culture, is valuable in breaking the silence". Through the novel Ngcobo attempts to rescue African women from colonial, apartheid and patriarchal associations with silence and inferiority. The novel is a forceful articulation of women's agency and it functions as an implicit call for social transformation.

Ngcobo's portrayal of a demographic that has been neglected socially, politically and intellectually, is empowered by Africa's strong traditions of orature. The narrator's voice is based on established socio-cultural norms suggesting confidence and reliance on a rich ideological resource base. As in African oral tradition, the novel can be viewed as an exchange of messages between the author and the audience. Through the novel, Ngcobo presents dilemmas, comments and reflects on problems. She limits her descriptions so

that readers get to know the characters through actions rather than through descriptions. Ngcobo (1986:84) herself claims that she “had the fortune of being born into a family of story tellers” and her literary creativity may be seen as an important extension of this.

Ngcobo deals with the actuality of women’s oppression by focusing on a range of women in the novel. She takes as subject of her narrative women who experience oppression and attempt to survive by liberating themselves from their subject positions. African women’s oppression was the main source of their misery and this derived from two sources, expressed by Margaret Daymond (2003: 252), that of patriarchal African traditions “on which her men rely” and “the apartheid State that her men try to oppose without releasing women”. The novel examines the disempowering nature of these political and social forces that have worked against women and the ways in which some women refused to be intimidated as they attempted to take charge of their own lives. As part of the attempt to explore agency, Ngcobo examines the part which African women had to play in resisting apartheid and patriarchal oppressions.

Ngcobo asserts herself as an agent of her own history by bringing her lived experiences as an African woman subject and activist to bear on her novel. Like other texts, Ngcobo’s text has elements of subjectivity as the relationship of literature to personal experience expresses itself in her work. She acknowledges as much in the interview with Hilda Bernstein (1994) when she testifies to her involvement in the Pan African Congress with the political goal of building the national liberation movement. The intensity of feeling and the ability to freely and autonomously initiate action in engaging and resisting patriarchal power and racism expresses itself explicitly in Ngcobo’s work. Dorothy Kenyon (1991: 54) claims “the black women’s new freedom and sense of worth made them realize that their personal experiences are of valid political interest”. Ngcobo confirms this when she argues in the interview with Margaret Daymond (1992: 86) that “writing essentially should be experience that’s been ingested, internalized, and then comes out refined.” *ATDD* is the emotional self-expression of personal experiences.

The writing of *ATDD* began in 1984. It was completed in 1987, and published in 1990. This was a time when apartheid South African society was going through enormous upheaval and was on the brink of a major transformation. The novel sketches the political

situation in the 1950s and 1960s when racial injustices were gaining momentum and political injustices were turning to political violence. The bureaucratic and military means by which the government attempted suppressing citizens resulted in a great deal of suffering and loss of lives. Vigilantes were used to destabilize communities and groups of assassins were trained to eliminate community leaders and terrorize people. An example was made of anyone who posed a threat to the apartheid regime. Imprisonment, rape, torture and death were the order of the day and activists were left defenseless against the might of the apartheid government. The dignity of the black person started to gain influence amongst the black masses. It was during this time that Ngcobo explores the similarities in the experiences of African women as they tried to find purpose in their lives while also trying to meet the demands of their families and community. Many women were economically more vulnerable and politically less secure than men, but they seldom occupied a position of subservience. The novel challenges literary feminist theorists who represent women without taking into account the experiences, the resilience and the resistance of African women against their oppressions in the socio-historical context of apartheid.

The impact of residential segregation and increased class polarization as a result of apartheid made women's endeavours for recognition all the more challenging. As a black person, Jezile is denied citizenship; as woman, she is exposed to patriarchal hierarchies thereby occupying a marginal and peripheral space in the South African apartheid state. She represents the entire black community suffering the consequences of institutionalized alienation as the result of apartheid. The preoccupation with citizenship was an important challenge faced by black people in South Africa, experienced acutely by African women in South Africa. It created problems of consciousness as women struggled to attain a sense of belonging in both the geographical as well as an existential sense. This desire to belong unified the social and the personal aspects of women's lives. Ngcobo, through the novel, articulates her character's alienation and their desire to survive as they were left competing with strangers in a territory which none of them identified as 'home'.

Ngcobo uses her novel to articulate the impact of the political reality of the South African apartheid system and the demands made by patriarchy on women. Given the patriarchal

nature of the apartheid system of government, she explores the severity of certain policies that oppress and entrap women, for example the migratory labour system and unpaid compulsory labour practices. She also explores the patriarchal nature of African society which stifles women's development such as marriage and motherhood. Ngcobo examines African women's struggles in resisting apartheid and asserting their agency while concomitantly trying to contend with patriarchal oppression. The novel demonstrates that the liberation of South Africa depended greatly on the often ignored and forgotten attempts made by rural African women in resisting race, class and gender discrimination and African patriarchy. By writing the novel, Ngcobo establishes herself as an energetic participant, showing agency in the struggle for liberation.

The system of apartheid governance used structural oppression that produced devastating material consequences for African people. The imposition of discriminatory government laws and policies, such as migratory labour laws, the Pass Laws, Bantu Education Act and the Group Areas Act, worked together to control and dominate black people. For example, the Bantu education system set up policies that would maintain the low level of education of Africans so that there would always be a surplus reservoir of cheap labour. Such laws and policies legitimated, sustained and even promoted political tyranny and oppression by keeping black people segregated, underpaid and poverty stricken. The Pass Laws especially were the cause of great distress amongst women. It confined them to unproductive land in rural areas which, as Ngcobo (1990: 43) writes, were merely a "dumping ground" for the apartheid state. The land was subdivided into uneconomic units of "small and overworked strips making it poor and unyielding [forcing people to perform] Compulsory Unpaid Labour" (Ngcobo 1990: 44). Women fought for the land which was the sole support for them and their children while their husbands toiled as migrant labourers in urban industries. Ngcobo's portrayal of women and their relationship to the land illustrates the intimate connection between them and the cycle of their poverty.

Apartheid resorted to using already existing patriarchal structures that favoured its own oppressive practices to enforce distinctions between race and class. Apartheid laws perpetuated and sustained women's role of domesticity with the introduction of the migrant labour system. This was a patriarchal structure which required men to travel to work in urban 'white' areas, but not to permanently reside there. Women remained largely

in rural areas where they weeded, ploughed, sowed and reaped in the fields, herded cattle, gathered wood and carried water for most of the day (Ngcobo: 2-5). With migratory labour patriarchy was forced to adapt, giving women more control in the home. Women could not allocate time with their children as they were preoccupied with household work and sometimes worked outside the family. This made it increasingly difficult for women to perform public and political roles. Moreover, the migrant labour system and the concomitant dislocation of families contributed to marital break-ups, incidents of sexual violence and the increase of illegitimate births. It was an expression of a cultural and socio-economic crisis that increased women's workload in agriculture and altered African intra-household dynamics to the disadvantage of women. Furthermore, the emphasis on the formal sector of the economy eclipsed women's agricultural work as well as their urban efforts as market vendors, for example, selling home-brewed beer. The apartheid government protected the strengthening economic order through enforced laws and policies ensuring domination and control. Patriarchal ideology was entrenched in all sectors of the society and manipulated the living conditions of every African household.

An understanding of patriarchy is crucial because it provides the framework within which society defines and views people and constructs male supremacy. Patriarchy is understood to be the oldest, most basic form of domination. It is a system of male authority in which women are oppressed through social, political and economic institutions. All other forms of exploitation and oppression including race, class and the exploitation of labour and apartheid may be understood as extensions of patriarchy. Adrienne Rich (1977: 57-58) captures the nuances of the African traditional social milieu when she describes patriarchy as:

the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which by direct pressure...or through tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labour - men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male.

The novel examines how women were actively engaged in their resistance against patriarchal oppression. In expressing the predicament of women, Davies (Davies and

Graves 1986: 18) argues that women were “shackled by their own negative self-image”, and by the “interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy”. However, patriarchy cannot be universal since its intensity changes in different contexts over time. *ATDD* speaks to the complexities of women’s marginalization and oppression generated by black and white patriarchies. Whereas black patriarchal oppression is internally generated by some customs and practices, white patriarchal oppression is externally induced by the equally oppressive apartheid systems of colonialism and settler colonialism. The structural systems of black and white patriarchy depicted specifically in the novel are captured by AC Fick (2008: 28) in a recent article entitled “The Stories they tell”. Fick argues that women were trapped “between traditional black patriarchy within their Zulu context and the economic dependency on colonial white racist patriarchy”. The novel therefore provides an apposite framework to examine African women’s subordination within these dual patriarchal forms of oppression within the South African apartheid context.

*ATDD* may be viewed as a political text since it engages centrally with the issues of race, class and gender oppression and resistance. Gender enables one to identify defined differences in the roles that men and women occupy which legitimize male supremacy. The novel examines the ways in which women challenged stereotypical perceptions of their gender subjectivity in the geographical context of rural South Africa, and the socio-political context of the resistance struggles and apartheid. Race refers to a group of people of common ancestry with distinguishing physical features, such as skin, colour or build. In apartheid South Africa, race was used to classify people according to their origins thereby creating a constructed sense of inferiority or superiority. Class is a social stratum whose members share certain economic, social, or cultural characteristics. The novel demonstrates how class was used to categorize people according to their material wealth and place them in positions associated with status and power. *ATDD* examines how all major characters struggled to survive the triple burden of gender, race and class subjectivity because they were women, African and poor.

Ngcobo takes a distinctive standpoint in her novel, accounting for the fact that gender is by no means the only factor shaping the experiences of African women. Gender is not monolithic, but varies according to race, class and culture. Abolishing patriarchal

oppression and advancing equality between African men and women would not have solved the problems facing African women. It still would have left problems with race and class. According to Cora Kaplan (1986: 148),

a feminist literary criticism that privileges gender in isolation of other forms of social determination [such as class or race] offers us a...partial reading of the role played by sexual difference in literary discourse, a reading bled dry of its most troubling and contradictory meanings.

Kaplan's argument can be seen as a response to many western feminist theorists who have ignored the integration of race and class differences in their works.

The novel represents women who are separated by inequalities that determine their relationships with each other and shows the dynamics of women's diversity along the lines of race, class and gender. Davies (1986: 10-11) examines representations of women in African literature and maintains that "race, class and sex oppression" are all distinctive yet interwoven forces that work simultaneously, producing multiple intersections of discrimination and therefore causing the most conflict. Thus to challenge patriarchy effectively also requires challenging other systems of oppression which mutually support each other. Ngcobo tackles the complex reality of the multiple oppressions faced by women and the different ways in which women challenged stereotypical perceptions of their gender, race and class subjectivity. The novel examines how race and class privileges have shaped thoughts, interpersonal relations, inter-group relations and social institutions. Ngcobo demonstrates through the portrayal of a range of characters that a reasonable representation of 'women' can only be achieved when one considers the coordinates of race, class and gender. She suggests that while stereotypical representations of women often depict passivity and physical weakness as conventionally admired traits of women protected by race and class privileges, these are not patriarchal privileges African women could depend upon as breadwinners, farm labourers, and community activists.

The triple oppression of gender, race and class points to the diversity and complexity of women's experiences of oppression in South Africa. In a paper delivered in 1980 entitled, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" Audre Lorde (1984: 856) outlines the differences that undermine women's solidarity across race and class lines. She argues that some of the problems facing feminism are a result of "(r)efusing to recognize difference". Lorde challenges the assumption of a shared oppression based largely on gender. She claims that this neglect "makes it impossible to see different problems and pitfalls facing us as women" suggesting that a more progressive kind of feminism be established, one that would consider the double oppression faced by "women of colour". Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) follows this up by alerting readers to the dangers of assuming that women, especially Third World and African women, are a coherent group thus providing a good foundation for women's struggles.

The strength of *ATDD* lies in its subversion of traditional representations of women and its commitment to correcting literary misrepresentations of African women. Ngcobo's literary representation of women is significant as it contributes to the debate on women's feminist writing strategies. While many feminist critics and writers have attempted to redress the imbalances between women and men, they have generally ignored the historical role of women, and especially African women, in the transformation process in South Africa. Through the depictions of African women's resistance, Ngcobo celebrates their participation and agency against the tyranny and exploitation of African patriarchy and white apartheid rule. The novel offers new insights and depth to literary representations of South African women under apartheid rule. By writing such a novel, Ngcobo attempts to get other writers to engage with the challenges of representation, voicing and analysis from an activist perspective.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE NOVEL

Lauretta Ngcobo has a well-defined tenet, which is to challenge stereotypical representations of women. She subverts previously accepted myths and ideologies surrounding women by depicting the struggles of rural African women who attempt to liberate themselves from patriarchy (both indigenous and settler colonial) and racial supremacy. In doing so, Ngcobo exposes the intricacies of a rural patriarchal social structure and demystifies idealized representations of women. This suggests that traditional mythology is a limiting factor for it circumscribes the representations of women. Ngcobo's progressive representation of women empowers women to see themselves more clearly and independently. Her writing is drawn from her own experience of marginalization in apartheid South Africa. This is an important aspect of the author's politics of characterization.

Ngcobo uses her characters to exemplify some of the problems that were inherent in South Africa at the time. As an author she grants her characters relative independence and some freedom to make their own choices. For example, MaBiyela chooses to send her daughter-in-law to work as it may relieve the small family of their poverty. As she says: "Go to the city and we shall all survive" (188). In another instance, MaNgidi, who is married to Chief Duma, exercises her right to choose when she accommodates and collaborates with the oppressors in the hope of maintaining peace. Ngcobo fictionalizes the collective suffering of women to address and affirm the value of their embattled subjectivities. Through the main characters Ngcobo explores and gives readers access to a range of subjectivities. In doing so she attempts to promote understanding so that readers may recognize through the characters an impression of their own experiences.

Ngcobo uses an interesting blend of social and political realism in her novel. She sees the need to make visible the complex social and political lives of women previously thought unworthy of representation. She draws on the reality of her own life, and her intimate observation of the rural women of her birthplace informs the detail she brings to her characters and situations. She depicts the South African settler colonial-apartheid

structure as an historically enduring force that contributed to shaping women's behaviour. Ngcobo's technique of social and political realism also unravels the competitive and conflictual sides of African society and the apartheid structure. This is set against female characters who occupied the lowest rung of the social and political hierarchy. In so doing, Ngcobo exposes the imbalances of power. She communicates this in a direct and detached way, affording readers the opportunity to experience the major characters and their situations. The novel therefore recreates and comments upon the quality of African life through the experiences of women. It both confirms and illuminates readers' notions of how women existed within the constraints of traditional African society and the apartheid system of government. Such techniques challenge historically accepted means of representing rural African women. However, Ngcobo's realism has its limitations, which may be the consequence of writing in exile and under the exigencies of struggle. The novel may be seen as lacking awareness of the political and artistic limitations of realism as a mode of literary representation. But this does not detract from the vividness and integrity of what is actually represented.

The novel's skilful plot gives precedence to rural women's challenges and their responses. It offers a portrait of the realities of being women in the South African socio-cultural and political environment under apartheid. The plot opens with the protagonist, Jezile Majola, who undermines the power of the apartheid regime by protesting against the dipping tanks. This is followed by her dispute with MaBiyela for going to Ixopo without permission. The death of her best friend and the near death experience of her first child from malnutrition are very harsh lessons for her. Her imprisonment for defying the government's Pass Laws, the rape and impregnation by her Afrikaner employer, and the subsequent loss of her daughters to her estranged husband represent the unexpected difficulties that poor women have to contend with. Saddened by her husband Siyalo's lack of faith in her, Jezile comes to terms with her life and is determined to survive. She challenges prescriptions of womanhood by asserting her agency and using her inner resources for survival, self-expression and empowerment. The plot builds up momentum and eventually grinds to a conclusion when Jezile kills the white official who attempted to rape her daughter, S'naye. Jezile's suffering represents the larger social damage wreaked by apartheid. This suggests that women's struggles are inextricably entwined with the total struggle for liberation.

Ngcobo depicts strong, individual women who refuse to be possessed and undermined by the South African structures of power and domination. Her characters are sharply and insightfully drawn, demonstrating the strategies of survival characteristic of oppressed women. Jezile, MaBiyela, Nosizwe and Ndondo characterize a range of African women who challenge dominant literary representations of women as passive objects within the patriarchal environments and apartheid. Faced with the range of choices at moments of adversity, most women were, in the words of Amina Mama (2001), “trapped in the daily business of securing the survival of themselves, their families and their communities”. Ngcobo confirms this when she writes that women “lived for their capabilities – they were chosen to be wives mainly on that score” (130). Ngcobo’s women characters stand out as images of strength as they struggle for economic survival, negotiating the demands of family and community, and growing with the challenges. They adopt a positive view during crises and are capable of thinking and making decisions as they attempt to liberate themselves from apartheid and patriarchal oppressions. The novel demonstrates that women’s experiences in South Africa are more diverse than had been assumed.

MaBiyela represents African women’s ability to hold things together across generations. She represents the passing generation of traditional African society straining to uphold its standards against the corroding effects of colonialism, settler colonialism (apartheid) and African patriarchy. MaBiyela and Jezile’s mother MaSibiya were submissive wives “because they had never had that power over their own lives (Ngcobo 1990: 11), but as mothers they gain with age additional status and power as the restoration of peace and unity is left in their hands. Their actions stem from long-held customs. Their years of ingrained culture and patriarchal norms force them to keep silent and obedient. Nonetheless they manage to wrestle fulfilling roles from life. MaBiyela engages in the difficult struggle for liberation while enacting the equally demanding role of mother. She occupies a position of great power and authority. Ngcobo writes: “MaBiyela had so much power. She was permanently vigilant, armed with authority and custom” (16). MaBiyela is depicted as “the guardian of morality in the absence of men” (16). She exercises her power “with an element of retaliation against some malignant social order” (16). This is illustrated when she lashes out at Jezile for going alone to Ixopo without her permission. She says: “in the absence of Siyalo, you must tell me – I’m here to look after his interests”

(15). MaBiyela represents the communal memory which links the past with the future as old beliefs establish continuity between birth and death. Being a preserver of customs, MaBiyela sees the placenta as the bond between the mother, the baby and the land, claiming that "(i)t will always draw you together" (74).

MaBiyela's first accomplishment is the creation of a functioning family unit which is a major step in human development. She labours day and night for the well being of her family. Part of her survival is wielding her traditional assertiveness and maintaining the security of the family in difficult and changing circumstances. MaSibiya advises Jezile that "MaBiyela is the pillar of this home .... With her by your side few people will try to exploit you" (156). However, her place was not only within the family. She ruled over the community too with unquestioned authority, despite being bound by the patriarchal norms of her culture and the social stratification of apartheid. Through her work as a midwife, she assists in a symbolic way in the birth of activism among the women in Sigageni. MaBiyela represents women who took the initiative and survived after years of patriarchal and racial oppression. This suggests Ngcobo's attempt to restore women to their rightful position. By introducing a character like MaBiyela, Ngcobo explores the wealth of African women's spiritual and creative heritage.

The main character, Jezile, is the pivot around which all characters revolve. She represents women who eke out a living and have to develop qualities of strength for themselves. The way in which she negotiates the complex structures of apartheid and patriarchal constraints and how they shape her life as woman, wife, daughter-in-law and mother, illustrates dimensions that transcend western stereotypes of African women. She is complex, dignified and blessed with the obvious virtues of goodness, honesty and refinement. She wins her husband's respect for her forthright and outspoken manner. She displays goodness by being a true friend to Zenzile. She expresses her honesty when she refuses to condone or be corrupted by her husband's stealing, as in her retort "what is the meaning of all this! ... that's stealing, that's stolen food" (141). She displays great courage when she demonstrates against the Pass Laws which controlled her mobility and earning potential. She takes enormous responsibility upon herself, earns an income and learns several painful lessons from her own mistakes. That she is a remarkable woman is expressed most strongly when she is brutally raped yet does not

seek to exact revenge. More than her resilience and endurance, Ngcobo highlights the sustaining power of her agency. Jezile is represented as an image of strength and triumph against formidable odds, and is an empowering model for young women.

Jezile's capacity for freedom and transformation derive from within her, from her ability to make her own choices and rise above her struggles. At the very outset of the novel we learn that Jezile disobeys the law and undermines the power of the apartheid regime, rejecting her subject position as a victim of an unjust system. The novel's focus on Jezile draws the reader into her quest for self-actualization in a constraining environment. Despite several defeats, Jezile is allowed to experience new dimensions of her self. The narrator does not state her qualities to the reader. The very process of her journey through life, including her coping with challenges and making choices during moments of adversity, present a positive and convincing representation of a woman. The changes that she undergoes in the course of her life parallel the historical changes that were underway in apartheid South Africa.

Jezile is therefore a metonymic figure who represents the national crisis in South Africa. She represents women who are marginalized by diverse economic, traditional and political oppressions, but who do not succumb to the stifling pressures of the oppressors. Her quest for freedom can be identified by specific clues in the novel: she is deeply motivated to free herself from the constraints of poverty and certain customs, and consequently leaves home to work in Bloemfontein. The death of her best friend Zenzile serves as a warning for her, and never at any stage does Jezile break ties completely with her home background. Jezile's 'escape' implies her freedom to act in accordance with her conscience. It also suggests her independence from patriarchal norms. The rape she experiences is not the end of her participation; it is transcendence into another realm of power and resistance. Her power is latent until at the end when she feels a surge of power strong enough to kill the white official who is symbolic of the corrupt apartheid system. Jezile sacrifices herself by taking on the burdens of her community. Through the portrayal of Jezile, Ngcobo creates a distinctive image of African women, thereby challenging African writers to be more forthright in the representations of women.

Nosizwe Morena is a doctor, a resistance fighter, a feminist and another metonymic figure who exemplifies a mode of effective liberation. She sets an example of women's emancipation within the severe limits of the inherited social norms. This educated character demonstrates a whole-hearted commitment to the cause of the empowerment of women, and especially rural women. She is the "political leader, the guiding spirit in the whole district of Ixopo," who is "hero-worshipped" (40) by the women in the community. She is an established figure and shows great leadership skills. Through her command she is able to rally the women of the community to attend her meetings. Nosizwe is calm and effective and she feels the emotions of other characters most acutely. The narrator confirms this when she says "she understood not only the harsh extremes of their lives, but also the merciless system of white oppression that left them cruelly exploited and defenceless" (40). Nosizwe's insistence on collective action is developed to the point that she is able to risk imprisonment. However, her imprisonment illustrates that without political representation women have no protection from physical or sexual abuse by warders or police. Ngcobo's portrayal of Nosizwe demonstrates that women can be assertive and influential, and powerful candidates for the governance of the community. Nosizwe's sense of self-definition exemplifies the power of African women and reflects on their determination to overcome their marginal status. She chooses to abjure marriage as this would draw her further into the patriarchal, tribal and apartheid systems. She is an inspiration in her quest for education as she represents the future generation of ambitious career women. Her education serves to connect the empowered few individuals and classes to the greater community so as to stimulate social change.

Ngcobo valorizes the theme of empowerment through her portrayals of Nomawa and Gaba. They represent women who are self-reliant, in control of their environment and able to survive through the intellect. Although they were exposed to the "callous talk reserved for women bereft of husbands" (147), they refused to internalize social opinions of them. They were women who were challenged and undermined by the structures of apartheid and patriarchal society. They manipulated the systems that oppress them by illegally selling home-brewed beer and exploiting men for their resources. For instance, Nomawa admits to Jezile, "(a)ll I want from this man is a little fun on the side and a little money to keep me alive" (183). Their indomitable optimism allows them to transcend their oppressions and survive through adverse circumstances. Nomawa and Gaba represent

women who turn their subjugated positions into their advantage by adopting viable survival strategies and techniques to assert their agency.

Ndondo, whose name means “medal” is the last in the long line of participants. She represents women who were active participants as ‘underground’ leaders and freedom fighters during the resistance struggles. Ndondo represents a path for the future. She reflects the complex level of awareness and involvement of women who lived through their experiences as activists who were involved in attaining freedom for themselves and their people. She lives up to her name as she possessed the “remarkable ability to mobilize the other students to the attack” (234) indicating, like Nosizwe, that women were actively involved in activism. By introducing characters like Ndondo and Nosizwe, Ngcobo focuses explicitly on women’s activism and their political involvement. Their identities can mainly be understood in terms of their active resistance. Ndondo and Nosizwe represent women who are the most powerful in the novel. Interestingly, Ngcobo’s women characters such as Mrs Potgieter and MaNgidi who do not lay claim to power as agents show little psychological growth and remain undeveloped. Like Zenzile, they are simply driven out of the story well before the end, suggesting that they are largely patriarchal fantasies of womanhood.

Ngcobo, as activist, counters repressive images of African women by offering a portrait of what it meant to be an African woman in apartheid South Africa. Mr Pienaar, the white dipping officer, is, above all, a self-narrating subject. It is at this early point in the narrative that settler subjectivity is located and its symbolic utterances analyzed. The narrative opens within the consciousness of Mr Pienaar, who exposes his intolerance to what he perceives as African women’s nature. His dismissal of African women, explicitly illustrated by his words “senseless, unthinking creatures” (1), is informed by his colonial culture. Based on colonial norms, Mr Pienaar’s dismissal of the women implies that African women lack all that the apartheid system would consider superior. Interestingly, African women’s potential and agency is indicated on the very next page by Mr Pienaar himself when he says “they herd cattle, they plough fields, they run this community“(2). It is this passage that challenges Mr Pienaar’s opening dismissal of African women. The introduction of Mr Pienaar right at the outset provides grounding for Ngcobo’s efforts to challenge the hegemonic view about African women. She shows that judgements and

prejudices about African women existed in the minds of the white oppressors and not in the women's behaviour.

Mr Potgieter is a representative of ruling class masculinity and the system of exploitation that marginalized women and used their bodies for the production of cheap labour, reproduction and sexual satisfaction. Mr Potgieter's abuse of his wife is linked with Jezile's rape. Both actions are responses to social expectations which include dominating, controlling and disciplining wives and other women. It also shows how far his actions are rooted in cultural expectations of masculine behaviour. Through the portrayal of Mr Potgieter, the novel speaks to the violation of rights and working relationships. Mr Potgieter represents the individualistic, oppressive and destructive nature of the apartheid system. Mr Pienaar and Mr Potgieter are symbolic figures suggesting many things about the way the apartheid government approached black African society with a history of cultural arrogance and incomprehension at every turn. Ngcobo draws readers' attention to masculine authority, racial power and an ideology against which African women will have to struggle.

Through the portrayal of Siyalo, Ngcobo attempts to examine aspects of African society that shape black men's subjectivity. For instance, Siyalo's experience as a migrant worker, his dismissal from work, his struggle for employment and his battle to keep his child alive, all serve to render his subjectivity, that is "feeling like a heap of refuse" (85). He represents the many black migrant workers who were confined in single men's hostels, or had been jailed and tortured for their attempts to survive the poverty and joblessness that accompanied apartheid. Moreover, through the portrayal of Siyalo, Ngcobo demonstrates that the struggle for survival and liberation included both men and women, and needed mutual accommodation and understanding between the sexes. This is illustrated when Siyalo says to Jezile "You women are facing great hardships here and we workers are oppressed in the cities" (83). He continues "I was happy when you joined the crowds on the march to the city" (83). However, women like Jezile detached themselves from some of the traditional patriarchal structures. They dedicated themselves to the liberation of their people by demonstrating against the Pass Laws even at the cost of being imprisoned, as in the case of Jezile and Nosizwe. Women like Jezile

wanted to restore to their men what the men had lost in apartheid South Africa and to direct them towards their well-being.

Ngcobo's third person omniscient narrator is an important artistic device in the story. The narrator seeks to convince the reader of the authenticity of the information within the framework of the story. She stands in the midst of society and observes this reality from the outside. This is evident in the following passage:

...the children were ill and dying, the women were childless, the husbands or sons were away in the cities and were jobless, or so they said when they wrote occasionally, or did not send any more money. Sometimes the women prayed about communal needs when there was little rain and the crops were failing because the merciless sun has scorched everything. Sometimes God would send pests of all kinds to destroy the crops, or would send them devastating storms (17).

The narrator carries the burden of rendering of the various crises that overtook the lives of Jezile and many South Africans at this time. She demonstrates a clear consciousness of women's problems and mediates Ngcobo's work as writer. She prefers to comment subtly rather than explicitly on the characters. It is left to the reader to become conscious of the narrator's tone. Other complex issues introduced by the narrator will be raised as themes in this study.

Ngcobo's narrator treads a fine line between the open acceptance of progressive views and a leaning towards an adherence to African social values. She sets up her narrator to possess a critical though non-dogmatic and optimistic attitude towards social norms suggesting that women's lives are not circumscribed by social demands. While many customs are worth preserving, others require negotiation to enable women to participate in the political sphere. Through the narration Ngcobo demonstrates that customs are perpetually open to interpretation and re-negotiation as characters like Jezile and MaBiyela unconsciously and consciously transgress them. These characters are torn between loyalty to their traditional values and the desire to participate in the new, modern cultures of the west. Subsequently, these characters begin to accept their own inferiority

and cooperate in their own oppressions. The narrator respects African women's status as mothers but questions their voiceless position as wives. It also questions the value placed on childbearing. For example, Jezile's inability to bear children at the beginning caused her great anxiety, as motherhood was regarded a prerequisite for social acceptance. The narrative respects women's self-reliance but questions their exploitation and exhaustions, resulting from their roles as food providers. It esteems mothers for wielding the power of authority over their children: for example, MaBiyela brought up her son, Siyalo "under her authority ... her daughter-in-law had to simply toe the line" (17). But the narrative also contests the power which works to the disadvantage of their children. Zenzile, for instance, was forced to remain married to Mthebe despite her poverty. It was extremely difficult for a woman to break free from the patriarchal system of marriage as it prescribes that "marriage was for ever - unto death" (35). All this suggests that Ngcobo's women characters do not simply import western ways but see utility in those that may lead to their emancipation. It is instructive that it is MaBiyela, who focuses on maintaining and securing the customs of African society who points the way to freedom for Jezile. When Jezile indicated her wish to work in Bloemfontein MaBiyela accepts responsibility for the children and encourages her: "There is no virtue in staying with us to preserve our way of life and reputation and to lose these children through starvation" (188). Therefore even the mother-in-law represents women who take initiatives that chart the course for women's emancipation.

Jezile represents women who take control of their lives rather than completely submitting to customs. She displays flexibility, tolerance and an ability to adapt to new situations. Jezile is a balanced character, who does neither rejects African norms, nor is enslaved by them. Her ability to make decisions and choices is exercised within her household and community. Jezile also demonstrates an ability to participate in the political sphere without transgressing the social codes. This is illustrated by her attending meetings without leaving her village and engaging in the struggle for liberation without abandoning her children. Through the portrayal of Jezile, Ngcobo attempts to explore the factors that shape women's agency, particularly how agency can arise out of very oppressed subject positions. Women's involvement in economic activities such as selling home-brewed beer enabled them to express agency through participation in protests without discarding their commitments to their social norms.

In African society the value of reverence for elders demands that younger people treat their elders with honour and respect. Jezile represents the many women who were “trapped between the impositions of customary law, state law and migratory practices” (40). Her first outburst against MaBiyela occurred when Jezile was determined to see her husband in Durban with the additional hope of falling pregnant. She goes to Ixopo without permission from MaBiyela to obtain a pass. This marks a transgression of values as this kind of disobedience was “an explosion [that] could never be countenanced” because “custom had prescribed” (16) that MaBiyela must grant permission. As a young woman, Jezile was supposed to have submitted to customary law by respecting the authority of her mother-in-law, and to apartheid law by getting permission to go and see her husband. However, Jezile too gains additional power and status over time.

This tense meeting of African values and the modern western ways disrupts the daily rhythm of black community life. Through Jezile, Ngcobo explores what modernization has to offer the majority of South Africans. Jezile is initially seduced by dreams about what Bloemfontein has to offer. However, her excitement soon subsides when she encounters the bitter and painful realities of Bloemfontein. The Potgieter’s cold, impersonal home alienates and isolates her, more so than she had been in her own community following the birth of Ndondo. Ngcobo illustrates the narrow limits of her emancipation, exposing how freedom from one domain may lead to enslavement in another. She questions the notion that women’s aspirations can only be achieved by westernization. However, she also explores the educational opportunities that modernization has to offer for broadening women’s horizons even with the restrictions of apartheid and its Bantu Education Act. Jezile’s desire to educate her children demonstrates how women were prepared to explore options in the hope that they would offer their children ways to resolve the problems of poverty and socio-political oppression.

Nosizwe, S’naye and Ndondo subvert the stereotype that women lack the intellectual capacity to be successful leaders. Whereas men are invoked as leaders in many African texts, women have been widely regarded as icons of national values, as the idealized custodians of traditions, and as submissive wives. Nosizwe, S’naye and Ndondo chose careers that are incompatible with marriage and motherhood. The thought of being an

African woman and a doctor or an underground activist was for many, enough of a contradiction in terms. But Ngcobo challenges her readers to go beyond established norms. The “Women’s Union that met on Thursdays” (189) illustrates that women were seriously engaged with issues in the political arena, as has been documented in the novel when women protested against the absence of clinics (46) and demonstrated against the municipal beer houses (30). Ngcobo reflects on the history of women’s activism in South Africa by demonstrating through her portrayals of Nosizwe, S’naye and Ndondo that women were activists, competent leaders and agents of change.

Ngcobo’s novel shows how women’s productive and reproductive capacities were exploited by the apartheid government as a source of cheap labour. Women’s physical labour sustained the largely subsistence agricultural economy of South Africa while their reproductive labour was exploited through various apartheid policies like the migratory labour system and influx control. Research into the African and the global economy show that in Africa “women farmers produce sixty five percent to eighty percent of all agricultural produce” and two thirds of the world’s work, earn 10 percent of the world’s income, and own less than one percent of the world’s property (Gilbert and Gubar 1998: 1191). In many parts of Africa women are the manual labourers and food providers for their families. African men were regarded as cheap labour and African women as necessary for the reproduction of that labour, as Nosizwe claims: “(s)o we here, as women, serve to produce migratory labour – our children are the labour resource of this government” (1990: 42). Although African women performed much of the labour, the impact of industry and economy in this context have exacerbated their degradation.

Apartheid and patriarchy combined to exploit black women. Women’s agricultural labour was undervalued by the apartheid state although it was women’s physical work that sustained the largely agricultural economy. However, the results of their labour built up and sustained the very class that perpetuated this injustice. Jezile represents women who were looked upon as food providers and care givers with the burden of providing for and caring for the family while their husbands worked as migrants. Women had to produce crops, as well as hold property stakes for men. Furthermore, the novel illustrates that an African woman’s worth in the apartheid state was reduced to a matter of economics, with her survival depending on it. Women realized that their gender and poverty were the

cause of their powerlessness and therefore resisted this by displaying a wisdom learned out of their struggles. This is illustrated through the portrayals of Nomawa and Gaba who, as a result of their inability to get wage employment, devise viable strategies for survival by producing and hawking home-brewed beer. Their preoccupations as entrepreneurs take on a new political significance. Migratory labour had robbed them of their husbands: “Gaba’s husband had died in Johannesburg and Nomawa’s had simply disappeared” (147). However, by earning their own income and ensuring their survival, they show agency. Through the portrayals of Jezile, Nomawa and Gaba, Ngcobo challenges the patriarchal discourse of family that constructs men as heads of households. She makes a scathing indictment on the migrant labour system when she writes that MaSibiya and MaBiyela “had both sat and waited for their husbands; both had lost them in the waiting” (11). The novel demonstrates how migrant labour heightened the pressure of work on women and robbed them of their husbands. It also exposes women’s resilience and resistance as they are depicted through images of their individual and communal achievements. Jezile, Nomawa and Gaba are well drawn examples: they represent women whose economic innovations were essential to the survival of the community.

The exploitation of the labour of African women (and men as gardeners, for instance) through domestic work, illustrates how white women had an interest in promoting the exploitation of African women (and men). Ngcobo depicts domestic work as a means of subjugating African women who were perceived as labouring bodies as they toiled for their white employers. Audre Lorde (1993: 118) argues that “in a patriarchal power structure [as in South African apartheid society], where white skin privilege was a major prop, the entrapment used to neutralize black women was not the same as that of white women”. According to Lorde, women of different cultures experience patriarchy differently: black women experienced racial and class oppression while white women shared the power of apartheid to oppress black women. Mrs Potgieter represents the many settler colonial women who escaped socially prescribed gender roles by transferring their domestic responsibilities to domestic workers who were always amongst the lowest paid and most vulnerable of South African workers. Zoe Wicomb (1996: 49) in her article “To Hear the Variety of Discourses” sums this up in the argument that “(t)he experience of white women’s liberation therefore in material terms represents the

oppression of black women". Mrs Potgieter represents the many white women in South Africa who were agents of the oppression of black women.

Jezile's experience of sexual exploitation by her employer Mr Potgieter represents the plight of many black domestic workers who were sexually abused by their masters. This occurrence was shrouded in secrecy and largely ignored by the apartheid government. Jezile's experience as a domestic worker "made her powerless and so very vulnerable" (204) as she had to work to survive. Further, she also had to fulfill her role as a domestic labourer and contend with the sexual advances of her employer. The rape by Mr Potgieter could not be described as a crime against African women under apartheid law, but as interracial misconduct on the part of Mr Potgieter. He therefore warns Jezile: "if the police come back again don't tell them who the father is" (210). Jezile's pregnancy became the evidence of an illegal liaison. The pregnancy could be paralleled with the psychic "rape" of identity and the white colonizers "rape" of Africa. Jezile's mulatto baby, Lungu (meaning 'white person'), was the indicator of the race of the father, yet the child took the status of the mother. This is an indication of the racist and sexist economic relations that existed during the apartheid era. The novel exposes how differences in gender, race and class permeate our psychology, our priorities, emotions and desires, and create a constructed sense of superiority or inferiority. It also shows how defenceless African women bore the brunt and stigma of the apartheid patriarchy.

Through Jezile, MaBiyela and Zenzile, Ngcobo shows that motherhood, through the sacrifices it entails and the relational complexities it involves, can be as much a source of powerlessness, as a source of joy, strength and solidarity. Mothers and the figure of mother Africa provide a symbolic force in many African literary works. Furthermore, the idealization of motherhood by its symbolic equation of mother with the earth and Africa appear in many African novels by male writers. Achebe, for example, in *Things Fall Apart* (1958: 121) celebrated the mystique of "Nneka" (Mother is Supreme) by idealizing motherhood. Significantly, Ngcobo's novel stands in contrast to the novels written by male writers, and exposes their inability to imagine other ways by which women can access power. In *ATDD*, Ngcobo produces a counter-hegemonic, post-patriarchal understanding of motherhood. She offers a more realistic and varied perspective on

motherhood and mothering. This attests to her efforts to break away from the myths and stereotypes surrounding motherhood and domesticity.

Ngcobo presents motherhood as an equivocal area, being both powerful and disempowering. Right at the outset of the novel, she demonstrates how African women's reproductive rights take priority over others. She writes that "the only thing that secured women a position in society was their husbands, and the only thing that secured husbands were children" (18). Ngcobo problematizes motherhood by reflecting on the alienation and internal exile of childlessness. This is depicted through Jezile who, when introduced to the reader, is anxious about her inferior status and dismal future as a childless wife. Her inability to fall pregnant "engulfed her with a sense of failure" (4). The novel reflects on childbearing and childrearing as important responsibilities of women in African society, and the ultimate measure of their social status.

The powerful African patriarchal system tells a woman that "she needed children to love, to secure her, to help her with some jobs that threatened to break her life" (6) and that being a mother "would fulfil her life and save her from social torment" (6). This suggests that being a mother in African society is a guarantor of stability. The novel demonstrates that in African society the reproductive and economic roles intersect, in that being a woman implies being a mother: as the narrator asserts, "every little girl was born to be a mother" (55). Such an assertion, as Nnaemeka (1997: 5) claims, gives a "human face to motherhood", which patriarchal systems all over have enshrouded in mystique. Ngcobo insists on an authentic representation of the experience of motherhood. She creates a character like Zenzile to depict the instability and suffering that motherhood can bring. Ngcobo's intention is to demythologize the illusion of motherhood as a desired goal for women and to think through other ways of being a mother.

The politicization of a mother's role in African culture is a departure from the western feminist view of motherhood as a condition of confinement or "a site for oppression" as declared by the United States feminist Adrienne Rich (1976: 12). The African feminist Obioma Nnaemeka (1997: 5) counters such claims by asserting that "the arguments that are made for motherhood in African texts are based not on motherhood as a patriarchal institution but on motherhood as an experience ('mothering') with its pains and its

rewards". The feminist debates she was exposed to in exile left an impression on Ngcobo's work as she projects strong images of mothers who attempt to sustain life and culture in the community while remaining active participants in the daily survival and management of the family. The character of MaBiyela suggests that women are not victimized by motherhood; instead motherhood can strengthen women's resistance against the victimizing world. Ngcobo's representation of motherhood as a source of joy is clearly depicted by the bonds that Jezile forms with her children, including her son Lungu, the comfort Ndondo's presence provides, and the pride she feels when her S'naye and Lungu excel.

The joy that motherhood can bring facilitates women's survival in potentially devastating situations, such as the birth of a child clearly fathered by a white man. The equivocal nature of motherhood is clearly depicted in Ngcobo's portrayal of Jezile. Interestingly, Jezile is victimized first by her inability to become a mother and later because she is a mother. The narrator states that "(t)he fulfillment of her life depended on a successful marriage and the success of that marriage depended on hard work – work to produce food for those children" (55). Jezile is shown to be encumbered by norms and customs that shape her life. As a mother, she is controlled by the demands of family that attempts to control her destiny.

Ngcobo recognizes women's eagerness to be mothers but questions the abuse and suffering that motherhood can bring, for example through the character of Zenzile. In this portrayal, Ngcobo reflects on motherhood as a source of powerlessness and suffering. Zenzile has the sole responsibility of her four children and a marriage that provides no protection in order to live better. In six years of marriage she has four unwanted pregnancies and her final years are characterized by poverty and mental deterioration. Through the character of Zenzile, Ngcobo may be making an indictment on the lack of availability of contraceptive information and methods in black rural communities. Zenzile's death after childbirth reflects on the lack of basic health care in rural communities.

The novel also presents a more radical portrayal of mothers who resist the limitations of apartheid and patriarchy. This is illustrated by mothers who use various skills such as negotiation and "other mothering" to resist their oppressions. MaBiyela and Jezile are

able to negotiate on issues of mothering and find ways to adapt to their situation. When Jezile is at work MaBiyela takes her place, reassuring Jezile with the words “I can look after them as well as you can” (188).

Through the portrayal of the child Ndeya, Ngcobo depicts the skill of “other-mothering”. This reveals how the harsh context of apartheid generates the development of women’s creativity in times of crisis. Ndeya contributes to the local political activism by helping Jezile with mothering while Jezile is busy working for MaNgidi. Ndeya’s role as mother is part of the pattern of resistance. Ndeya represents the many young women who have the capacity to contribute creatively to society at an early age and resist the oppressive systems that alienate them: “Ndeya showed a competence far beyond her age” (148); she “made a little canopy for shelter” (159) for the children while the women laboured all day, and while Jezile did her washing, “S’naye was securely tied on Ndeya’s back” (161). Ndeya’s role as other-mother shows how women of all ages found ways to save themselves by sharing their burdens. The portrayal of Ndeya challenges the way women are socialized into patriarchal norms that contribute to their oppressions.

Furthermore, when Jezile was imprisoned for six months, Siyalo assumes her responsibilities by taking care of his young daughter, S’naye. He put her to sleep, fed her and provided her with milk. This suggests that mothering and nurturing roles are not to be stereotyped. Siyalo’s role as co-parent exposes conventionally gendered roles and responsibilities of motherhood as being in flux. In this way Ngcobo demonstrates that gender is a performed entity. The concept of performativity is theorized by Judith Butler (1988), who argues that gender roles are not fixed but performed. The novel illustrates that gender roles can be fluid social constructs, subject to changing forms and actions according to circumstances. By taking on the role of co-mother, Siyalo effectively helps to bridge the gap between the women and a community that is deeply patriarchal in nature.

Ngcobo’s portrayal of characters who painfully find ways to save themselves by sharing their burdens, serves to illustrate the potential of communities to enjoy a strongly knit comradeship. People’s willingness to help each other is based on mutuality, recognition and respect, which counter the race, class and gendered cultures of hierarchy, abuse and exploitation. This suggests that the roles and power of motherhood can be negotiated.

Through co-mothering, the development of father's roles goes beyond traditional prescriptions and limitations.

Ngcobo's portrayals of a range of mothers and daughters such as Jezile and S'naye and Ndondo, reflect on the mother's role as primary educator of her daughter and challenge the complicity of mothers in domesticating their daughters. Some mothers force their daughters into rigid roles of women/mothers as Nomawa did to Ndeya. Other mothers like Jezile did not base their identities on their mothers or mothers-in-law. Instead they challenged the ways of lives that their mothers had accepted as women who "never had power over their own lives" (11). Like Jezile, her daughters S'naye and Ndondo also seemed to reject prescribed roles to be influenced by their mother's way of life. Despite their poverty they made an effort to get an education, thereby obtaining the self-defining freedom to resist social and political oppressions like poverty and certain customs. Jezile and her daughters represent women who are very selective about their roles as women and as mothers. In this way they show a great deal of agency.

Through the novel Ngcobo challenges marriage which reinforces traditional boundaries that shape and define women's lives. She demystifies marriage by focusing on the sense of disappointment and entrapment that women such as Zenzile experience. Ngcobo foregrounds the way marriage serves patriarchal and social structures. She writes that women "were chosen to be wives" (130), suggesting that girls were groomed for marriage from an early age and persuaded that being wives was their natural calling. The depiction of marriage in the novel exposes how various social opinions of women's capabilities are internalized by the women themselves and control them to devastating psychological effect. Society promoted false optimism by conditioning a woman to believe that "(t)he fulfillment of her life depended on a successful marriage" (55). The novel focuses on marriage as a means of opening up a debate on social structures: "Marriage was not just a relationship between two people, but a relationship between two families" (55). Women's greater need for marriage, which derives both from social expectations and economic vulnerability, puts men in powerful positions. The novel illustrates that if a woman is to marry and remain married, she must comply with the prevailing societal norms of behaviour, even if it means living under extremely unpleasant conditions. This is illustrated through Zenzile's marriage to Mthebe, and the marriage of Mr and Mrs

Potgieter. Ngcobo's sympathetic handling of Zenzile and Mrs Potgieter's painful and unhappy marriages represent the millions of wives betrayed by their unfaithful husbands.

Zenzile's marriage exposes the predicament of many women trapped between African traditions, apartheid and the migrant labour system. Ngcobo engages in a profound social critique through her depiction of Zenzile's marriage. Zenzile was enslaved by her adherence to traditional norms that tell her, "(i)n these parts, marriage was for ever – unto death" (35). Her potential for joy and freedom is smothered by her marriage to Mthebe. Her understanding of the need for change is lost in the daily battle for survival. Ngcobo is critical of the migrant labour system which caused the disintegration of African families: "Anxiety is a corroding feeling; and couples living apart cannot escape anxiety" (5).

Zenzile represents women who place emphasis on certain unbending values which become the source of their unhappiness. It is easier to understand Zenzile's death once we are aware of the steps that lead to it. She was entrapped within domesticity, and tortured by poverty and her anxiety about Mthebe, who was the source of her emotional instability. To an extent, Zenzile tries to resist her oppressive situation. She finds freedom through her choice to move to Malakazi. She certainly shows agency here, even though her weakened condition precipitates her death. Zenzile's death was the result of the poverty and despair she experienced in her marriage. Ngcobo's feminist critique is clear. Many men insist on sex without responsibility and the women are left with the consequences. Women have to care for their children and at the same time produce their food. Through the portrayal of Zenzile, Ngcobo questions whether death is the easiest solution for marital distress in the harsh conjuncture of poverty, patriarchy and apartheid.

The novel illustrates how marriage can be as psychologically oppressive for the beneficiaries of apartheid as it is for African society. Zenzile's plight can be paralleled with that of Mrs Potgieter's. Her very name, *Mrs Potgieter*, subsumes her into her husband's identity and demonstrates the fragility of the self. Financially, both Zenzile and Mrs Potgieter cannot afford to maintain themselves without the money of their husbands. Therefore their husbands' gender power provides grounds for their helplessness and dependence. Mrs Potgieter represents many married women who are in complete self-denial. She is trapped in a loveless marriage, powerless against her lustful husband and

blind to the harsh realities of the apartheid government. She often vents her rage upon the one person she can control, her domestic worker, in this case Jezile. Innes and Rooney (1997: 205) argue that in African women's literature "it often emerges that the white woman is not seen to enjoy or occupy a position of superiority as she is marked by her gendered inferiority within her own culture". This illustrates that all societies operate on similar principles of patriarchy, domination and control. Though the means of oppressing women in each culture may be unique, the reasoning and the results of the subjugation are similar. Ngcobo's ability to capture and portray these similarities through her portrayal of Zenzile and Mrs Potgieter underlines the need to foster unity and change on common grounds. Zenzile and Mrs Potgieter otherwise represent many women who have no alternative but to accept mutual distrust, misunderstanding and hostility in place of the emotional and sexual fulfilment depicted in dominant representations of marriage.

Nomawa seeks an alternative to marriage but it is still male-defined. Nomawa, whose husband "had simply disappeared" (147), reinvents ways to relate sexually other than through marriage. She offers alternatives marked by choice and a lack of ownership, suggesting that men have to be manipulated into approval. For instance, Nomawa thought that it was necessary to offer her sexual favours in order to get financial support from a man. As she admits to Jezile "(if) women can't go and work in the cities it stands to reason that they've got to depend on some man that can" (182). In contrast to the other women, Jezile is able to set up a relationship with a man on equal terms but nevertheless must develop qualities of resourcefulness on her own. Her separation from Siyalo was a symbolic break with the past. Although this break involves contradictions and ambiguities, it nevertheless allows her to participate in the process of self-actualization. In introducing Nomawa, Ngcobo presents a view that allows for alternatives, contradictions and changes.

Women's cohesive power enables them to sustain life and culture in the family and community. Women's solidarity also enables the possibility of political agency. The support and sustenance that women offer each other enable them to survive migrant labour, poverty, apartheid and patriarchal oppression. The notion of solidarity is an important part of the social structuring of African life. Solidarity is manifested in two ways: sisterhood, and collective action. Sisterhood reflects on the cooperation between women

on a personal basis, for example in Zenzile, Nomawa and Gaba's relationship with Jezile. Collective action, which brings women together in a group has specific political objectives. Women's solidarity offers safety in a constraining environment as women resist their oppressions through sisterhood. The prison scene symbolizes the control and oppression of women but also the possibility of solidarity under unforeseen circumstances. Women used traditional forms of protesting, such as the singing of grievance songs in prison: "Pretoria – Verwoerd – you strike the woman, you strike the rock" (98). This symbolizes the long history of struggle as illustrated by their voices which "pierced the prison air and shattered the silence" (101). Drawn together in the spirit of solidarity, women "grew strong and threw off the crippling feeling of inadequacy" (101). Women's solidarity represents cultural oneness and wholeness.

In unhappy marriages, sisterhood and solidarity among women mitigate pain and suffering as in the case of Zenzile's relationship with Jezile, and, in turn, in Jezile's relationship with Nomawa and Gaba. Ngcobo reflects on women's commitment to build supportive relationships and support structures with other women in the community. Nomawa and Gaba's affirming and empowering friendship with Jezile enables her to appropriate oppressive spaces and in the process reinvent herself. Such relationships represent a kind of solidarity which gives women the support they need to overcome their subjugation. It also provides women with self-knowledge and a sense of empowerment. Gaba warns Jezile: "Don't let your love ever enslave you to a man" (159). The novel also demonstrates that women's awareness and resistance against patriarchy and apartheid cannot be sustained if they lack the necessary support base of communal bonding against oppression.

Furthermore, Ngcobo portrays women who use their ancient tradition of sharing as the foundation on which to build their lives. As Nomawa says to Jezile: "We will all share and if necessary we'll go home with half-done washing" (162). This reflects the ideal of sharing that is the basis of Ngcobo's moral perspective. It is also an important part of the social structuring of African life. Ngcobo depicts this principle of sharing as necessary to people who have no other material resources as a result of apartheid. She shows that sharing and cooperation is the expression of a communal spirit as it eases the burden of being women within the oppressive patriarchal and apartheid context.

While many African novels depict schisms separating black from white, privileged from underprivileged, most attempts to merge these schisms seem to fail. Through the portrayals of Jezile and Mrs Potgieter, Ngcobo seeks to establish the basics of equality and solidarity possible between women of different races and classes. The most distinctive case of female bonding in *ATDD* is demonstrated when Jezile Majola and Mrs Potgieter unite in their oppressions of male domination and abuse from the same man, Mr Potgieter: "They were two women trapped under one roof, unable to escape and allied against their will" (206). At the time it was not easy for women of different class groups to ally together, but with Jezile and Mrs Potgieter, this is achieved to a certain extent. They represent women who are bearers of healing suggesting that the restoration of peace and unity is left in the hands of women. According to *ATDD*, such sharing may be a decisive factor in women's emancipation across the race and class divides. Ngcobo writes that "a bond of understanding grew between these two women" (206), illustrating that even between two such alienated groups common humanity and female solidarity over patriarchal issues of abuse and sexual exploitation was possible. Mrs Potgieter seems to carry the burden of guilt for the entire apartheid regime. It is reasonable to assume that had she been more developed she would have been a dynamic character leaving the reader with a multivalent image of national unity in South Africa. But Ngcobo wrote this in exile, and her experiences under apartheid did not give her this kind of image.

Cross-generational solidarity represents survival and continuity. The novel explores the relationship of African mothers and daughters, and the feminist argument that all daughters are in danger of being lost to their mothers by the operations of patriarchy. Ngcobo celebrates the enduring solidarity between mothers and daughters and the important role that women can play in contributing to the sustenance of African womanhood. Cross-generational solidarity between mothers and daughters mirror and affirm their otherwise fragile subjectivities. This is evident in the bond between MaSibiya and Jezile, MaBiyela and Jezile, and between Jezile and her daughters. Both Jezile and her daughters go on various journeys of self-actualization, yet they develop their bonds and maintain their solidarity through family and maternal love.

When Jezile was anxious about her childlessness, she was drawn to her maternal bond, and “fled back to Luvu to be with her mother” (4). When Jezile was in financial trouble, it was MaBiyela who inspired her by her strength and encouragement. MaBiyela steps into the role of mothering Jezile’s children and helps her work through her financial problems. By sending Jezile to Bloemfontein to work, MaBiyela allows her to earn an income and tries to give her a chance to restore her self-image. Jezile’s experiences in Bloemfontein, though harsh and sometimes unbearable, strengthened her will and determination. This enabled her to turn her humiliations into triumph. This was made possible through the support provided by MaBiyela.

The exploration of cross-generational solidarity between Jezile and her daughters begins with the alienation of Jezile’s daughters from herself. Jezile struggled against patriarchal prescriptions to keep her daughters but, according to the custom, the children fell under the authority of the father, in this case Siyalo. However, at the end, when S’naye and Ndondo finally return to their mother, the strong emotional connection between the three of them is very apparent.

Ngcobo’s novel explores the attempts of African women to turn their struggles into opportunities in order to combat the destruction inherent in racism and patriarchy. Jezile is a well-drawn example. Although the birth of a child of rape was considered “a communal catastrophe” (214), Jezile’s ostracism by her own people and the uncharitable judgements of the church, gave her the confidence to survive. The narrator confirms this in the statement: “From that moment a new determination grew in her; she would face that community, she would live in it” (215). Jezile represents many women who attempt to turn catastrophes into opportunities in their struggle against racism. She sets her child Lungu on the path of acquiring the highest level of education. She was “determined that she would teach him the importance of justice as a virtue, for he was one of those whose own life had known no justice” (228). In this statement the narrator identifies justice with virtue. Justice is one of the virtues she harbours for the greater part of the novel. Given that African people were deprived of justice for centuries, Jezile’s attitude serves to illustrate the theme of ill-fortune sometimes leading to personal growth as a character resolves to deal with her challenges. So progress under such a harsh conjuncture becomes a matter not of fate but of character.

The subaltern's strategy for survival may include cooperation, collaboration and accommodation of the oppressors as these may be the only options available. Ngcobo draws attention to the complexity of women's roles through her portrayal of MaNgidi, the wife of Chief Duma. MaNgidi and her husband were placed under the control of the Bantu Authorities Department (BAD) and were made "to serve as extensions of apartheid bureaucracy" (Daymond 1998: 263). MaNgidi thought she and her family could survive the oppressor's destructiveness by accommodating apartheid. She benefits from her husband's high standing by manipulating, exploiting and betraying her own people. To an extent, MaNgidi is portrayed as a victim of a process she does not understand. She ends up as a sad figure as she alienates herself from one community while never being able to achieve integration with the people she values. MaNgidi is portrayed with compassion and without bitterness as Ngcobo depicts the ways in which she cooperates and collaborates with the oppressors. However, the novel illustrates that serving both the oppression and the struggle for freedom are irreconcilable aims. All the major characters choose the former and resist the latter, and MaNgidi serves as a foil for them. Given the weight of the dominant propaganda against the struggle for liberation, this is an important strategy.

From the material examined thus far it can be said that *ATDD* is the work of an African feminist. This is evidenced in her incisive portrayals of white and black patriarchal power, racial and gender stratification, the challenges and contradictions of marriage and motherhood, and the resistance of the characters Jezile, MaBiyela, Nosizwe and Nondo to marginalization and silencing. Throughout the novel Ngcobo attempts to instill a positive sense of feminine subjectivity by portraying women who make independent choices and decisions and take responsibility for themselves. In this way Ngcobo subverts patriarchal expectations that define women's roles as being largely decorative and supportive. In representing her protagonist and the central narrator as women, Ngcobo shifts the focus of reader's attention to women, an otherwise neglected and marginalized group in society.

In producing *ATDD*, Ngcobo attempts to contribute to the development of African feminist consciousness and writing. She encourages readers and fellow writers to challenge the stereotypical representations by showing women making important contributions to their

families, communities and country. Women's involvement in gender, community and political activism changes previously accepted ideas of women's passivity. It emphasizes women's agency and Ngcobo's attentiveness to women's voices through characterization and narration too. By writing about women Ngcobo celebrates lives of courage, perseverance and leadership. And by writing for women she strengthens self-awareness and affirms feminine subjectivities.

## CHAPTER 3

### AFRICAN WOMEN AND THE CHALLENGES OF VOICING

*And They Didn't Die* is a positive response to the challenges of African women and writers who have been silenced by a range of oppressions such as colonialism, settler colonialism, racial supremacy, African patriarchy, and the literary and dominant language systems. The active participation and assertive articulation of women characters in the novel reflect African women rising to the challenges of speaking, acting and determining the terms of their own participation and representation. In writing the novel, Laretta Ngcobo recognizes the disempowering nature of silence and affirms that voicing is integral to the cause of social protest. She finds her own distinctive voice to challenge what has been written in the past. She emphasizes the power of voicing to articulate the aspirations and values of her community and to articulate its resistance against oppressive forces. Ngcobo exercises her artistic power to create new realities and introduces South African literary discourse to new voices: the voices of women who represent a sizable proportion of the population but have scarcely been heard before. Ngcobo's choice of the genre of the English novel to represent the experiences of poor, rural women shows enormous confidence and draws upon a powerful, if subtle, self-expression to turn back centuries of silence and misrepresentation.

Voice is paralleled with agency in the novel, suggesting that the capacity to speak secures women's empowerment. By writing *ATDD* Ngcobo provides a medium through which women's subjectivity is articulated, and through which women's subjection is challenged. Ngcobo's own subject position comes to the fore when the narrator asserts "(a)though all the women lived this reality, few could articulate it for themselves" (Ngcobo 1990: 40). Ngcobo's awareness and sensitivity to the need for women to have a voice as well as a literary voice, even in English literature, resonates with Nfah-Abbenyi's (1997) contention that "we must hear what [women's] voices/texts are inherently telling/teaching us". Through her novel Ngcobo seeks to create a presence and a space for herself, and for a range of character types to articulate subjectivity and challenge marginalization. Through the novel a range of women, including the author, use their voices to assert their agency. Ngcobo's novel also allows women readers agency in enabling them to think

about how they can contribute to their own development and the development of their societies.

Writing involves the representation of voice. There can be no narrative without a narrator. Ngcobo's choice of a woman narrator affirms a normally neglected subject of focalization. She decisively chooses a narrator and a point of view that contradicts and contests patriarchal and apartheid logic. The narrator is a "woman speaking back" to the apartheid state and to other writers who misrepresent women or fail to give attention to the existence, challenges and plight of African women. She locates rural women's struggles at the core of her art. She commits her novel to measuring the psychological effects of apartheid and patriarchal oppression as well as to exploring the possibilities for transformation. Her authorial voice is imbued with a communal spirit as she articulates a story which would otherwise not be told in the English novel. She gives voice to the voiceless. The narrator focuses on the experiences of women's lives, and their struggles to enact and verbalize their resistance and assert their agency. The novel tries to represent an entire community of oppressed women. Ngcobo's narrative comes across as a social text, in that it is a careful documentation of the facts and experiences of oppression. But the narrative is equally a literary text, which enables readers to 'hear' events and experiences from the perspective of a range of oppressed people. Audre Lorde's (1984, 1993) groundbreaking article "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" offers an indication of the extent to which women have tackled the challenges of voicing:

The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

Through Ngcobo's narrator, readers of English novels are able to gain powerful insights into the capacity of oppressed women to break out of their silences to tackle their oppression.

Ngcobo's portrayal of Nosizwe Morena challenges various patriarchal views of women by taking on the role of leader in the community, speaking with foresight and contributing to the struggle for liberation. Nosizwe portrays an assertive voice speaking against marginalization and for the empowerment of women. Her long speeches, which occupy the most of the fourth chapter of the novel, are intimately bound up with the play of voice whether in directly rendered speech or narrated monologue. Nosizwe speaks out of a weariness deeper than her own when she says: "We and our children will have to fight on and on; if it takes a thousand years, we will win in the end" (48). Ngcobo takes up the challenge of speaking to the problems facing rural African women by constructing the character of Nosizwe to convey African intellectual's feelings of concern and frustration about their problems and contradictions:

We, the women in the rural areas, need to know why we are here and our husbands are there; why we starve when South Africa is such a large and wealthy country, and what might happen to us if we keep on asking these questions (42).

This passage is a reminder of women's struggles as Nosizwe and her audience of like-minded readers search their innermost feelings and thoughts. The character of Nosizwe parallels intellectuals like Ngcobo, for they understand "not only the harsh extremes of their lives, but also the merciless system of white oppression that left them cruelly exploited and defenceless" (40). Nosizwe, like Ngcobo, is an African woman who asserts her agency and refuses to be silenced. On a symbolic level, the character of Nosizwe encourages women to gain more access to the knowledge necessary to become activists so they themselves can take control of their own representations.

Ngcobo challenges the social and political structures that attempted to inculcate submissive tendencies in women and keep them silent. African women have been fighting, not just against a definition of literature that excluded them, but also against political and patriarchal cultures which kept them poor and largely uneducated. The modes of entrapment, betrayal and exclusion undermining African women writers have included patriarchal disapproval of educated women, enforced illiteracy and women's exclusion from publication by various ruling class networks. Miriam Tlali (1984: 22) in her

article “Remove the chains”, criticizes the Bantu Education Act as a “most ghastly piece of mentally censoring legislation”, asserting that it was “designed for the sole purpose of rendering immutable the myth of white superiority”. She tackles the issue of the development of women’s literary voices as she argues that:

...for an aspirant black writer to emerge, and *succeed* to have his or her work accepted for publication ... is an enormous task [especially when she has] to find means to travel, inform [herself], meet knowledgeable people in all walks of life, do extensive research, and be able to compare books and ways of thinking (24).

Miriam Tlali’s argument exposes the various challenges that many African women writers had to face before having their work published. She attempts to define her own position as a writer in relation to western feminism.

Literacy in any language demands formal education. Enforced poverty and the Bantu Education Act compounded the effects of African patriarchy, with the result that parents chose to spend scarce resources educating their sons rather than daughters. Ngcobo (1986: 81) is critical of the discrimination which extolled “self-effacing patterns of behaviour for our girls, while young boys received all the encouragement to go out there and triumph and survive”. Women were exposed to the often limited and inferior education grudgingly provided by apartheid which hampered their creative abilities. Ngcobo tries to ameliorate this in the context of her creative work through the force of voicing. Her depiction of S’naye, Nosizwe and Ndondo illustrates the ways in which education contributes to a range of necessary and defining freedoms. Education is shown to empower women with voices to express their subjectivities, including their struggles against patriarchal and racial oppression.

Throughout the text Ngcobo draws attention to African women who pursue what they find of value in traditional roles and who resist what is negative. The restrictions in the education of girls handicap them from giving literary expression to their thoughts and feelings. Ngcobo (1986: 86) herself reveals how “that tutored feeling of ‘less-worthiness’ has been a crippling factor in all [her] creative thinking”, as her own challenges were

exacerbated by apartheid ideology that was deeply entrenched in all strata of society. According to Davies (1986: 13), the challenge of African women writers is not simply one of seeing themselves in conflict with their traditions but of “pointing out to society where some of the inequities lie and thereby becoming directly involved in a struggle to reshape society”. African women confront the challenges of voicing by challenging the oppressive structures that have kept them silent, as Nosizwe does, and Ngcobo too. Ngcobo’s protagonist Jezile represents women who insist on education for her daughters so that they may break the cycle and enjoy freedom of expression and assert their agency in all aspects of life.

Many postcolonial feminists try to encourage action and foster desirable change in order to create a viable culture for African women and a position from which they can speak. Ama Ata Aidoo (1980: 156) is one postcolonial feminist who exposes the injustices in her article “To Be an African Woman Writer”: “on our continent, millions of women and girls have been, and are being prevented from realizing their full potential as human beings”. Aidoo’s observation bears testimony to a history of deprivation for, as she claims, “some of us suffer a little more, simply because we are women, and our positions are nearly hopeless because we are African women”. Aidoo, like Ngcobo, seeks to correct imbalances of power that occur through discursive practices. As Nfah-Abbenyi (1997: 15) notes African women writers “have used their writing as weapon to delve into the African woman question, concurrently offering reconstructive insights into feminist and postcolonial theories and the reading of non-western literatures”. Many postcolonial theorists identify manifestations of race and class privileges that maintain barriers between women. Ngcobo attempts to redefine the canon of feminist literature by arguing for the inclusion of women writers who have been marginalized by mainstream academia in the past. Through this novel an assertive demand is being made.

Ngcobo describes the limitations placed on her as an aspiring African woman in pursuit of making her voice heard. Her article “My Life, My Writing” (1986), outlines her difficulties in realizing her ambitions to become a writer in South Africa and the ongoing struggle to be recognized and published in England. Her article constitutes an analysis of some of the issues challenging women and society. Ngcobo (1986: 86) articulates the pain of oppression as she declares that “years of conditioning had taught us that only men have a

voice and are worth listening to". The article exposes the explicit and intimate details of personal and individual oppression, yet it also illustrates the possibility of turning African women's struggles into committed literary art. Moreover, it challenges writers who portray women who are silenced by their difficulties and who lack the resilient, challenging spirit she finds in many African women. Her frankness is borne out in her novel by her attentiveness to challenging sexist ideologies and rigid conventions that keep women silenced.

At times Ngcobo engages in the paradoxical task of ensuring that her character's voices are sometimes better heard through their silences. Through the characters of Zenzile and Jezile, Ngcobo illustrates that sometimes women may choose to be silent. The novel demonstrates that strategic silence can be a powerful form of resistance. Zenzile's loss of voice due to her poverty, her lack of education and adherence to traditional values of marriage, and Jezile's silence after her rape, are articulations in themselves. The novel illustrates that sometimes silence may be the only or the most concentrated mode of resistance available. Jezile's silence after her rape strengthens the force of the horror rather than weakens it. The issue which ultimately emerges from Jezile's silence is the question of personal power, as Ngcobo introduces new possibilities for thinking about individual power and how to use it for the betterment of the community. After Jezile is raped, her agency is reinvested in her for she is not destroyed by it. Her refusal to speak signals her unwillingness to participate in her oppression. Jezile's silence captures the attention of the readers as it invites and initiates responses. Ngcobo speaks against women's oppression without necessarily speaking for individual women. As Ngcobo writes "(a)though all the women lived this reality, few could articulate it for themselves" (Ngcobo 1990: 40). Another interpretation of silence is offered by Trinh (1989):

Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with means to gain a hearing. It is voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right. Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, or more points given to silencers (83).

Ngcobo's representation of women exposes the elusive qualities of women's reactions and offers readers a glimpse of the enigmatic world of deeply oppressed women. Jezile's

silence speaks for many women as Ngcobo weighs the value of words against human action. Interestingly, Ngcobo's exile reflects on her own silence. It represents South Africa's loss of women and women intellectuals. Ngcobo's silence in fact created some space for her to process and articulate her experiences in South Africa, and offers insights into one of the ways in which African women have resisted their oppressions and asserted their agency.

Throughout the text we feel the abiding presence of the mother's voice, which exposes the gaps in the mythology of "ideal" motherhood proposed by male literature and African male literature. Motherhood is often claimed as a source of strength by many African women writers who cite the representation of powerful symbolic figures, such as Mother Africa. However, mothers have been largely silenced by the various patriarchal structures surrounding them.

Through her novel Ngcobo illustrates that it is not a mother's voice in conversation that draws readers, but their mental responses that create the effect of a mother's verbal presence within the text. The shifting registers of the mother's voice; anxious to bear children, desperate to provide food, restless at living apart, sensible to earn an income, determined to give her child a good life, all of which expose her multi-faceted personality and the coherence of her life. Ngcobo also depicts the self-assertive and self-reliant aspects of motherhood by constructing characters like MaBiyela and Jezile. Ngcobo's depictions of such characters diverge from the mother stereotype. They choose to act in resistance against their victimizations by disrupting culturally designated silence and exclusion. The characters of Jezile and MaBiyela succeed in maintaining a degree of empowerment and agency throughout the narrative. This reflects on Ngcobo's spirited optimism in affirming African mothers' voices. Through her representations of various women like MaBiyela, Jezile, Zenzile and Nomawa, Ngcobo uncovers the practical, lived reality of mothers and exposes the ways in which they are able to wield their verbal and actual power as they enact their roles and responsibilities in their families and communities.

*ATDD* shows solidarity with African women writers and women activists and challenges male writers and intellectuals to recognize historical distortions and to accept female

emancipation without terror. Ngcobo's novel demonstrates the importance of female solidarity as women come together to help each other thereby strengthening and liberating themselves from their silences. Ngcobo's depiction of women's solidarity reflects on women's active participation in nation building as part of the social structuring of African life. Such a consciousness is also described by Davies (1986: 15), who helped create an important platform for postcolonial feminists to name themselves and articulate their subjection. In her preface to her anthology *Ngambika* Davies (1986: viii) opens up the critical perspective of "looking at women in African literature standing on their own rather than in the shadow of the men with whom she shares the literary stage". She affirms that in order for women to overcome the challenges of voicing they need to react to constraints by expressing their feelings so that their writing becomes a site for their liberation. She argues for the need to make visible "the mute, voiceless woman" and to create a position from which to speak. Similarly, Ngcobo's anthology *Let It Be Told* (1987) drew African women writers together with their individual testimonies focusing on the collective elements of their experiences. Such endeavours are aimed primarily at integrating women writers' specific experiences into a collective whole. Davies and Ngcobo's efforts as editors suggest that as women writers become empowered to create literature, they themselves can and should take control of the own representations, beginning, if necessary, in community with other African women writers.

Women resistance writers develop strength by affirming solidarity with other women resistance writers. Ngcobo and Yvonne Vera are well drawn examples of this. They have liberated themselves from patriarchally imposed silences by writing novels and portraying characters that illustrate how rural African women have contributed to political resistance through the force of voicing. While many African writers frequently place high value on culture and traditions, Ngcobo and Vera do not do so at the expense of their critical insights. They demonstrate that certain traditional inequalities, such as an insistence on marriage and motherhood, create discriminatory silences that allow for unspoken biases to control women. These destructive silences limit what can be and should be understood about African women. Ngcobo's *ATDD* and Vera's *Nehanda* (written in 1993) offer readers a new language for articulating women's participation in the resistance against settler colonial oppression. Through their characters they subvert the stereotype that women cannot be spokespersons and political leaders. Ngcobo's Nosizwe and Vera's

Nehanda are exemplary examples of this. Ngcobo and Vera articulate through their novels how the African woman, freedom fighter, visionary and creative writer “feels within herself, even the voice, her speech, what she speaks”, as this “enables her to bring people together enough that they listened to her”. (Vera 1994: 77). Ngcobo and Vera’s novels function as a corrective to the lack of African heroines within African literature, empowering women by allowing them to see their own history and reality reflected to them.

Ngcobo and Vera have called for a more heroic representation of women. Desiree Lewis (2002) argues that “Nehanda’s development as a character is described in terms of her leaving a world of silence and contemplation to become the voice of her people”. This reminds one of the character of Nosizwe in *ATDD*. As Ngcobo writes: “If, in all her talks with the women, they had not grasped this fundamental lesson – the oneness of all suffering people and the need to unite – then perhaps the struggle was in vain” (103). The representation of Nehanda and Nosizwe, particularly their roles as spokespersons and their efforts in mobilizing women, illustrates a radical subversion of colonial, apartheid and patriarchal expectations. Both the novels demonstrate that African women did not accept the status quo without question and that some equipped themselves with effective resistance strategies and asserted their agency by fearlessly articulating their thoughts and aspirations. This was no doubt what sparked “growing interest toward African women and their writing, coupled with the explosion in the mid-1980s of scholarly inquiries on, by, and about women” Nfah-Abbenyi (1997: 4). Under colonialism and apartheid African women’s experiences have been shared events of orality and communal resistance, which is perhaps why the characters and the literary expressions resonate and connect with each other. This exemplifies the possibility of political agency as women writers join nation-wide efforts to overcome oppression and break the silence.

African women have a very long history of being productive and contributing to society as agriculturalists and oral performers. They have been pivotal figures in community life and literature, and their voices were heard in various societal forums. However, according to Stratton (1994) and Mama (2001), African women’s positions deteriorated and their voices were silenced under colonialism as they were subjected to interlocking forms of oppression: colonial racism as well as both indigenous and foreign structures of male

domination. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997: 2) complements these views by arguing that “despite this enviable position women have occupied as oral artists African women writers were not given the attention they deserved”. Western conceptions of African women and African male versions of African women have often dismissed the socio-cultural agency that African women traditionally had and contributed to the repression of the experiences. However, Ngcobo attempts to undo this injustice. Her novel demonstrates that African women’s writing is an extension of their orality.

African literary work is firmly rooted in oral culture and African women have “traditionally played a very prominent part in the transmission of oral literature” (Ngcobo 1986:84). However, oral story telling has been steadily subverted with the introduction of the scripted form of literature, which Ngcobo (1986: 84) argues, “has tended to divide society into the educated elite and the uneducated masses”. However, Lewis (2002: no page reference) points out that orality is “grounded firmly in human communication, and oriented towards dialogue, rather than monologue” while writing “can be seen as manipulative” and “an instrument of domination”. This explains the continuing importance of orality in women’s lives. Margaret Daymond (2003: 6) confirms this when she asserts that “(e)xperiencing orature as informative does not diminish it”, especially as “over half of our texts in the 1980s and 1990s are orature or oral testimony”. The richness of African women’s oral production is receiving some attention. Ngcobo’s voice, her striking characters and her powerful language used in the novel is evidence of the rich history of the oral tradition.

Ngcobo uses her western education and the English language as literary weapons to call into question western views of African women and to declare war on the assumption that they are “(s)enseless, unthinking creatures” (1). *ATDD* is a South African novel written while Ngcobo was in exile in England. The distance from her origins gave her some freedom of expression and the opportunity to challenge the dominant western culture on its own ground. Ngcobo accredits her exile experience with having enabled her to produce work. As she says her creativity comes from the “aloofness” she appreciated in England. It gave her the “power to write, and it took only three months before [she] started to write seriously” (Daymond 2003: 87). Ngcobo uses her novel and the English language to give

voice to African women and subvert western views of African women. She uses the novel to celebrate the sustenance of African traditional orality.

Gilbert and Gubar (1980) were among the first to review the representation of women as literary figures and as writers in their groundbreaking essay "The Madwoman in the Attic". They argue that women could not become writers and assume writers' identities until they found appropriate models for themselves in the literary tradition. Ngcobo finds the source of her power from the African oral tradition to voice her own views. She does this by applying qualities found in Victorian and modern Anglo-American fiction. Examples are, Jane Austen's irony and understatement in *Northanger Abbey* (1890), Doris Lessing's intimate recording of day to day detail in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Charles Dickens' social and personal matters of birth and justice in *Great Expectations* (1861), Toni Morrison's focus on black female experience of life in *Beloved* (1987) and E.M. Forster's irony in a western oppressive context in *A Passage to India* (1957). Ngcobo extends the techniques of western writers in the realm of politics in apartheid South Africa. By using such techniques and the English language, and combining it with the strengths of oral literature, Ngcobo is able to give voice to her experiences in apartheid South Africa. It enables her to acquire a larger audience globally. However, this is at the expense of many Zulu readers in her own country who, as Aidoo (1980: 157) declares, "will never be in a position to enjoy you or judge you" even though they were central to the formulation of *ATDD*. Translations of the novel into one or more African languages can give many African language speakers the opportunity of 'hearing' their own experiences articulated. It could also help include rural readers who still form a sizable proportion of the population.

Ngcobo uses the English language to give voice to her experiences in apartheid South Africa. The English language enables access to domains of power where women can gain visibility, voice their views and show agency. She is able to articulate her experiences and communicate in a language that increases visibility to other women engaged in similar struggles across the world. Her choice of the English language was a difficult and inescapable reality, as Ngcobo herself describes the English language as "a colonial, apartheid residue" (Daymond 1992: 97). However, she also views the English language as a liberating, democratizing force enabling African women to voice their discontent of

being generally silenced and ignored. Ngcobo adapts the language specifically for her own purposes. The language is imbued with a distinctive South African tone through Ngcobo's extensive use of words such as "sell-outs", "demonstrations", "passes", and "migrant labour (Ngcobo 1990: 92, 89, 42)". Furthermore, Ngcobo deliberately uses straightforward, accessible language, some of which is not often used in polite company. For example, we read of the screams of a woman that filled the room "Fuck me, fuck me, Dlamini" (Ngcobo 1990: 26). In this instance Ngcobo makes a subtle indictment of the apartheid government and their hostel systems which robbed women of privacy, family and living space.

The explicit language Ngcobo uses calls up a critical debate across cultures. Feminist Suzanne Juhasz (1978: 179) argues that there is a "need to reveal rather than conceal, to use a language bare not only of adornment but obliqueness" and Ngcobo does just that by representing women whose utterances are forbidden against the gender specific weight of appropriate behaviour. Ngcobo attempts to re-appropriate so called "dirty" words and in doing so, constructs a critique of western cultural values and expectations that keep these words taboo and unspeakable more especially when articulated by women themselves. Through the act of writing, Ngcobo as activist is engaging in a political act by resisting an easy assimilation of western cultural determinants that structure women's desirable use of the English language. Ngcobo undermines the dominant and repressive western cultural structures by re-evaluating the notion of a "proper" language for the "proper lady" (Poovey 1984: 3), thereby subverting middle class western norms surrounding women and representing African women's refusal to be restricted and into silence by shameful systems of oppressions.

The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) begins his book *Decolonising the mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* with the words: "This book ... is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings". Ngugi's insistence that African writers use indigenous languages is based on the assumption that English denotes a fixed western identity and serves to reinforce the dominant culture. However, Ngcobo refuses to be consumed with a fear of Englishness and the devouring power of its ways. Through her novel she demonstrates that the English language is a dynamic medium for human communication and, in the words of Miriam Tlali (1984), "appeals to the greater majority

of all Africans who have had the opportunity to go to school". Tlali goes on further to affirm that "English unites us", which is a colonial legacy that Ngcobo uses strategically. Interestingly, Ngcobo tries to deconstruct the power of a unitary language in her novel by combining isiZulu and Afrikaans words with English, which implicitly underlines the richness of a cultural cross-fertilization. Her multilingualism is typical of many African women writers. It suggests the desire for a combined effort of all feminists to engage on a meaningful level without collision of wills, opposition of ideas and incompatible interests.

Postcolonial feminist debates offer an indication of the degree to which women have used their voices to tackle the challenges of representation and voicing. And these are numerous as outlined. However, researchers eager to redress imbalances have been warned by Spivak (1985) in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" not to imagine that they can simply correct this by representing oppressed women because it dismisses real difference and, in fact, adds to the silencing of those women. Spivak's difficult argument gains clarity from Trinh (1989: 80), who alerts us of the danger of speaking for oppressed women in *Woman Native Other*:

You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal-relocation-reeducation-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice – you know. And often cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said.

An argument akin to this is powerfully presented by Obioma Nnaemeka (1997: 162), who complements Spivak's and Trinh's views by claiming that "Africans are silenced by those who have usurped their discursive territory". However, despite acknowledgement of their concerns she believes that this feminist debate should focus more on how

*we can lend our voices to or speak up against problems facing others without necessarily speaking for them. We should aim at speaking up with them against the problems and speaking up with them for solutions without speaking for/against them (162).*

Nnaemeka identifies the fine line between participation and usurpation. Spivak, Trinh and Nnaemeka's work bear important insights into the contradictions to which activist researchers are subject. Through the novel *Ngcobo* illustrates that speaking for others does not create exclusion, rather it ensures presence and enables participation. African women have occupied positions of great power and *Ngcobo* has found a way through writing for women to assert their agency and claim their right to be heard. *Ngcobo*'s characters show their agency by voicing their suffering and readers are able to "hear" their unique experiences. Characters such as MaBiyela, Jezile, Nosizwe and Ndondo are well drawn examples of this. *Ngcobo* makes a compelling attempt to create women characters who are capable, radical and active participants in the resistance struggles. She creates an empowering image for African women by illustrating their abilities to define themselves and transcend the boundaries by which society confines them, and attain self-definition while remaining nonetheless within their society. African women's agency is emphasized as they are able to present their own voices, actions and responses to racism, sexism, marginalization and poverty. *Ngcobo* gives her characters voices to 'answer back' to the modern west. Through the novel, *Ngcobo* is making a serious effort to motivate indigenous African women to voice their experiences.

Some of *Ngcobo*'s impetus as a writer is located in an antagonistic relationship with colonial, white, male, and African male literature. She claims that "women have views, vital points of view, which differ markedly in certain respects from those of our male writers" (*Ngcobo* 1986: 82). *Ngcobo* revolts through her literary creativity against the attitudes and ideologies that have kept women in their subjection. The richness of her representation of characters as heroic, self-assertive subjects with agency has contributed much needed facets to feminist analyses. However, the scarcity of critical coverage of *Ngcobo*'s work in comparison to male writers of comparable achievement leaves an under-researched gap in African literature. *Ngcobo* herself argues in her opening remarks at the African Writer's Conference (1984) in London: "For many, the African woman writer creature does not exist" (1986: 81). The conference created a special forum for African women writers who have made significant yet unnoticed contributions to their genres. *Ngcobo* (1986: 83) has made an appeal for the voices of African women writers to be heard as she claims that "(o)urs is a fledgling literature, fighting for its survival at all levels". *Ngcobo* (1986: 81) declares that "(m)any of our women lack the confidence to

confront the world” and argues that the African woman need to develop her own self-awareness since it is she who will define her liberation. Miriam Tlali (1984: 26) expresses this dilemma in her article “Remove the chains”:

the aspirant African female writer have still to struggle to remove the cobwebs of tradition, custom and the colonial mentality. She has to battle first with herself and then gather enough courage to face the world about her... Because they are hampered at every turn, even by the very society they wish to write for, they find that they have to resort to all kinds of subterfuges to realize their dreams.

African women in the novels of African male writers were spoken for, hardly ever given the status of speaking subjects. Abdulrazak Gurnah (1993: xi) confirms this in his introduction to “Essays on African Writing” when he claims that African male writers “spoke for women without giving them a voice”. His concern with marginalized literature reflects the sexism and biases that are embedded in male literature which operates to reproduce and reinforce existing power relations. Specific works of major literary male figures like Chinua Achebe (1958) and Wole Soyinka (1963) have been criticized by postcolonial feminists Davies (Davies and Graves: 1986) and Florence Stratton (1994) respectively, for endowing qualities of strength and prowess for men and that of submissiveness and subservience for women. Many African women’s literary work bears witness to postcolonial feminist claims about revising representations of African women and suggests, as Davies (1986: 86) does, that a male writer especially must “recognize when he is creating negative images and stereotypes and seek alternative images and symbols if he to develop positive female characters”. While women’s literature reflects the experiences of marginalization, men’s literature, in the words of Stratton (1994: 15) “tends to be full of ideological valorizations of the status quo of male dominance”. Black male critics exacerbated African women’s marginalization by acting, according to Kenyon (1991: 52), “as if they do not know that black women writers exist and are hampered”. Nasta (1991: xv) claims the postcolonial feminist writer is “not only involved in making herself heard (...) she has also to subvert and demythologize indigenous male writings and traditions which seek to label her “. Ngcobo uses the oppressive structures of race, class and gender to expose biases in writing as well as in society. She locates her

characters within the social and political struggles of apartheid South Africa and African society as she hopes to change the ideologies that postcolonial feminists oppose.

By writing *ATDD*, Ngcobo may be said to have changed the direction of African feminism more sharply than did many of her contemporaries. Unfortunately her work remains largely ignored. Ngcobo belongs to a generation of writers which is chronologically the same as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Unfortunately her work, like that of Miriam Tlali and Bessie Head, did not receive the critical acclaim in comparison to male writers of comparable achievement, perhaps an indication of women writers still suffering marginalization. This is not surprising given the fact that women's texts are being assessed by standards established first by western and then by African male writers and intellectuals. This illustrates the extent to which African women writers have been alienated from the English literary tradition, the male literary tradition and the African literary tradition. It is only recently that *ATDD* has surfaced as a classic work of African women's fiction which is read, taught and evaluated by academics. Women critics like Margaret Daymond (1998: 273) have sought to assess Ngcobo's novel and argue that:

Ngcobo is to be celebrated as the first South African women writer to have demonstrated the ways in which a black rural women's story, her actions and her consciousness, is both a powerful register of events and a means of shaping a people's understanding of national issues.

Daymond's view is a reflection of Ngcobo's accomplishment as writer as it demonstrates that only an African woman can convincingly explore and voice her own experience.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

*And They Didn't Die* contributes to the development of African fiction in English as well as enriching the English novel. By writing the novel Lauretta Ngcobo contributes to creating new representations of women. She creates a new form and language of expression in the novel. For example, Ngcobo constructs powerful women characters who not only challenge stereotypical images imposed by ideologies and interests of colonialism, but also rebel against the constructions of women imposed by black and white patriarchies. The novel functions as a corrective to various misrepresentations of African women.

In addition to its literary significance, the novel seems to have also served symbolically as an account of how very powerless people survive settler colonialism, patriarchy and poverty. It also reads as a manual for resistance, agency and empowerment, which explains the suggestive title "And They Didn't Die". The title points to the abiding sense of hope in spite of an obvious familiarity with tragedy. The title reflects and comments on the resilience of African people, especially the characters depicted in the novel. It implies that behind every intention of the apartheid government lies the reality of the strength and endurance of the African people. The title gives hope of life and living beyond the events it covers in a very dark period of South African history.

Ngcobo acknowledges that women's experiences are born out of different economic, social and cultural contexts. She begins the novel by setting up a dichotomy right at the outset to contrast between the domestic, selfless traditional woman and wife with the resourceful independent woman who is actively engaged in her own emancipation. Such a comparison, introduced by Mr Pienaar's dismissal of African women as "(s)enseless, unthinking creatures" (1), challenges readers to look more deeply than he evidently does. By writing the novel Ngcobo attempts to correct assumptions about the positions of African women in the political hierarchy, in economic life and in African families. Ngcobo's literary representation of African women is therefore a political engagement. It establishes her as one of the most thoughtful and daring of writers alongside other writers like Yvonne Vera, Bessie Head and Miriam Tlali.

Ngcobo is both creative artist and human rights activist. Her writing is both a form of political and literary activism. Through the novel Ngcobo challenges the violation of basic human rights by exposing the suffering and the sacrifices of women living in South Africa under apartheid rule. *ATDD* develops the struggle by exposing women's exploitation of labour, disintegration of their families and their subsequent poverty. Nonetheless they are equipped with resilience and the will to survive. Ngcobo captures the predicament of these women, who have to choose resistance over passivity in a society that isolated women's rights. Her characters have an interest in their own emancipation and in national liberation. They are portrayed as women who strategize, organize, network, demonstrate and march in protest to affirm the rights of African women. This is illustrated through Jezile and Nosizwe, who put up courageous battles against the racist, patriarchal society by fighting over discriminatory practices. For example, they sang songs of grievances in prison and they listed their complaints of demands for basic health care such as "clinics for [their] sick children" and the "land to live on" (46). They also protested against impositions of "poll tax, quit-rent or hut-tax" (42). Moreover, they outwardly reflected their opposition by demonstrating against the Pass Laws and the municipal beer halls. Women's fight for social justice resonates throughout the novel. Ngcobo (1991) through her novel strives for the unity of all African people in their struggle for human rights by asserting: "We South Africans need each other not as a horse and master, but as a pair of hands" (192). The novel, the writer and the characters are revealed to have roots in the racial upliftment ideology that is a common feature of many African novels.

The novel provides a women's perspective of life in South Africa under apartheid rule thus appealing to a vast segment of readers whose thoughts, voices and aspirations have been marginalized in much of English fiction, and even African fiction in colonial languages. It also reaches out to readers of English literature, like many democrats and believers in gender or racial equality.

The novel contributes to the development of an African feminist theory that will form the basis for interpreting, evaluating and analyzing African women, thereby producing a more relevant model of development. Ngcobo does this by constructing women characters who are determined to challenge their subject positions and overcome their oppressions.

They are strong women who are portrayed as decision-makers, spoke persons, community leaders and activists. They assert their agency by challenging the oppressions of apartheid and patriarchy.

Ngcobo argues, as Davies (1986: 338) did, “that while [writers] identified themselves with feminist politics, it had to be defined with African contexts”. Ngcobo’s conscious feminism is reflected in her construction of her characters. Her major characters are women who are politically active figures who took their identities from the exigencies of life in South Africa and redefined feminism in terms of a political struggle that took race, rural deprivation and gender into account.

Characterizing African feminism, Amina Mama (2001) asserts that it is also about

challenging the status quo, or about describing the ways in which the contemporary patriarchies in Africa constrain women and prevent them from realizing their potential beyond their traditional roles as hard-working income-generating wives and mothers.

The symbolism of motherhood is apparent in a character like Ndondo who represents the new embryonic movement of women organizing and fighting against the oppressive forces that hamper their creativity. Ngcobo focuses on women’s potential and capacity for creativity in South Africa, positioning herself at the forefront of the resistance struggles. She uses her novel to construct characters who represent the struggles of the creative literary process.

African women’s struggles with creativity included fighting against the prescriptions of colonial writing as well as giving voice to their experiences and points of view (subjectivity). For example, Jezile’s initial struggle against social and political forces to become a mother could be understood as a metaphor for Ngcobo’s creative struggles in exile in England to produce a novel that represents and articulates the experiences of African women.

Believing in the equality of races, classes and genders, Ngcobo reassesses the legacy of apartheid from a feminist perspective in *ATDD*. She saw herself as part of an intensifying struggle. By writing the novel she participates in the struggle in the best way that she can as a creative writer and asserts herself as agent of her own history.

Much of the success of the novel can be attributed to Ngcobo's representation of African women activists and their historical agency, which was integral to the struggle for resistance but largely neglected or ignored in all arenas, social, political and intellectual. By recounting the story of rural women's resistance in apartheid South Africa, *And They Didn't Die* makes a profound contribution to breaking the silence.

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