

## **FEMALE CHARACTERS IN PHASWANE MPE'S *WELCOME TO OUR HILLBROW* AND NIQ MHLONGO'S *DOG EAT DOG***

**Aklilu Dessalegn Zewdu & Abiye Daniel**  
*Addis Ababa University*

This article examines two novels by Phaswane Mpe and Niq Mhlongo, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Dog Eat Dog*, by focusing on how they portray post-apartheid South African women and their experiences during and after the fall of apartheid. Set in the early years of South Africa's democracy, these novels can be read from a feminist perspective, which offers an opportunity to investigate the condition of black South African women and their struggle in the context of the legacies of apartheid and the persisting male domination. The article employs postcolonial feminism as an approach and studies the two novels comparatively to see how the authors depict South African women in the face of double colonization and how they stand up to it. As the analysis indicates, Mpe and Mhlongo have voiced the plight of South African women through female characters that have continued to carry the burden of the legacy of apartheid and the persistence of patriarchy in the post-apartheid era. They have also demonstrated the resilience of women by featuring characters that reject exploitation and seize the opportunities offered by the newly-democratized nation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this article is to explore the portrayal of post-apartheid female characters in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) and Niq Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog* (2004). It attempts to understand the experience of women in the post-apartheid era as represented in the two novels. I also examine the ways the female characters resist different forms of oppression. A feminist lens allows a better understanding of the social prejudice against them and the reality of womanhood in the context of the wake of democratization in South Africa in 1994, and it helps in an examination of how the legacies of apartheid and lingering patriarchy continue to impact their situation and the resilience they display for the betterment of their condition.

Although the selected novels were written by male writers and their stories have male protagonists, the texts clearly reveal the situation of South African women in the post-apartheid era by also including female characters. The oppression of women appears to be one of the themes that the two novelists foregrounded in their works. While many issues have drawn the attention of researchers in their readings of Mpe's and Mhlongo's novels, an investigation of the female characters in these texts has not caught the attention of literary critics of post-apartheid literature. The exception is Emma Aho's (2021) essay, where sexism and gender inequalities in Mpe's *Welcome*

*to Our Hillbrow* are explored through Adichie's African feminism and Anscombe's virtue ethics with the aim to create a module to use the novel to teach ethics or Swedish Common Principles to Swedish students. While it makes sense to apply Adichie's African feminism to an African text, I find it problematic to use the Western concept of ethics (i.e., Anscombe's virtue ethics) to read a (South) African literary work, as ethical values in African traditions are different from those of Western culture.

In their analysis of the novel, Aho (2021: 4) argues that the novel is an "ethically problematic text" from the perspective of African feminism as it advocates for gender equality. What is more relevant to the present study, however, is the discussion pertaining to gender inequality. Aho stresses that the "women adhere to the traditional feminine identity" (2021: 12) and that "sexism is displayed partly through women suffering from sexual harassment, violence and the assumption that their bodies belong to me" (2021: 10). These patriarchal views and the position that South African women assume in society are in line with the argument of the present study, as one aspect of the postcolonial feminist perspective is to look at how women are oppressed by men due to the prevalent patriarchal nature of African societies. However, owing to the theoretical approaches used in the essay, Aho's analysis fails to examine precisely those female characters that resist male domination. Apart from this, I find postcolonial feminism to be the right theoretical framework to deal with all forms of oppression of women, as well as their resistance, in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Dog Eat Dog*.

While these two authors and/or novels have not been paired in any previous studies, I would argue that their treatment of feminism is one of the factors that connects them. Feminist issues are prevalent in the two novels, and they have shown how the legacies of apartheid impacted South African women and their current condition in the post-apartheid period. African societies overflow with local and culturally specific constructions of gender, which are articulated in literature. Through different agents and their works, Africa has probably contributed more to an international awareness of modern Africa's literacy and cultural achievements than any other place. Contemporary Africa is filled with a multitude of official and unofficial gender commentators of particular interest and an abundance of writers and woman-centered theorists who offer perspectives that interrogate, reformulate, and analyze inherited popular codes.

Concepts such as "womanism" and "motherism" have been adopted or coined during this dynamic process, in which authors write with a new way of responding as postcolonial subjects (Aidoo 1965). In addition to numerous others, Chinua Achebe, Donatus Nwaga, and Buchi Emecheta in particular have produced a number of remarkably talented creative works that have become globally popular books. In these literary works, we find that African women have been subjected to numerous limitations and restrictions that society imposes on them. Women in Africa have been discriminated against by the norms and customs of their societies, and they have been treated and deemed as second-class members of society who are considered no more important than agents of household work and carers of children. For most of these writers, the main endeavor is to reveal the hardships that women experience due to social, cultural, and economic problems.

Likewise, the South African writers Phaswane Mpe and Niq Mhlongo astutely portray the unfortunate situation of black South African women in society. These women deserve attention in comparison to their white South African women counterparts, as they were subject to discrimination during apartheid due to their skin color and male oppression due to their culture. Since these women represent a voiceless part of society, the novels' voicing of their concerns

and troubles fulfills one role of literature. They also explore the joys and sorrows of South African women, as they struggle with patriarchal dominance, apartheid, economic exploitation, and racism. As a mirror used to reflect the historical, cultural, and political life of a people, literature has thus occupied a central position among the various vehicles used to represent social reality.

In light of the crucial role played by literature, this study specifically focuses on the way in which *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Dog Eat Dog* address the social realities of women, showing how the protagonists in the novels pose bold resistance against male domination despite the sociopolitical supremacy that men have had. It seeks to bring the true mentality and heroism of South African women more evident, as they stand burdened by traditional beliefs, colonialism, and patriarchy. Subsequently, I analyze the portrayal of women in the selected novels with the following fundamental questions: (1) in what ways do Mpe and Mhlongo reflect upon issues of postcolonial feminism in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Dog Eat Dog*; and (2) how do the female characters in the novels resist male domination despite the sociopolitical imbalance? To answer these questions, textual analysis is employed as a methodology, while a close reading and detailed analysis support the interpretation of the two novels.

## THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Due to the limited scope of Western feminist thought, postcolonial feminism directs the emphasis away from the experience of women in Western culture to that of the postcolonial world (Mills 1998). Dealing with the ways in which women in the postcolonial world are affected by racism and colonialism, it emerged as a reaction to the totalizing tendencies of the mainstream feminist discourse, and it comments that non-Western women are wrongly represented (Weedon 2000; McEwan 2001). It has also offered a critique of the mainstream postcolonial theory that focuses on the consequences of colonialism for the current political and economic situation of the colonies with little or no regard toward issues of gender (Bulbeck 1998; Al-wazedi 2021).

Postcolonial feminism has never operated as a separate entity from postcolonialism; rather, it has directly inspired the forms and the force of postcolonial politics. Where its feminist focus is foregrounded, it comprises non-Western feminisms that negotiate the political demands of nationalism, socialist feminism, liberalism, and eco-feminism, alongside the social challenges of everyday patriarchy, typically supported by institutional and legal discrimination, including domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, honor killings, dowry deaths, female feticide, and child abuse. Feminism in a postcolonial frame begins with the situation of the ordinary woman in a particular place, while also thinking her situation through in relation to broader issues, in order to give her the more powerful basis of collectivity. It highlights the degree to which women are still working against a colonial legacy that was powerfully patriarchal in institutional, economic, political, and ideological ways (Young 2003).

The two characteristics of postcolonial feminism, double colonization and resistance are discussed below, which are relevant to the selected novels for the study. Double colonization, a term coined by Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford (1986), refers to the fact that women in postcolonial countries have been victims of both the oppression of colonialism and male domination. Postcolonial feminist theorists argue that women were oppressed by both patriarchy and the colonial power, but also that the situation has continued to be the reality in the Global South even during the postcolonial period (Tyagi 2014; Lewis & Mills 2003). Thus, women are colonized in a twofold way by means of imperialism and male dominance.

Postcolonial feminists are concerned with identifying and revealing the specific effects that double colonization has on women and how double colonization is represented and referred to in literature. In a nutshell, therefore, double colonization refers to women of colonized nations being doubly oppressed due to their race as well as their gender.

According to Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin (2000), postcolonial feminism arose out of the gendered history of colonialism. The history of colonialism is largely the history of exploitation of non-white, non-Western others. As colonized countries have been deeply affected by the exploitative racist nature of colonialism, postcolonial feminists argue that focus on colonial oppression – particularly in racial, class, and ethnic forms – has in large part overlooked women in postcolonial societies. Analysis tends to consider women as members of marginalized groups within postcolonial societies, the case of indigenous minorities, and having a history of unbroken oppression.

The connection between feminism and literature can be found mainly by means of substance. If feminism is the substance, the literary text becomes the product in which the material is designed and idealized to get an accurate reflection of the woman's world from a particular viewpoint. The level of resistance in feminist literature can be considered from two perspectives. The first is the challenging of the credibility of the male-dominated or patriarchal literary tradition, which misrepresents and undermines the identification and encounters of women. The second form of resistance is considered in the renovation of new identities of women, which advances the discussion of women to the center of attention from the non-existence or "silenced" space of masculine discourse. Therefore, female characters in postcolonial literature often engage in bold resistance against male domination in spite of the sociopolitical forces arrayed against them.

### **PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *WELCOME TO OUR HILLBROW***

Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a post-apartheid novel that treats not only the issues that evolved after the fall of the apartheid but the legacies of apartheid in South African society. The story takes place in Hillbrow, a neighborhood in Johannesburg, during the years of transition from apartheid. Refentse, the main protagonist, moves to Johannesburg from the rural town of Tiragalong to attend university. He earns BA and MA degrees and gets hired by the university to teach, but after he learns that his lover, Lerato, has cheated on him with their friend, he commits suicide. From heaven, he reflects on his life and tells his story. Finally, he is joined in heaven by his friends, Lerato and Sammy, and his mother.

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the female characters are portrayed to highlight the condition of post-apartheid woman and the position they hold in the new era. Mpe depicts the female characters in such a way that shows the burden they have shouldered as victims of both the apartheid system (in the case of the South African women characters) and colonialism (in the case of the non-South African women who migrated from other African countries), on the one hand, and as victims of the patriarchal system, on the other.

The South African female characters are shown as being oppressed due to their black skin color during the post-apartheid era, as that never changed with the collapse of the apartheid system. The heroine of a short story written by Refentse, an embedded narrative in Mpe's

novel,<sup>1</sup> writes a novel in her indigenous language, Sepedi, but it is rejected by a publisher for using vulgar language that would not cause English writers to be denied publication. Mpe foregrounds this by contrasting this with the short story that Refentse himself wrote in English, as well as *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, also written in English; despite using vulgar language, they are both accepted by the publishers. Racism, which was at the core of the apartheid system, is shown to influence the post-apartheid South African society in different ways, and the publishing industry – being a platform of communication – is one of these. In fact, control of means of communication was one of the key mechanisms used to perpetuate the apartheid system and colonialism.

Mpe also interestingly demonstrates how colonialism has continued to unleash bitter consequences even after the colonized countries gained their independence. As narrated in the story, the migrants that swarmed the towns of South Africa like Johannesburg and Hillbrow were black Africans coming from war-torn, poverty-stricken African countries immediately after independence. Furthermore, the women who make up the main part of the migrants left their countries in search of a better life for themselves and their families back home. Even then, the fate awaiting these women migrants in South Africa was prostitution, crime, violence, and AIDS.

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, female characters are also portrayed as victims of male dominance in their society. Women are seen in the novel to be victims of rape and vulnerable to sexual blackmail. On several occasions in the story, the reader encounters stories of rape and is informed how rife these are in post-apartheid society; in effect, this reveals the attitude of the society toward women and their place there: “There were many such vulnerable people in our Hillbrow, where human cries for help often went unanswered, the multitudes passing by as if oblivious to what was happening, afraid to intervene out of concern for their own lives” (p. 65). In this sense, women are mostly seen as sex commodities, such as for Terror, one of the male characters, who is a womanizer and a rapist. Another face of the oppression of women that the female characters come to experience is economic exploitation and its consequences in their everyday life. The best thing the women can hope for, educated or not, is to be hired as domestic help in white men’s kitchens. Much worse is that the South African and non-South African women have to resort to prostitution to make a living for themselves and their families at home.

*Welcome to Our Hillbrow* not only demonstrates the double oppression of women in the apartheid and post-apartheid era, but it also presents characters that stand up against the male dominance and say no to the different forms of oppression. Refilwe, the ex-lover of the protagonist, for instance, is portrayed as a strong woman except for the weakness she exhibits in her sexual life. As a student, she is academically strong and receives positive testimonials from her teachers and acquaintances alike. After graduation she is able to get a job in a publishing house as Assistant Editor; this is due to getting three strong testimonials from her two lecturers and Refentse (as a reference from her community). Through Refentse’s testimonial, Mpe articulates his opinion on women: “What stands out about [Ms. Refilwe] is her appetite for learning and capacity for hard work” (p. 33). After two years, Refilwe is promoted to the position of Commissioning Editor. But she doesn’t stay long in the publishing house, as she learns that there is no room for young and critical writers or those who write in indigenous languages: “Although she knew what good books looked like, the company kept on reminding her that

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1 Featuring a story within the main story, an embedded narrative is used as a literary technique to provide context to help highlight a specific element.

good books were only those that could get a school prescription” (p. 94). When leaving, she decides to study for her MA and wins a scholarship at Oxford Brooks University.

The heroine in the short story of the protagonist is another character Mpe uses to project post-colonial feminism in his work. The heroine is a university student working as domestic help in a white man’s house to cover her expenses and settle her study loans. She also emerges as a writer who explores the key issues during the post-apartheid period. She writes a novel in Sepedi (the Northern Sotho language spoken in the northeastern provinces of South Africa) and submits it to a publisher. The reviewers comment that it uses vulgar language and it should be edited before possible publication. She refuses to make the revisions and is rejected by the publisher. But the rejection from the publisher comes not only because of the use of vulgar language but “because she dared to write things that were critical and showed up their prejudices” (p. 59).

As a post-apartheid novel, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* serves Mpe’s purpose of revealing the burden that (South) African women shoulder, as a result of both apartheid/colonialism and patriarchy, on the one hand, and depicting the post-apartheid/postcolonial woman who resists the different forms of double oppression. He presents the reader with female characters who suffered harsh experiences of apartheid and colonialism due to their race and characters who lay victim to the male dominance in their society. He also portrays women characters who stand up for their rights and emerge as strong personalities in the face of double oppression.

#### **PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *DOG EAT DOG***

Niq Mhlongo’s debut novel, *Dog Eat Dog*, is a past-tense, first-person narration set in the historical backdrop of the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994. Featuring a protagonist nicknamed Dingz, Dingamanzi Makhedama Njomane is a young student at the University of Witwatersrand who is in danger of losing his college education. At the beginning of the book, Dingz receives a rejection letter for his application for financial aid, and as the story continues he is expelled from his dormitory for bringing a girl to his room. He suffers from an STD and carelessly complicates his university life by skipping classes and missing exams, instead carousing and playing around to enjoy himself despite his financial difficulties. While making an excuse for not taking a final exam, he lies that his uncle died on the exam date and then finds himself in a complicated situation to produce a death certificate. Finally, he manages to pass to the next year and the story ends, leaving unanswered the question of whether he will continue his studies.

With the story being set after the collapse of the apartheid system, marking the borderline between the apartheid and post-apartheid eras, *Dog Eat Dog* foregrounds the fate of the black South African woman in the face of the oppressive apartheid regime, on the one hand, and what the new post-apartheid era would hold in store for her. To do this, Mhlongo portrays old black South African women who shouldered the oppression of the apartheid system and depicts young black South African female characters who are experiencing the legacy of apartheid with the hope of the promise for a better life.

In the story, there are black South African mothers who are illiterate and living in abject poverty in shanty houses in the townships, as they were denied access to education and employment by the apartheid regime. Being widowed mothers, they sustain their family of six, seven, eight, or more children on their inadequate pension. Dingz’s widowed mother supports nine members of her family with a three-hundred-and-fifty rand pension in a four-room, matchbox house. The mother of another character, who “ran a shebeen, selling liquor at her house to

supplement her meagre pension” (p. 65), has eight children and seven of them still live with her. They are not only burdened with the responsibility of supporting their school-aged and unemployed children, but they also have to raise their orphaned grandchildren. An old woman whom Dingz and his friend Dunga visit in the township has to look after her two daughters’ five kids in a three-room house. She shares her fears: “I don’t know what they’ll do if the Lord decides to terminate my contract in this world because they all depend on my pension. The other one is pregnant again and I wonder if she even knows who the father is” (p. 194). The mothers are equally victimized under the apartheid system, due to racism and economic exclusion, and after the democratization of the country because of the ineptitude of the new government in addressing their problems.

The apartheid system left the women in an impoverished situation, denying them access to education, better housing, healthcare, and employment opportunities on the basis of their skin color. Nevertheless, Mhlongo is not only concerned with how the racially discriminatory system put black South African women at the disadvantage; also important for him is the patriarchal social system, which hampers their access to equal opportunities as their male counterparts. Female characters in the novel are depicted as responsible for assuming the role of producing and raising children, which also limits their access to education, better healthcare, and economic empowerment. The mother characters in *Dog Eat Dog* have many children; they are uneducated, and they depend on their husband’s income or pension, which leaves them at the end of the poverty line.

Sexual objectification is another form of patriarchy demonstrated in the novel. The male characters view the girls as an object of sexual desire. For instance, in Chapter Twelve of the novel, when two girls pass by, Dingz and his friends tease them and their talk shifts to how hot the girls are, referring to their body parts. When one of Dingz’s friends says that they are still very young, another says, “Just look at their breasts, man! Kids don’t have that kind of dairy. They could feed the whole of Soweto” (p. 84). Another friend adds, referring to their bottoms, “Oh shit! Look at that ATM, man... That’s a real African Trade Mark” (p. 84). Apart from this, the story paints all ladies with the same brush, portraying them as materialistic. Describing the parties staged in the streets to celebrate the first election, Dingz remarks, “I am as sure as death that if you had that kind of a sound system in your car most girls wouldn’t give a damn about the size of your dick” (p. 98). In the same vein, the partying guys with “their lady-killer sports cars” harass the ladies and flirt with them to win a one-night stand.

The young generation of black South African women are portrayed as being both victims of the legacy of apartheid and beneficiaries of the opportunity that the promise of the “Rainbow Nation” hopes to bring.<sup>2</sup> Some young female characters in *Dog Eat Dog* have fallen victim to the legacies of apartheid, like unemployment and poverty. These girls have two, three, or four children with little or no income to raise them. On the other hand, female characters like Theks, Babes, and Nkanyezi are on the right track to make good use of the new opportunity. They are attending college and transcending the fateful limitations of their mothers and older sisters. Theks is depicted as a girl who does well in school, even better than her female and male friends; as Dingz tells, “All my friends had managed the minimum requirement to be re-admitted, although we had all failed one or two courses, except Theks who had done really

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2 The term “Rainbow Nation” was coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe South Africa after the first democratic election in 1994, signifying its unity in diversity.

well” (p. 212). She is also “the first from her family to have been admitted to a tertiary institution” (p. 65), an opportunity that her mother as well as her older sisters were not so lucky to get.

By shedding light on the condition of black South African women in the context of the apartheid and the post-apartheid eras through the respective portrayal of old and young black female characters, Mhlongo exposes what challenges the old generation of black women had faced – and continue to encounter – and how the legacy of apartheid impacts the young generation of South African women and what their experiences look like in the face of new challenges and opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

In their novels, Phaswane Mpe and Niq Mhlongo elucidate the condition of black South African women by revealing the burden they shoulder as a result of both apartheid and patriarchy, on the one hand, and by depicting post-apartheid women who resist different forms of oppression. In the novels, the characters are affected by the apartheid system, which caused them to live in poverty and denied them access to education, employment, different public services, and so forth. This legacy is allowed to perpetuate after the demise of apartheid, as improvements have not been made since then. Due to the lingering situation, the female characters have to lead an impoverished life in shanty houses in the townships that are still neglected by the government. Their access to health care, better housing, and employment has not shown any significant improvement, still leaving them dependent.

When the legacy of apartheid-era racism is also explored, it is shown to have continued to influence the lives of the female characters in the post-apartheid years. For example, in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, since the apartheid-era censorship has not yet disappeared, a black female writer gets a rejection from a publisher for writing in an indigenous language and vulgar language style. The female characters are equally subject to male domination, with the novels revealing that for the male characters, a woman’s place is in the kitchen. Women are depicted as responsible for bearing children and looking after them, and cooking for the family. Sexual objectification and viewing all women as materialistic are also explored in the novels.

However, the authors are not only interested in demonstrating the plight of black South African women but also in highlighting the resistance they display in the face of exploitation. They feature female characters who fall victim to the whip of double oppression yet still rise above their unfortunate circumstances by making use of the opportunities they have. They stand up to the exploitation they experience and transcend their limitations by proving their potential. By depicting such strong female characters, the authors both highlight the role of such resilient women in society and provide a model for other women facing similar challenges to follow in their footsteps.

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