

# THE “NEW SOUTH AFRICAN WOMAN” IN ANGELA MAKHOLWA’S CRIME FICTION IN A TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST CONTEXT

*Brno Studies in English*  
Volume 47, No. 2, 2021

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867  
<https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2021-2-10>

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## Abstract

The article reads two crime fiction novels by Angela Makholwa, the bestselling South African novelist, as radical feminist novels that respond to an extremely high rate of violence against women in contemporary South Africa. It is argued that Makholwa’s articulations of female desire rewrite South African post-apartheid discourses about the nation from a black female perspective. The trope of the New South African Woman in these texts is analyzed as an expression of 21<sup>st</sup>-century African feminism that rejects the culture of violent masculinity as well as traditional discourses about women. In comparing it with 1<sup>st</sup>-wave feminism’s New Woman ideology as it was manifested in American and European fin-de-siècle contexts, it is seen as a transnational feminist phenomenon that responds to nationalism’s exclusion of women from the nation.

## Key words

*Angela Makholwa; New South African Woman; transnational feminism; Neue Frau; Hapsburg coloniality; Slovak feminism*

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## Introduction

Angela Makholwa (born 1976) is a best-selling author of popular novels and the first black woman writer in South Africa to write crime fiction. The significance of this must be understood in a historical context of colonial and patriarchal oppression where the first novel by a South African black woman was published only in 1975, a year before Makholwa was born (this was Miriam Tlali’s *Muriel at Metropolitan*, to be promptly banned by the South African censorship board). In appropriating the typically masculine genre of crime fiction – which, as Stephen Knight argues, is known for “extensive male chauvinist traditions of description, attitude and behaviour, as well as the complacent acceptance of a patriarchal social order” (cit. in Murray 2016: 15) – Makholwa, like other female crime fiction writers, has reinvented the genre from a feminist perspective. Jessica Murray (2016), in drawing on the work of Kathleen Gregory Klein, Maureen Reddy,

Margie Orford and Antoinette Pretorius, emphasizes the feminist importance of such women-centred, gender-aware detective fiction in a country such as South Africa, where women are the primary targets of male crime and violence. Much publicised statistics estimate that one in three South African women will be raped in her lifetime. In 2020, 2,700 women were killed, and on average, 100 rapes were reported every day – but experts say that is just a fraction of what is going on (Bhekisisa 2021). All of this was made even worse with the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in 2021, when sexual assaults registered a 74% increase, compared to the previous year (Mitchley 2021). According to the country's president Cyril Ramaphosa, violence against women is “another pandemic that is raging in our country alongside COVID-19” (Crabtree 2020).

As my analysis of Makholwa's two crime novels below shows, the author raises a mirror to this ugly side of the New South Africa and brings women's experiences of male violence centre-stage. For Makholwa, as for many other contemporary South African feminists, the rampant violence against women in post-apartheid South Africa is the result of the failure of the anti-apartheid struggle to recognize gender, alongside race, as a category of oppression. While women were actively involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, driven by grievances pertaining specifically to them as women, they were not concerned with women's rights in the wider sense, because they believed that, “If an entire society is oppressed, then to talk of women's liberation is negative” (Ginwala 1986). These words of Frene Ginwala, president of the ANC Women's League in the 1980s, show that there was no programme of transforming gender relationships: as the anti-apartheid activist Mamphela Ramphele (1996) writes, women mistakenly believed they would be rewarded for their struggle after freedom was won with social equity and inclusion in politics.

According to the South African feminist theorist Pumla Gqola, misogynist violence in contemporary South Africa is an example of deeply-rooted, structural sexism that is not an aberration, but constitutes the norm. It is one of the constitutive elements of society, one that has been normalised and made part of its patriarchal culture, which Gqola calls “rape culture” (2015: 3). Rape culture, she explains, also excludes women from public spaces, and if they are raped, blames them for being in these spaces; it views certain people, such as prostitutes or wives, as those who cannot be raped, because they make their bodies available to men through a social contract; and it uses “culture” to justify the violation of women. “Crudely put, society raises us to believe that this is the function of women's bodies – to please men sexually and symbolically” (8). Women who are constantly fearing for their lives cannot feel as equal citizens; in this sense, the ideals of the anti-apartheid struggle have not been realized.

In Makholwa's novels, the South African rape culture, in which women are only pawns between men, is seen to carry over into the post-apartheid period. Her representation of women's resistance against this endemic violence emphasizes education, financial and emotional independence from men, and female solidarity. Her heroines represent what has been called in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century media discourse the “New South African Woman” (NSAW) – an aspirational identity for black women circulating in popular culture. As Gqola explains, it stands in sharp

contrast to the “old” South African femininity, whose physical movement, sexuality and reproduction, labour and even hairstyles were regulated by apartheid legislation, subjecting the black female body to punishment and poverty. In the New South Africa, on the contrary, “the body had to be imagined anew: as free, mobile, flourishing, exploratory” (Gqola 2016: 120):

The “New South African woman” is a working, urban, upwardly mobile woman. She has a career, and she is ambitious and driven. She has smooth skin, straight, shiny hair and “tastefully” manicured nails, and an arched brow, all of which communicate through the body a specific location within a global economy and a very controlled feminine esthetic whose transgression is ridiculed. (123)

As a black woman who has succeeded in several male-dominated professions – journalism, crime-fiction writing, public relations (she is the owner of a PR company) – Makholwa herself epitomizes this “new” femininity, emphasized by her author portraits on the back cover of her novels. It is therefore not a surprise that her protagonists are also representatives of the same. They are educated, middle-class, professional women with independent, disposable incomes; they are fashion-conscious, outspoken, aware of their rights and impatient with sexism; and their goals in life are pleasure, glamour, and conspicuous consumption. Typically, they engage in non-committal relationships with men and keep marriage and family as an afterthought.

For Gqola, the trope of the New South African Woman “is evidence of female empowerment, but not necessarily feminism” (2016: 123). She cautions against its objectification of women, who in spite of their new economic and political power are valued mainly for their looks, and against its idea of success and respectability as normative and conservative. It includes cisgender heterosexual identity, aspiration to reproductive marriage (“appropriate coupling”), consumer lifestyle, and the ability to reconcile career and family. For all her seeming independence, the New South African Woman is trapped by the imperative to aspire to impossible standards of success and (white) beauty dictated by globalized neoliberal consumer capitalism as represented, for example, on the covers of the *New African Woman* magazine. In this way, the New South African Woman becomes a sign of male success: “she is cast as consumable” (122).

Along similar lines, Myambo (2020) has pointed out that Makholwa’s heroines (in both her crime and chick-lit novels) represent only upper- and middle-class urban South African women whose lives revolve exclusively in elite urban micro-spaces, neglecting the majority of their poor, rural counterparts. Even though her narratives take place in South Africa, their spatial politics, and thus their political impact and cultural commentary, are both enabled and constrained by their settings and narrative thrust, with protagonists who exemplify a popular notion of choice/neoliberal feminism. By creating such a selective image of the post-apartheid South African woman, Makholwa’s novels obscure the deep inequalities that continue to divide South Africa and their feminism is compromised by this class bias.

On the other hand, Lynda Spencer has argued that the value of the representation of the middle-class, urban, professional and financially independent black woman should not be under-estimated in the context of South African literature, where this type of heroine had never before existed. While she concedes that these female characters' "preoccupation with a consumer culture, desire for romance and performance of femininity exposes their complicity with patriarchy", at the same time she views their new situation as "grounds from which to fashion new identities and relationships" (2018: 85). In the context of post-apartheid South Africa where black women, for the first time in history, have a disposable income, consumption "is not a sign of oppression, but a form of agency and a source of pleasure for the characters" (94).

Read in this light, Makholwa's protagonists' focus on sex, shopping and romance becomes an expression of "conscious self-fashioning that can potentially resist male control" (87). In a country where until 1990, affluent suburbs, private cars, designer brands and mountain resorts were the privilege of white South Africans only, having access to these lifestyles can be read as an explicit sign of black emancipation. Moreover, in a country where women are often blamed for being raped for their "inappropriate" clothing or behaviour (Gqola 2015: 67), women who spend their disposable income on fashion and pleasure can be seen as feminist heroines. Ambitious and career-driven, they are taking control of their lives and resist patriarchal control, male violence and sexism.

### **Red Ink (2007)**

Lucy, the protagonist of *Red Ink* (2007), Makholwa's debut novel, is a true New South African Woman: she is raising a small son on her own, working as a consultant in a PR company, writing a book about a serial killer, and all the while manages to look glamorous and sexy. She was pregnant when she left her philandering boyfriend, Gary; she is now dating Karabo, the "perfect" gentleman, who pampers her with romantic weekends in spa resorts and dinners in upmarket restaurants. The only problem that Lucy seems to be constantly confronting is what to wear to look her best. Their dates typically end up in Karabo's bed. Unlike a stereotypical romance heroine, Lucy is not seeking marriage. She always uses protection during sex and keeps Karabo only as an occasional diversion from her busy professional life. Her friend Fundi questions this commitment-free relationship, suggesting that Lucy should be dating not purely for the sake of "multiple orgasms" (Makholwa 2007: 66), but for the prospect of future marriage and security. However, Lucy is too independent and busy with her career to worry about this: "There is no room for a stressful relationship where I have to keep wondering how someone else feels about me, where they are, what they are doing, and all that. With Karabo, it's kind of a seasonal thing, which suits me fine. [...] It's the perfect arrangement" (66). The New South African Woman is seen to be diametrically different from the "old" South African woman, for whom free sexual behaviour would have meant merciless social exclusion. Lucy's sexuality is separated from reproduction and marriage, but not from pleasure. She is seen

as a desiring subject free to choose with whom, when and how she wants to have sex, and this is not stigmatized, but celebrated as an expression of empowered femininity. As the South African feminist journals *Agenda* and *Feminist Africa* have emphasized in the last two decades, the emancipated female body and sexuality are not only the sites of others' inscribed meanings, providing pleasure to men, but also sources of African women's agency through their ability to experience pleasure and express desire. Getting ready to spend a weekend away with her boyfriend, Lucy displays the contents of her bag to her friend Fundi to claim her right to commitment-free enjoyment:

“Sexy lingerie,” she said, taking out a black lacy bra with matching g-string. “Check. Flavoured condoms in cranberry, blackberry and strawberry. Check. Energy drink. Check. A fine bottle of red wine. Check. I think this should prove satisfactory to the principal of the Seduction School for Young Bachelorettes, no?” (178)

However, the narrative has a dark side that fundamentally problematizes the freedoms won by women. It paints a bleak image of post-apartheid South Africa where black women are lured to their death by serial killers with promises of employment and lunch dates. The threat of violence seems to be inscribed in the very fabric of the world they inhabit. In search of fame and fortune, Lucy embarks on writing a book about the jailed serial killer, Napoleon Dingiswayo, unaware that his brother and accomplice Sifiso is at large and lurks in the shadows to prey on her and the people close to her. It is only after Sifiso, following Napoleon's instructions, kills Lucy's business partner Patricia and then her lover Karabo that Lucy becomes aware of the danger she has put herself into. She narrowly escapes being killed herself.

The central irony of the story is that the two serial killers started their murderous careers as hitmen working for the underground anti-apartheid resistance leader, KK Mabote, who later becomes an important businessman in the new dispensation, benefitting from the Black Economic Empowerment government programme that sought to level out deep economic divides along racial lines resulting from apartheid injustices. KK Mabote is an opportunist with no moral scruples who transfers practices from the past to the present: “Post-democracy, there were new deals to be made. Sometimes worrisome bodies still needed to be removed” (195). When a young woman threatens to report him to the police for raping her, Mabote has her murdered to protect his political career. The novel shows that the violence of today is the product of past violence – apartheid brutality and the resistance against it. Rewriting the celebratory national narrative of post-apartheid history, it shows the “Rainbow Nation” to be deeply troubled by moral vacuity.

When reading the narrative as a feminist critique of the South African rape culture, four male characters stand out: KK Mabote, a worrisome symbol of the new democratic dispensation; Tshepo, Patricia's abusive boyfriend, who beats her and infects her with HIV; and the duo Napoleon and Sifiso who brutally murder women for perverse pleasure and are groomed by KK Mabote to become

professional killers. The last two receive the deepest analysis as the novel seeks to explain their behaviour, motivated by a profound hatred of women. The two brothers were raised by an abusive alcoholic mother, ran away from home, and were drawn into a gang of thieves and forced to steal. These patterns of oppression are reproduced by the adult Napoleon and Sifiso, who compensate for their social powerlessness by deliberately violating women: “His compulsion to rape was innate, he claimed; it was literally the only time he could enjoy himself with a woman because it was only then that he ever felt powerful” (232). Unlike Napoleon, Sifiso never rapes women before killing them. Raped himself by a prostitute at age 11, he is disgusted by the female body: “For Sifiso, the female sex represented filth, disease and whoring. He could not touch them. Women were beneath him” (209). The pattern of rape in Sifiso’s life is repeated when, as an adult, he is repeatedly raped by KK Mabote, who in this way “felt the need to establish domination, making Sifiso scream like a wounded animal from the pain of penetration” (209).

According to Gqola (2015), the proliferation of rape in post-apartheid South Africa is an expression of claiming manhood by men who have been emasculated by poverty and social injustice, but she warns against explaining away the responsibility of the violators by referring to their childhood traumas and frustration from poverty (86). The character of KK Mabote shows that rape is not simply an expression of social marginalization, but also a symptom of the cult of hypermasculinity that, as Gqola argues, has been an integral part of patriarchal South African culture: “to treat women as though they do not matter is deeply ingrained in our culture as South Africans” (11). As Murray has pointed out, Makholwa shows that “the brutal instances of physical violence are merely extreme manifestations of discursive and structural gender oppression that shapes every aspect of the female characters’ lives” (Murray 2016: 1). This inequality is expressed, for example, in the “toxic romance narratives” that cast women as “damsels” to be rescued by men, who consequently regard them as their property. One such toxic relationship is between Fundi, a struggling actress, and KK Mabote, who feigns love for her in order to gain access to her friend Lucy. Fundi naively sees KK, who helps her launch her acting career, as her Prince Charming, even after he calls her a whore. For the reader who is aware of the businessman’s dark past, Fundi’s clinging to her romantic dream, despite the warning signs, is worrying. Luckily for her, KK is forced to leave the country as he is about to be implicated in the murders carried out by the two killers. Single again, Fundi is happier than ever: her acting career soars to new international heights. The narrative suggests that women gain freedom when they detach themselves from the romantic scripts that cast men as their rescuers.

### ***Black Widow Society* (2013)**

Makholwa’s second crime novel, *Black Widow Society* (2013), brings the feminism of *Red Ink* to a militant level. It revolves around a secret society of women who refuse to make compromises in marriage and are determined to take control

over their lives: “These women [...] plot their own destinies. They don’t allow life to happen to them but decide *how* life will happen to them” (Makholwa 2013: 161). The meaning of this feminist statement of self-determination is gradually revealed as highly unorthodox. Formed by three business women with the objective “to eliminate the suffering of women in the hands of men” (36), the society employs a professional killer to physically eliminate abusive husbands. Money is an important part of each transaction that the society undertakes – it demands half of the widow’s inheritance. This is then used to fund the Young Women’s Academy – a “programme aimed at producing a new breed of woman who would be given the type of education that would empower her to avoid the kinds of decisions that had led most of the black widows to their ill-fated marriages and partnerships” (17). In terms of Susan Arndt’s classification of African feminism, this is unambiguously the “radical” variety: it argues that “men (as a social group) inevitably and in principle discriminate against, oppress and mistreat women” because they are “‘by nature’ or because of their socialization, hopelessly sexist and usually deeply immoral” and “in most texts the woman protagonist finally kills a man, who represents the violation of women’s rights” (85).

As in *Red Ink*, the protagonists of *Black Widow Society* are professional career women with an independent disposable income, fashion sense and *joie de vivre*. Their motto could be “The only way to deal with tough times is to get even by looking good” (127), or even, “get a man, get disappointed, get depressed and look great! All in three easy steps!” (78), an ironical weight-loss plan emphasizing their emotional independence from men. After work, they visit classy restaurants, where they can be seen sipping Chardonnay wearing their new high heels. This image of conspicuous consumption and self-indulgence must be read in the context of a situation where twenty-five years earlier, a black woman could not enter a restaurant unless she worked there and had neither the time nor money to indulge her body. In this sense, it is not a sign of collusion with consumerism, but of emancipation and freedom. Makholwa said she purposefully made all her protagonists upper-middle-class, because “people tend to think of [domestic violence] as affecting the lower echelons of society. [...] the wealthier the woman who is experiencing domestic abuse, the more likely she will try to hide it” (Makholwa Interview). Furthermore, by casting its heroines as not only black, but also white and mixed-raced, the novel is concerned to show that domestic violence in South Africa is not the problem of black women only, and that women of all races must unite in their struggle to end this culture of violence.

Even as the novel criticizes male violence, patriarchal power relations are internalized and reproduced by the women themselves. The society has a strict hierarchy, rules and a system of surveillance that ensures loyalty: “There were rules for almost everything in BWS. How people got recruited, who was allowed into the society, who and what was not allowed in the society, how often the women met and how they related to each other outside the confines of the society” (36). Their use of violence to free suffering wives is equally an aspect of patriarchy that the women have adopted as their tactic: violence has become so pervasive that it has been normalized by the women as empowering. Such militant feminism, expressed as a hatred of men and a desire to get rid of them, is shown not to triumph in the

end. The ruthlessness of the society against men, driven by desire for money and revenge rather than genuine feminist solidarity, brings about its downfall. It is implied that violence is not the way towards female empowerment and emancipation.

For Pumla Gqola, the current South African discourse of “women’s empowerment” is not transformative, because it assumes that women “should adapt to the current system, being ‘empowered into position’” (2015: 63) and “leaves the ‘cult of femininity’ intact and violent masculinities untouched” (65). She emphasizes that feminist social change can happen only if masculinities are also subject to radical transformation. As Murray (2016) has also pointed out, Makholwa’s novels fail to envision such a transformation—they place the entire responsibility for violent relationships on women’s bad choices and see a solution to male violence in teaching young women how to avoid these bad decisions. In this sense, Makholwa’s texts’ feminist potential is limited. Nevertheless, I concur with Murray that in exposing and questioning “deeply embedded gendered constructions” this fiction makes “a first and necessary step in the larger and more politically radical process of effecting change” (24). Makholwa’s representation of women as independent professionals without marriage aspirations, whose sexuality is not only the site of their victimhood, but also of their power, attacks head-on traditional gender frameworks.

### **The New Woman of First-Wave Feminism**

The trope of the New South African Woman unavoidably echoes the New Woman ideology in fin-de-siècle Europe and United States that was an expression of modern femininity at a moment of life-changing technological, scientific and social progress. Even though there has been no direct link of inspiration between them, it is notable that these analogous socio-historical situations created similar discourses of female emancipation that reveal nationalism and modernity to carry similar meanings for women across cultures and centuries. The term “Neue Frau” (new woman) appeared in Germany after the revolution of 1848 and was increasingly deployed by bourgeois and proletarian women’s organizations in their fight for women’s right to education and work (Mongu 2011). The emergence of education and career opportunities for European and American women in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as new legal rights to property (although not yet the vote), meant that they stepped into a new position of freedom and choice as regards marital and sexual partners. The expanding potential for women in society was imagined in literature by British and American authors such as Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Kate Chopin, Ella Hepworth Dixon, George Paston (Emily Symonds), as well as colonial writers such as Olive Schreiner. The term “New Woman” is said to have been coined by the Irish writer Sarah Grand in her essay “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” published in 1894 (Jordan 1983). The essay is a manifesto against the “cow-kind of woman” who “sit[s] still at home with cotton-wool in [her] ears” (Grand 1894: 274). It recognizes very clearly how patriarchy works – it makes it impossible for women to attain education and then marks them as irrational:



Man deprived us of all proper education, and then jeered at us because we had no knowledge. He narrowed our outlook on life so that our view of it should be all distorted, and then declared that our mistaken impression of it proved us to be senseless creatures. He cramped our minds so that there was no room for reason in them, and then made merry at our want of logic. (272)

This inequality, however, is now over: women have discovered that none of this was natural or given, but that “there are in ourselves, in both sexes, possibilities hitherto suppressed or abused, which, when properly developed, will supply to either what is lacking in the other” (272). The New Woman—urban, employed and educated—would be fashioned by Grand and her contemporaries in their fiction, as well as by the print media and the cinema. According to Ellen Jordan, “the first indication that a new breed of feminist was in the process of being born” came as early as 1883 with the publication of Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1983: 19). In Schreiner’s novels, the desire for modern womanhood is expressed by her heroines’ thirst for scholarly knowledge and travel beyond the horizons of South Africa. Even though they never realize their dreams, which are crushed by the weight of patriarchal society, their longing is an expression of this modern consciousness. While Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) dies before she can realize it, Rebekah in *From Man to Man* (1926) at least manages to carve out a space for herself in her study, surrounded by her books and fossils; her passion for science and her nostalgia for the past are typically modern sentiments. Schreiner here envisioned the importance of a woman’s “room of her own” before Virginia Woolf.

Iveta Jusová has pointed out the contradictions in how the fin-de-siècle new woman was conceived of. She demonstrates that the new woman’s feminist ideals notwithstanding, both her fictional and real-life expressions were in collusion with imperialism, meaning that “[h]er feminist consciousness was at the same time informed by her growing sense of privilege” (2005: 7). This is evident in the writing of Olive Schreiner, whose idea of the modern woman—as imagined in her novels or discussed in *Woman and Labour* (1911) – is exclusively white and middle-class, excluding black and mixed-raced South African women from its historical narrative of progress. Similarly, Rita Felski has pointed out how in challenging male-centred narratives of modernity, these women’s representations of themselves as modern subjects were no less implicated in broader cultural and intellectual discourses of the time than those by male writers – imperialism, scientific racism and classism. Although Schreiner was explicitly anti-colonialist and personally committed to the campaign for multiracial suffrage in South Africa, she deeply internalized the model of racial hierarchy that “was so central to the period’s cultural imaginings of non-Western societies as to be virtually ineradicable” (1995: 161). This racist bias of Western feminism and the colonial power dynamics meant that modern femininity would not become available to Black South African women until one hundred years later.

The “New Woman” was not just a Western European and American concept, however; it was also important for women in Eastern and Central Europe. In

the Slovak context, feminism was promoted since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the writers Elena Maróthy-Šoltéssová (1825–1878), Terézia Vansová (1857–1942), and especially Hana Gregorová (1885–1958), whose work draws from and places them into the European feminist tradition. It is particularly interesting in comparison with South African writers, because it took place in the context of Slovak nationalist struggles for emancipation from the double domination of the Hungarian Kingdom and the Austrian Empire. Clemens Ruthner has demonstrated how the Hapsburg Empire can usefully be read with the instruments of postcolonial theory as a quasi-colonial situation, broadening the problematic of colonialism by Austria-Hungary's "inner colonies". He shows that nineteenth-century Austro-Hungarian discourses and literary texts quite often contained colonial motifs, Orientalist undercurrents and "*krypto-koloniale Phantasien*" (317) that placed ethnic minorities into the position of the colonized Other, with distinct racial implications. Slovak women's position in fin-de-siècle Hapsburg Empire can thus be compared to that of black women in apartheid South Africa as doubly colonized: based on their ethnicity and their gender.

In her public lectures, essays and articles, Gregorová championed the importance of women's higher education and participation in public life, including the right to vote and be elected. She saw woman as no less suited to this role than man, and emphasized that men must equally participate in domestic and family affairs. Feminism, for her, was not simply the struggle for women's equality with men, but for a better society, social progress and peace. Her efforts were lampooned by male nationalist intellectuals such as S. H. Vajanský, who "warned before the ruin of feminism and praised the woman's role as a vestal" (Gregorová 1979: 67; all translations are mine), as well as conservative women, who saw women's emancipation as subordinate to national emancipation. The place of the Slovak woman at the family hearth, supporting the man as a wife, mother and housekeeper, was seen as necessitated by the quasi-colonial situation wherein the small nation needed to close its ranks and give up individualist desires—a situation highly similar to that of the South African anti-apartheid struggle. These early Slovak feminists, isolated in their efforts, craved inspiration and encouragement from Western feminism. The first Slovak women's magazine, *Dennica*, founded in 1898, "brought news about the activities and successes of women all over the world, including in the field of science" (Gregorová 1979: 99). It immediately encountered rejection by the "guardians of the family, who were afraid that emancipation was unnatural, because it leads the woman away from her 'primary' role" (99). The *Slovak National Newspaper* called *Dennica* "a pale, anaemic offshoot of feminism under the Tatra Mountains, born of something disgusting, immoral, unhealthy" (104).

In October 1918, upon the capitulation of Austria-Hungary, two hundred Slovak nationalists met in the city of Martin to declare the sovereignty of the Slovak nation and to establish the Slovak National Council. Gregorová remembers: "We called in vain to be included in the negotiations when the Declaration of the Slovak Nation was passed. [...] They did not let us inside the Tatra Bank, where the future of the entire nation was being decided. We paced back and forth in front of the building, banished by our own men, silenced" (132). In spite of their

demands, women were not given any seats in the Slovak National Council.

The experiences of Slovak and South African women are a testimony to the ways nationalism is intertwined with patriarchy and excludes women from full citizenship. Whether colonial or anti-colonial, nationalism, as is now widely accepted among postcolonial historians, is deeply conservative about gender roles, because it is anxious to establish a stable social order whose values are unchallenged, as I described above. Slovak and South African women are further related by their shared peripheral position and colonial experience. Even though the situation under South African apartheid and under the Hapsburgs was in many ways different, it resulted in similar set-backs for women. Gregorová saw the Slovak nationalist struggle against Hungarian and Austrian domination as a disadvantage for Slovak women in comparison to Western European and American women:

While elsewhere feminism tended towards universal aims, proclaiming cosmopolitanism, here we were only at the stage of awakening national consciousness. [...] To join the revolutionary ideas of women from developed nations would have meant to fall head-first. The nation preferred tame women, and the Slovak women complied, in spite of their desire for new knowledge. (Gregorová 1929: 235).

Her description of the dynamics of Slovak feminism at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century echoes the belief of South African anti-apartheid women activists from the 1980s that national liberation came before women's liberation. It was only after the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 that the concept of "nová žena" (new woman) gained influence in the discourse of the time as a model woman publicly engaged in nation-building, fostering national consciousness, republican ideas, peace and prosperity (see Göllnerová and Zikmundová 1938). Women's equality with men, officially promoted by the first Czechoslovak president T. G. Masaryk, came to be seen as part of this democracy-building (Mongu 2011).

## Conclusion: Transnational feminist genealogies

Gregorová's essay "Slovenka pri krbe a knihe" (The Slovak woman by the fireplace with a book, 1929) is according to Jana Cviková and Jana Juráňová (2007: 227) of similar significance in the feminist literary tradition as Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, published in the same year. It emphasizes the importance of revising the existing canon and recovering forgotten works to write a female literary history. For Woolf, "a woman writing thinks back through her mothers" (Woolf 1929: Ch. 6). Like Woolf, Gregorová perceived her literary predecessors as her symbolic mothers, the source of female authority and continuity: "Mothers, foremothers! Where are your souls floating? With love we are following you" (Gregorová 1929: 41). For Woolf and Gregorová, such feminist alliances were crucial for women whose place in the nation was always subject to negotiation. As Woolf wrote in

her anti-patriarchal pacifist manifesto *Three Guineas* (1938), “As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (121). In reference to Woolf, feminists have argued that if the nation cannot be an adequate home for women, transnational feminist alliances are necessary to forge resistance against patriarchy, even as the nation remains a location of identity that needs to be reimagined as liberatory (see e.g., Boehmer).

This consciousness of continuing “in the footsteps” of one’s predecessors is present also in the thinking of 21<sup>st</sup>-century South African women writers. Having very few “literary foremothers” among their own, contemporary black South African women writers are looking abroad for imaginative and intellectual role-models – in particular, to American women writers who have written about black femininity in relation to slavery, segregation and patriarchy. For instance, Angela Makholwa lists among her key influences Harper Lee (Patterson), while for the novelist Kopano Matlwa (born 1985) the greatest inspiration was Toni Morrison (Matlwa Interview), and for Mohale Mashigo (born 1983) this place is occupied by Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* (Mashigo viii). Similarly, the poet Koleka Putuma (born 1993), who with her radical feminist poetry collection *Collective Amnesia* (2017) became the best-selling poet in South African history, in her poem “Lifeline” offers a list of feminists she sees as her predecessors. It starts off with three American names who pioneered intersectional feminist thinking: Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, and Angela Davis. The poem concludes by emphasizing the importance of such genealogies for women’s survival: “it is a lifeline. / every name / is a gospel shut up in my bones. / every name / chants / Black girl—Live!” (85).

In taking inspiration from these American writers and feminists, 21<sup>st</sup>-century South African women writers appropriate, and become part of, an anti-racist, anti-slavery, revolutionary, transnational feminist tradition. By re-reading their works in the context of a transnational feminist tradition in which they wrote, it is possible to comprehend the enormous speed with which black women writers established themselves in the South African literary landscape, catching up with and even overtaking their male counterparts. In a situation where black women writers lagged behind men by at least seventy years, the inspiration from American women’s literary and feminist tradition enabled these writers to rapidly develop their feminist voices. This shows that contemporary South African feminist writing cannot be seen in isolation from American feminism. Likewise, the trope of the New South African Woman must be read not as an isolated phenomenon, but in continuity with 1<sup>st</sup>-wave feminists and as part of a transnational feminist consciousness.

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