

Dianne Shober

**Literary bridges
of Sindiwe Magona**

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Dianne Shober: Literary Bridges of Sindiwe Magona

Abstract

The vast and varied oeuvre of South African writer Sindiwe Magona explicates the life of the ordinary black woman living in a nation beset by racial and gender constrictions. Her sensitive portrayals of the anguished intimacies of domestic workers as well as professional women seek to provide a literary record, a global revelation, and a national restoration of people separated by education, language, culture and gender. This work explores the multiple metaphorical bridges she attempts to construct.

The author

Prof. Dianne Shober is head of the English department at the University of Fort Hare and researches and writes on a number of areas relating to gender studies in South Africa. She has published four books, one of which interrogates the literary life of esteemed South African author, Sindiwe Magona and is titled *Climbing Higher* (2013).

E-Mail: dshober@ufh.ac.za



Literary Bridges of Sindiwe Magona¹

*We shall live to be old
You and I.
And we will tell stories
Of our living, our loving
The dreams of our youth
And the folly of our old age
The nightmares we witnessed parading around pretending to be reality.
(Sindiwe Magona, Please, Take Photographs 76)*

In the changing milieu of our South African socio-political landscape, Sindiwe Magona has become not only a recorder of history, but a creator of it. Chinua Achebe writes: “Every literature must seek the things that belong unto its peace, it must in other words speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and destiny of its people” (*Morning* 7). South African author, Sindiwe Magona, adheres to his praxis, opening her first autobiographical text *To My Children’s Children* with:

Child of the Child of my child: As ours is an oral tradition I would like you to hear from my own lips what it was like living in the 1940’s onwards. What it was like in the times of your great-grandmother, me. However, my people no longer live long lives. Generations no longer set eyes on one another. Therefore, I fear I may not live long enough to do my duty to you, to let you know who you are and whence you are. So, I will keep, for you, my words in this manner ... (1)

Magona seeks to do her duty to her Xhosa people, her South African nation and to the global community by revealing the truth experienced by people impaled by apartheid, crafting literary bridges of reconciliation and thereby crossing racial, economic, linguistic, and geographical divides through her powerful life narratives. She began her writing career in 1990 just as South Africa was emerging from the darkness of apartheid. Her growing collection of novels, plays, poetry, short stories and autobiographies locate apartheid and its effects as the malevolent antagonists who torment her oppressed characters. She states that her “writing will always be steeped in the experience of apartheid, having lived it, having borne witness to the struggle of people who were desperately poor with no hope of ever escaping that poverty” (Koyanna 175). Yet to

¹ This paper was originally delivered at the 20th anniversary celebration of Magona’s publishing, Cape Town, August 2010. It was also presented in the departmental seminar series of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, in May 2014.

truly reconcile with a diseased, disturbed and dysfunctional past, one must acknowledge its effects. Says Maona:

As Africans who lived under apartheid, until we understand what really has happened to us, and understand the people who made this happen to us, and forgive, embrace, and humanize them, we will not be free of our past. Until the white people in South African understand what apartheid was, what it did to us, and forgive themselves for doing that, and help us in our healing, we will never be one as a nation. (Koyanna 183)

Metaphorically, Magona adopts the approach of presenting the truth of the experiences she lived or witnessed while seeking to reconcile the chasmed racial groups politically and geographically separated by decades of apartheid generated division. Her works build bridges for the African unaware of the richness of her Xhosa heritage, for the South African white ignorant of the black struggle, and for the global community ill-informed of the ordinary African domestic worker, migrant labourer, and school child who breathed the choking dust of oppression. Her texts become living epistles reflecting the heart beat of a people lost in the quagmire of religious, gender and cultural subjugation. Her honesty and forthrightness leaves no doubt in the minds of her readers about the horrors of apartheid and rabidness of racism.

Born in the rural Transkei, raised in the Cape Flat township of Guguletu, relocated to New York for post-graduate study and employed at the United Nations for almost twenty years, these multiple vistas swept Magona from one tumultuous seaboard to another, and enabled her to write with a multifocal lens. Her resume includes employment as a fish cleaner, domestic servant, teacher, social worker, media consultant, inspirational speaker, theater actor and author. With her vast experiences from the local to the global to guide her, Magona is able to write stories that exude a startling sense of reality. One interview calls her “the narrating memory of [her] people” (Kozana 168), recording the lives of those whom apartheid’s elitist government had deemed mindless and rendered mute.

Magona discloses not only her own meaningful childhood experiences, turbulent township life, disenchanting education, disturbing marriage, despairing single parenthood, and what she titles her “great escape” in her autobiographies *To My Children’s Children* and *Forced to Grow*, but through her fiction she transports her readers to the world of the beleaguered domestic worker Atini in *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night*, the anguished mother Mandisa in *Mother to Mother*, and the traumatized friend Amanda in *Beauty’s Gift*. Through each authentic orchestration, Magona exposes the heartache of the black South African woman striving to reach higher despite carrying six mountains on her back as Ogundipe-Leslie intones (28). Her oeuvre reflects female characters who are visible and integral members of their communities, enabling them to vocalize their despair and discontent as well as their dreams for personal and social victories.

Yet Magona's oeuvre does not just tell tragic tales, but assembles narrational bridges connecting the local and global readers, in order to address the ignorance and indifference erected by apartheid's iron-clad boundaries. Her first novel *Mother to Mother* (1998), examines the murder of Fulbright scholar Amy Biehl during the violent conclusion of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle. Discovering that one of her childhood friends, so close she says that they shared the same saliva, was the mother of one of Biehl's murderers, Magona felt compelled to write the story, and described herself as being "pregnant with grief". Save her escape to America with her three adolescent children, the accused could have been her own son, she reasoned. Although *Mother to Mother* is a fictionalized account of the event, it emotionally links the two mothers, bridging the social divides to connect them in their suffering. The novel is required reading for workers at the Amy Biehl Foundation in Cape Town and is highlighted in the award winning documentary "Long Night's Journey into Day". Although movie rights are still being optioned for the novel, it has been produced as a successful play starring Thembi Mtshali-Jones in the lead role of Mandisa.

Through this amazing literary work, Magona has successfully constructed a bridge of reconciliation for her friend, Nonthuzelo and the Biehl family, but her efforts do not stop with just the immediate sufferers. In the opening of the novel, Magona writes of the breadth of her intentions, posing a question to the imagined narratee as well as the actual reading audience:

are there not lessons to be had from knowing something of the other world? ... What was the world of this young woman's killers, the world of those, young as she was young, whose environment failed to nurture them in the higher ideas of humanity and who, instead, became lost creatures of malice and destruction" (v).

Although Magona intends for the novel to be a tool of reconciliation, *Mother to Mother* is also a book of revelation, revealing the results of apartheid's humiliating and dehumanizing laws that bred angry young men who could mutilate a helpless young woman simply because she was white. Further, it identifies the fathers whose sperm spawned another generation, but whose bodies are forced to work in mines or factories thousands of kilometers away from the children they will never see or know. Finally it provides a voice to the anguished African mothers who couldn't raise their children because they were acting as surrogate mothers for their white employers, a motif further explicated in the "Women at Work" section of Magona's award winning *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night*. Like the story of Atini, the impoverished mother who flees her rural homestead in a desperate effort to find work in the city and send money back to feed her four hungry children. Magona's scene in which Atini expresses her breastmilk in the hard African soil exposes the misery facing such destitute mothers:

Kneeling, she took out first one and then the other breast. Plumped hard and veined, they were hot to her crying hand ... Squirt-squirt-squirt: the greedy soil quenched its thirst with her baby's life while near her knees the woman's eyes wet a spot. (10)

Magona states later in an interview:

The mother who abandons her children is a story that has not been told in South Africa. The majority of the women we saw in the urban areas during the era of the passes, wearing overalls and aprons and caps and wide smiles that labeled them as domestic workers, were in the cities without their children. These are the mothers who were busy being mothers to white babies and white children and being servants to white families so that their children back in the village could barely survive. (Koyana 178)

Through her sensitive portrayal of real-life heartache, Magona becomes as former Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes himself “a wounded healer” (233). Says Magona: “It is not in loving our neighbor that we become better human beings: the challenge before us is in learning to understand and perhaps one day love our enemy” (Koyana 183). Through her personal migrations of discovery, Magona creates in her writings a conscious textual bridge between the two cultures and two spiritual traditions (Western and African), thus enabling the proprietors of each group to share ideas and achieve understanding and appreciation of the other while finding for herself a secure place under the protection of the Trinity and her ancestors.

Even her writing style unites two distinct literary forms, incorporating both the oral African tradition as well as the western conventional style through its use of “realism, linear plot and first-person narrative” (Daymond 332). This dual cultural and literary staging provides a multivocal and multifocal canvas on which to place her characters and the tragedy and triumph of their lives while at the same time making “the insights of one culture accessible to another” (Chapman). Magona also carefully interweaves together the two, sometimes three South African languages of Xhosa, Afrikaans, and English to form an intricate tapestry of linguistic beauty. Through the interrogation of her life history and the stories of her people, Magona enlightens the global and local reader of the tragedies and triumphs of her Xhosa people as they strive to secure a sense of personhood and purpose in a society fraught with distancing discourse. Because of her insightful, oftentimes gritty portraits of oppression’s identity rape of gendered individuals, Magona is a sought after short story writer, and her chronicles have been anthologized in collections such as *Under African Skies*, *Twist*, *Childhood*, *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* and *A City Imagined*. She has also written articles for the *New York Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *the Cape Times*, *the Cape Argus*, and *the New Internationalist*.

Once the scourge of apartheid was defeated, Magona adjusted her literary focus to the AIDS pandemic, crafting moving portraits of women besieged by men who are using their manhood as a weapon. In her stirring didactic form, Magona instructs men and women to get tested and remain faithful. She produced an anthology of AIDS essays titled “It’s Up To Me” in 2004, which is still to be published, and has written a play on AIDS titled *VUKANI!* which has been performed in a number of American and South African venues. As she herself is a witness, national or gender transformation is only

possible as the individual activates his/her dreams of a new reality and narrates identities of dignity and self-efficacy.

It is with this vision that Magona wrote her highly acclaimed novel *Beauty's Gift*, which was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize for Literature as well as the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 2009. Michaela Borzaga applauds it as a "courageous" book, stating that it "will most probably remain in the history of South African literature as one of the most important manifestos of black feminism" (*Beauty's Gift: A Book Review*). South African AIDS activist Yackie Achmat heralded *Beauty's Gift* as "one of the most important books about HIV/AIDS in our country" (Sindiwe Magona's Gift"). Magona opens the text with these stirring words:

God knew the African woman was going to have a very, very hard life. That is why He gave her skin as tough as Mother Earth herself. He gave her that tough, timeless skin so that her woes would not be written all over her face, so that her face would not be a map of her torn and tattered heart. (1)

Immediately the reader is accosted with the anguish stitched into the life of the African woman, a genderized heartache that seems to be as perpetual as the seasons, spanning generations, politics, cultures, and localized in her female soul. Apartheid may be over and colonialism vanquished, but the suffering of the African woman continues. Although these women are no longer bound by race and class restrictions of white hegemony, they remain conflicted by the genderized oppression of patriarchy. Like other black African women writers, Magona does not ignore their concern for the maternal or discount their open, expressive sexuality, but she destabilizes previously limited characterizations of *femme fatale* or nurturing mother, creating instead richly nuanced renditions of women who, like herself, are witty, intelligent, independent and economically viable.

Consistent with her bridge building efforts to inform global readers of the issues besetting the African woman, Magona published the novel first in Italian under the translated title *This is My Body!* It was originally titled *The Green Freedom of a Cockatoo*, a line taken from the Wallace Steven poem Magona's characters discuss, but the Italian publishers altered it in order to create through Beauty's death a metaphorical representation of the sacrifice of Christ, stating they wanted to make "a parallel between the rite of the Eucharist and the woman's body, [the] new lamb sacrificed for the cause of the errors of men" that others may be saved ("They Said They Wrote").

Throughout this novel, Magona overrides the dominating discourse of cultural and patriarchal hegemony. *Beauty's Gift* transforms the silent, subjugated African woman into a self-governed and self-assured being, ascendant in her ability to freely locate herself in an environment of her own creation. She creates a fully transformed African woman, not one cowering before the striking arms of a husband enraged by a delayed meal or denied sex, or one who stands on the fringes in fear of the elder's pronouncements. This woman is recovering her body and freeing herself from the death

threat of an unfaithful husband. She values her intelligence, her friendships and herself and thus secures a safe passage to her future and that of her children and her nation.

As a declaration to the potential of women who can recover from the effects of poverty, apartheid and abandonment, Magona produced and performed a one-woman autobiographical play titled *I Promised Myself a Fabulous Middle Age*. Completed in collaboration with Anne Hamilton and directed by Fatima Dike, Magona presented the play at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town in June 2008. It was described as a “hilarious, thought-provoking gambol down memory lane” in which she reviewed her life’s journey from the Transkei village to the Guguletu township on to New York and back (“Playground”).

Magona’s expression of agency embedded in the play’s title illustrates the freshness of her post-apartheid construction of subjectivity, as she authors her life in two mediums: prose and drama, orchestrating a visual and textual representation of her self-determinism. This is especially witnessed in a crisp, probing poetry collection titled *Please, Take Photographs* released in 2009. Once again, Magona takes on many different personas: the fatherless child in “The Great Learning” (26), the childless wife in “The Prize” (29), as well as her own subjective self in “Why I Write” (60). By speaking through these many voices, Magona enables the reader to “hear” the pain of people they may never meet, and thereby acquire an understanding of their anguish and become sensitized to their condition.

Magona’s creative energies continue to expand. She has completed writing the biography of former Archbishop of Cape Town, Njongonkulu Winston Ndungane, a work requested by the Anglican Church. She has also written a short story based on the life of her grandfather titled “Modi’s Bridge” which is included in an anthology edited by Ama Ata Aidoo called *African Love Stories*. In 2009 her translated contribution “Away from the House” (with the Afrikaans title “Weg Van Die Huise”) was published in an Afrikaans anthology titled *As Almal Ver* which means *When All Are Far Away*. The stories, written by and about South Africans who are living outside their homeland, explore the challenges of building bridges to and from their internalized space and place.

Yet the tragedy of the AIDS pandemic continues to inflame her passions, and Magona hopes to create a *Beauty’s Gift* trilogy. She fumes at the male characters who people her novels, describing them in angry, staccato terms:

These are the men who strip Pampers off a baby and rape her. Men who have thirteen children from thirteen mothers. Men who are smug at not paying for maintenance. Men who have many lovers and who have a wife that must suffer their infidelity. (Personal Interview)

She wants to believe that under a different set of circumstances these black men could have been men of dignity and hopes that by Book 3 in the trilogy the male characters are able to preach responsibility and fidelity to others.

Additionally she has hopes to complete a third autobiography which interrogates her American season and the impact this self-exile had on her personal and professional development. Still her literary eye does not only cast a glance backward to re-frame female history, she also extends her prosthetic gaze to global concerns. Her dedicated humanitarian efforts have won her awards in South Africa, America and Italy. In recognition of her activism for women's rights, she was one of the ten finalists for the Cape Argus Women of the Year award in 1977, awarded the South Africa-American Organization Achievement Award in 1999 and the Women Who Make a Difference Award in 2002. The New York State Democratic Senator made a proclamation on World's AIDS Day in 2003 to applaud her artistic work on HIV/AIDS.

For Magona, the globe is her garden and she appears to agree with Virginia Woolf who said that "As a woman my country is the whole world" (*Three Guineas* 125). She has travelled internationally to promote the message of her life stories and advocate the rights of women and children, addressing audiences at the United Nations, the Kennedy Centre, and the Ford Foundation as well as prestigious universities such as Columbia, Temple and Georgia State University. Besides the South African indigenous language translations, her oeuvre has been released in Italian, Dutch, German, Swedish, Japanese and Korean and is available as far afield as India and Australia.

Harkening to her years as a Xhosa tutor and her love for her mother tongue, Magona co-authored an instructional manual titled *Teach Yourself Xhosa*. She has also poured her tireless energies into producing educational books for children, and there are over 260 listings on the Oxford University Press website that acknowledge Maonga as one of the authors of the children's readers published in five South African languages. Magona explains: "I write to help young people, in the schools especially. We had to struggle learning what was a foreign language about strange things that never happened in our lives. This is why there are not more of us writing in English" (Taylor 17).

As her writing often indicates, Magona believes children hold the key to our nation and is grieved that the life potential of every African child has been stifled by poverty, oppression and for girl children, male domination. The development of Africa, postulates Magona, is only possible when both genders utilize their potential. She states: "The nations of Africa need all the talents they have, and half of those talents are in female bodies" (Schatteman, "The Stories" 177). In response to her desire to see the release of other female voices and creative talents, Magona has also led creative writing groups in Guguletu, enabling township women to reflectively narrate their condition and status as black women in South Africa. In the forward of the translated collection Magona explains her concerns for the erosion of her mother tongue: "We are sacrificing our tongues on the altar of progress" because [n]o country has ever triumphed by turning their backs on their language" and concludes her text with the salient signature "Yours, to serve her country, Nomabali, Mother of Stories ("Guguletu Blues").

In exploring Magona's vast oeuvre, spanning two rich decades of literary realism, her complex, creative tapestry examines motherhood, especially black motherhood,

shortchanged by the confines and geographical separations forced upon families by the apartheid pass system. Furthermore her works address relational abandonment and infidelity wrought by a government determined to fracture the tribal family and she depicts the anguish of children humiliated and de-motivated by racism's scourge. Her vivid evocations of Xhosa culture and language enliven her work, while inviting future generations and the uninformed "other" to share in her experiences. Most importantly, she does not shrink from indicting black South Africans whose sexual infidelity and irresponsibility have escalated the AIDS crisis.

In particular Magona does not define black South African women as victims; rather she represents them as the thatch that covers the roof of her society and elevates them to the role of cultural reservoirs and social bridge builders. Through life writings she connects generations, cultures and genders by encouraging mutual awareness, analysis and dialogue and by addressing the injustices of apartheid and patriarchy while decrying the ignorance and arrogance that lie at the root of South Africa's implosion from AIDS. Magona remains a crucial, critical, contemporary voice within the international literary landscape whose work keeps pace with changing global circumstances. With each passing year and subsequent literary production, Magona's creative influence increases and her social statements become more piercing. She deems she is divinely placed in history and intends to leave an indelible mark. Hers is a preservation of the past and proscription for the future. Undoubtedly there are many more *iintsomi* within this feisty, forthright woman and the world and its readers will be fortunate to sit around her campfire.

Being

Because it pleases our Maker

We have no choice

In the fashion of our making

The sentence, for our being,

Is Choice

In the manner of our living. (Please, Take Photographs 15)

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