

# Debunking patriarchal assumptions about motherhood as represented in selected Southern African literature

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This article explores how literary representations of African motherhood demystify oppressive patriarchal assumptions that have marginalised women whilst promoting male privilege. This study's objective is to challenge patriarchal values that continue to damage and undermine many African women's position and status in society. This is critical in order to address gender injustice and make a claim for African women's rights to respectful, dignified and fulfilling lives as full members of society. An interpretive content analysis of Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* has been adopted. African feminist theory provided the interpretive framework for analysing the selected texts. In sharp contrast to patriarchal assumptions of women as inferior to men, this research indicates many African women performing critical roles that ensure family survival with little to no help from men. Depictions of African mothers' sacrifice and struggles to safeguard the interests of the families contrast the irresponsible behaviours and failures associated with fatherhood in the texts studied. Given the important contributions of women to improving quality of life, the study recommends the need for transformation of oppressive patriarchal values that undermine women to create a more equitable society.

**Keywords:** patriarchal normativity; gender; motherhood; fatherhood; identities; male privilege; oppression; African feminism.

## Introduction

The history of many countries has, generally, been written from a gendered perspective (Olayiwola & Olowonmi 2013; Schweickart 2011), with social life 'organised around principles of hierarchy' where men have been accorded positive identity whilst most women have been denied the same (Johnson 2014:16). Despite 'possibilities of "certain" men being the victims of patriarchy' and other forms of oppression (Waruni 2021:1), that cannot mask the reality that patriarchy's obsession with hierarchical organisation of society and celebration of manliness means more women than men have endured oppression and unfair treatment (Alimam 2010). 'Because patriarchy is male-identified and male-centred, women and the work they do tend to be devalued, if not made invisible' (Johnson 2014:15). This is a serious violation of women's human rights. Such mistreatment of women that undermines the critical roles and status of women in society should be challenged because it unjustifiably negates women's lives and their potential by taking away from them various privileges, opportunities and power over their own lives.

The discrimination and prejudice suffered by most women have been both in life and as represented in literature. Literature has been historically ranked alongside various segments of society's superstructure such as religion, the media and other sites of hegemony that men have abused to perpetuate their domination of women (Kendie 2006). Literature, particularly by early male writers, has often represented women and men in ways that have reflected the inequalities embedded in patriarchal thought (Nwapa 1998; Schweickart 2011). Oyewole and Olowonmi have argued that 'the drumbeat of the past, fashioned and authored by men, was single-faced and biased' against women whilst promoting positive identities of men (2011:141). 'Male writers, within the carapace of imaginative text, have projected their own biases and cultural reality as a sovereign reality, overshadowing potentials of the other' (Olayiwola & Olowonmi 2013:143). Men have almost always been associated with positive identities including subjectivity, autonomy, power and freedom of choice, amongst many other positive identities. Men's character in a lot of early literary fiction had free sway to become whatever they chose, hero or villain (Schweickart

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2011), whilst women's identities and roles were often 'edited' to fit the mould of passivity and domesticity that patriarchal ideology expected of women.

However, feminist scholars acknowledge the potential that literature also assumes as a crucial vehicle to redress gender imbalances and a site of women's struggle for equal representation and creation of democratic societies (Primorac 1993; Schweickart 2011). They have argued that women writers should:

[S]tand up for their rights and not allow their male-dominated society to define what it means to be a woman. Women themselves must take the lead and articulate who they are and what role they can and will play in society. Most importantly, they must reject the patriarchal assumptions that women are inferior to men. (Alimam 2010:3)

This emphasises the role that literature by women can play to rescue women's identities from patriarchal normativity's misrepresentations by (re)defining women outside patriarchal assumptions. The desire to challenge patriarchal misrepresentations suffered by women inspired many early African women writers to (re)write women with positive identities in their fiction:

Flora Nwapa notes that she was inspired by the strong, powerful, socially relevant women who were part of the landscape of Igboland where she grew up and to whom she paid homage in her works by reinscribing them in African literature after a long history of marginalisation by Nigerian male writers. (ed. Nnaemeka 1998:13)

Against this backdrop, this study examines how selected literary art by Southern African feminist women writers challenges patriarchal assumptions about women and womanhood. The study aims at provoking a rethink of erroneous patriarchal assumptions that promote 'the idea that men are superior to women' (Johnson 2014:6) and associating 'qualities such as ... strength, competitiveness, toughness ... decisiveness', sacrifice and many others only with men (2014:7). According to Oyewole and Olowonmi, 'women are tired of dancing and giving accolades to [a] strange sound, which had tucked them into a long solitary nightmarish misrepresentation' (2011:141). Thus, this study examines how the selected women novelists have used fiction to challenge the marginalisation of women and demonstrate the imperativeness of rethinking women's status and position in society.

Motherhood is one aspect of African womanhood that has often been misrepresented and undermined (Robbe 2015). Patriarchy has damaged women's identities as mothers in a variety of ways: mothers' contributions to the well-being of children have been understated and masked, yet women have carried the larger burden in parenting responsibilities (Domestic Violence Resource Centre 2009). Patriarchy has placed the primary responsibility and social expectation of bringing up children on mothers although 'both women and men are equally able to provide for a child's physical, social and emotional needs' (DVRC 2009:9). Abusive men have often attacked 'women's abilities to mother: they know that

this represents a source of positive identity' (Mullender et al. 2002:158). Whilst women have been expected to be good mothers, men have not experienced 'the same kind of pressure to be good fathers' (DVRC 2009:9). This study aims to provoke men to be more accountable as parents and to realise women's important role.

African feminists have questioned patriarchal assumptions that undermine African motherhood (Evwierhoma 2007; Robbe 2015). They have contested perspectives on motherhood that 'focus only on the oppressive aspects of motherhood' whilst ignoring positive identities 'of mothers as an important sign of their emancipation' (Robbe 2015:21). Such views invite analyses that valorise 'African women's maternal identities' rather than those that undermine them (Robbe 2015:21). Undermining African motherhood should be challenged because '[i]n many African societies, motherhood defines womanhood' (Evwierhoma 2007:318). If motherhood is undervalued, then, African womanhood as a whole is undermined. Valorisation of African motherhood is, therefore, 'crucial to women's status in African society' (Evwierhoma 2007:318) because it reflects a 'shift in emphasis from the negative hermeneutic of ideological unmasking to a positive hermeneutic whose aim is the recovery and cultivation of women's culture' (Mitchell 2011:407). Thus, this article examines how representations of motherhood in the selected novels create positive women identities that contradict patriarchal normativity's construction of women.

## Synopses of the selected novels

The selected literary texts for study are Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* (1990) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Both writers herald from Southern Africa, a region where patriarchal attitudes remain embedded and many women continue to face serious gender inequality. As feminist writers, Ngcobo and Dangarembga attempt to address the oppression of women. Ngcobo's novel:

[P]ays tribute to the women of rural KwaZulu-Natal [during apartheid South Africa] who have fought to retain control of their land and to keep their families alive while their husbands labour in the city. (Daymond 1998:247)

Her novel examines the harsh experiences of African people during apartheid and particularly highlights African women's remarkable courage and strength to fight for the survival of their children, despite the hardships they faced. In *Nervous Conditions* (NC), Dangarembga chronicles the struggles of African women against patriarchal injustice and against the poverty produced by colonial inequalities. Dangarembga examines different women's powerful resilience and determination to stand up against patriarchal abuse.

## Questions guiding the study

The following key questions inform the study:

1. How do literary representations of motherhood subvert negative identities and assumptions about women embedded in patriarchal normativity? What shifts are

discernible in the portrayal of women and how do these debunk patriarchy?

2. In what ways do the actions and roles performed by some male characters as fathers expose patriarchal misrepresentations of women and men? How do the contradictions, if any, in the portrayal of motherhood and fatherhood help challenge and debunk oppressive patriarchal assumptions about women and womanhood?

## Research methodology

The study adopted an interpretive content analysis of purposively sampled Southern African literary works by both women and men writers. The primary literary texts selected for study were Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* (1999) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Charles Mungoshi's short story, 'The Mount of Moriah', was also explored to help analyse the literary portrayal of fatherhood by a progressive male writer and compare his depictions to those offered by Ngcobo and Dangarembga.

As a research method, content analysis is based on already existing written material (Mugenda & Mugenda 2003). The major strength of content analysis is that it allows 'detailed description of a phenomenon' (Mugenda & Mugenda 2003:174). This is important in studies where findings are presented and analysed in the narrative form. Content analysis allows the researcher to employ a number of analytic techniques that include textual analysis to be employed in the construction of particular realities (Vanderstoep & Johnston 2009). Criticism levelled against content analysis is that the data collected is not always reliable because it might have lost currency by the time of study, because the information is already pre-recorded and much change could have happened to transform the situation (Mugenda & Mugenda 2003). However, it cannot be denied that literature occupies an essential role in society because the issues that literature depicts are not removed from reality, because real-life experiences influence its writing (Diamond & Edwards 1988).

An advantage of using the interpretive paradigm is that it offers room for reader-response to the issues in the primary texts: '[t]he text – the words on the page – has been written by the writer, but meaning is always a matter of interpretation' (Schweickart 2011:458). To enrich the readers' quality of interpretation, Vanderstoep and Johnston have emphasised that researchers should connect with the views of the community of readers, because the validity of content analysis is contingent on the agreement of related researchers in the field (2009). Thus, various feminist views were continuously integrated throughout the study whenever required.

## Theoretical framework

The study is informed by postcolonial African Feminism, a branch of feminist theory. Feminism has emerged as a reaction to the oppression of women. According to Mama (2012), feminism:

[P]ut simply, refers to the ongoing struggle to free women from centuries of oppression, exploitation and marginalisation in all the vast majority of known human societies. It is a call to end patriarchy and to expose, deconstruct and eradicate all the myriad personal, social, economic and political practices, habits and assumptions that sustain gender inequality and injustice around the world. (p. 2)

This definition locates feminism as a struggle to transform oppressive structures and institutions that promote men whilst undermining women's identities, lives and livelihoods. Feminists have identified patriarchy as the primary source of the oppression of women, which has promoted men's privileges in various areas of life.

As a theory, feminism offers an analytic framework to help conceptualise the oppression of women. Different strands of feminism that include 'liberalism, classical Marxism, radical feminism and socialist feminism' (Aina 1998:67) have emerged because women have not always been oppressed in similar ways: women in developed societies, in non-developed societies and other contexts have faced dissimilar experiences of oppression. Consequently, different views exist on how the emancipation of women can be attained. This has inspired Nnaemeka to discuss the word 'feminism in the plural (feminisms) ... mindful of the multiplicity of perspectives and the need for accommodation' of different experiences of oppression by women (ed. 1998:3).

Because the novels being examined in this study were written by African feminists, African Feminism's theoretical underpinnings are used to examine the texts. African Feminism is a feminist perspective that offers a 'contextual and situational sense to African women and their local lived experiences and realities' (Naidu 2013:147). It argues that gender oppression is not the sole form of oppression. It exposes the inadequacy of some Western approaches to examining the oppression of women, 'which separate systems of oppression, isolating and focusing on one, whilst occluding the others' (Bayu 2019; Crenshaw 1993:1244). African Feminism rejects Eurocentric models of the oppression of women that are 'restricted to male and female power relations only, ignoring power relations based on race, class, ethnicity, age, nationality and so forth', which are other forms of oppression that have undermined many African women (Steady 2005:319). This broadens conceptualisation of how oppression functions in different societies.

## Motherhood, decision-making, sacrifice and responsibility

Ngcobo's novel depicts African women who successfully challenge the impact of many oppressive cultural and patriarchal beliefs that have imposed unreasonable limitations on them. African patriarchy curtailed a newly married woman's freedom with a 'string of taboos that she had to observe' at her in-laws' house 'because she was not a full member of the family' (p. 56). These taboos implied that a married woman was treated as an outsider within her husband's home.

Feminists have argued that 'women face formidable obstacles especially in matters of ... decision-making' (Uwakweh 1998:13), which has been viewed as a man's purview. However, Ngcobo depicts women questioning men's unjust monopoly over decision-making power. This is demonstrated through Jezile after Siyalo returned for his ritual once-a-year return from Durban, which coincided with her menses. She questioned: 'why couldn't he plan the time of his leave in advance with her? He said it all depended on his employer, but what did his employer know about her or her body or their need for a baby?' (pp. 6–7).

Jezile's frustration at not being consulted by her husband (and his employer) reveals women's dissatisfaction with exclusion from decision-making. She was determined to change her own destiny and asserted, 'Nobody would ever take away that power from her, neither his mother nor his own mother, not anyone' (p. 11). Her desire for autonomy portrays emerging women who challenge patriarchal normativity.

Although patriarchal assumptions and practices have undervalued women and their roles, Ngcobo's text represents African women performing great responsibilities, as mothers, to ensure family survival. The women 'were capable; they were strong' (p. 17). In the rural enclave of Sigageni, survival was extremely difficult because of the appalling apartheid sociopolitical and economic conditions. Sigageni was marked by aridness and perennial drought. Every year, 'Sigageni was in the hold of a slow death – each year worse than the last' (p. 38). Sigageni was a death trap: the crops were drying in the scorching heat of the sun, cattle were dying and children were severely malnourished or dying as shown by the description of S'naye's 'emaciated' body where her '[v]eins stood out distended and pulsing at the temples' (p. 114). Upon Jezile's return from a 6 month prison sentence, she was shocked by her child's state of severe malnourishment: S'naye's 'skin hung loose on the body except around the face and head' (p. 114). The abysmal description of S'naye is a severe indictment of apartheid rule in South Africa and its racial bigotry that caused serious damage to the physical, social and psychological lives of African people.

However, women's resilience to ensure family survival defies patriarchal definitions of womanhood. Jezile's profound pain as she looked at S'naye triggered her into action:

All she thought about was S'naye – she had to live. She robbed her hen's nests and fed her on eggs .... But when no more eggs remained ... Jezile frantically turned on her hens, killing them off one by one to keep S'naye alive. (pp. 115–116)

Nothing could stand between Jezile and the survival of her child. That the child's health magically improved upon the mother's intervention powerfully testifies to the critical roles of mothers to the survival of families. Interestingly, before Jezile returned from prison, Siyalo had helplessly watched his daughter's condition deteriorating. Thus, the role of the father pales in significance compared with that of the mother when it comes to children's survival. The critical role performed by

mothers powerfully challenges the misconceptions about women rooted in patriarchal normativity.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Mai Tambudzai demonstrates similar commitment to her children's welfare in ways that evoke the actions of Jezile discussed here. Her family had no money to pay school fees for the two children, Nhamo and Tambudzai, who faced the threat of being thrown out of school. She wanted to invest in the education of her children and her sacrifice evokes much praise. She could not manage to keep both children in school but worked very hard to ensure that at least her eldest child remained in school:

She [B]egan to boil eggs, which she carried to the bus terminus and sold to passengers .... She also took vegetables – rape, onions and tomatoes – extending her garden so that there was more to sell. (p. 15)

She did not cringe under the weight of her family's poverty, and her industry ensured that Nhamo remained in school. Her actions equally powerfully illustrate African mothers' resilience and preparedness to fight for the welfare of their children. According to O'Brien (1994):

The struggle for women to raise children ... is not merely a domestic task. The political and social tensions that overwhelm everyday life make motherhood a role tantamount in importance to any full-time (male) political activist's. (p. 149)

Whilst Mai Tambudzai slaved to protect the interests of her children, her husband, Jeremiah, showed no care at all. He was partly responsible for the predicament the family faced: he had abused the money sent by Babamukuru for the children's school fees, spending it on alcohol. To make matters worse, Jeremiah avoided work as much as he could. Lucia aptly described Jeremiah as 'a lazy hand ... [who] doesn't want to work' (p. 145). Whilst Jeremiah lounged at home, Mai Tambudzai was 'working so hard, so alone', labouring in the fields, carrying a child on her back the whole day (p. 10). Towards evening, she would proceed to 'water her vegetables: rape, covo, tomatoes, *derere* and onions' (p. 8). As if that was not enough, 'if there was still work to be carried out when she finished her watering ... she would tire herself further to do it' (p. 10). Her sacrifice exposes the emptiness of patriarchal claims that have attempted to trivialise women and undermine their labour. The productive roles of women in the home portrayed here affirm African feminists' arguments that '[t]he African woman has not been inactive, irrelevant' (Okonjo 1976:45). If anything, it is men who should be challenged for not doing enough around the home. Lorentzen has condemned 'men's unequal participation in family care work and household tasks', which has made womanhood burdensome within patriarchal structures (2014:16). Mai Tambudzai's selfless sacrifice provokes readers into questioning patriarchal 'logic' whose male centredness has produced situations where 'women and the work they do tend to be devalued, if not made invisible' (Johnson 2014:15). Therefore, African women's identities as mothers and as wives need to be reviewed in very positive light.

The association of fatherhood with irresponsible behaviour that Dangarembga represents in *Nervous Conditions* (NC) is also highlighted by Ngcobo in *And They Didn't Die*. Like Jeremiah in NC, Mthebe, an 'invisible' father, neglected his family as he did not provide for them. His neglect complicated his unemployed wife's role as a mother of his children. Zenzile, in turn, failed to sufficiently fulfil her role as a 'good' mother. Zenzile confided in Jezile that, because of Mthebe's neglect, she 'can't cope with the children ... [and] can't look after them properly' (p. 53). Meanwhile, in Durban, Mthebe was a spendthrift who 'dressed immaculately' and 'excelled himself entertaining' his wife's best friend, Jezile, taking her 'for a 2-hour drive round the Durban Esplanade, round the South Coast – those fine houses, those spectacular views, that clean air' (p. 36). Ironically, his family wallowed in poverty, deprivation and want. Men's negligent behaviour towards their families as exhibited by Jeremiah and Mthebe unmasks the patriarchal myths that have constructed men as 'rational, logical ... always right' (Johnson 2014:13). Such irresponsible behaviour of fathers who neglect their children has been described by Dodgson-Katiyo as the 'sins of the fathers' (2007:46). These sins should be exposed so that fathers are held accountable for neglecting their parenting responsibilities, because this has undermined women's abilities to effectively mother the children.

In his short story, 'The Mount of Moriah', Charles Mungoshi also creatively deals with irresponsible behaviour of fathers. His representation of fatherhood draws similarities with the portrayals offered by Ngcobo and Dangarembga. Mungoshi's title makes a powerful biblical allusion to the story of Abraham who tried to sacrifice his son, Isaac, atop the mountain called Moriah. His story, Mungoshi 'focuses on the relationship between Hama, a crippled young boy and his drunken, violent, divorced ... unloving and unlovable father' (Muponde 2007:17). The father and son relationship shows the indifference of a negligent father who did not care if the son lived or died. According to Muponde (2007):

[T]he image of a father who intends to eviscerate his crippled son brings to ruination the ideological braces of patriarchy which conflate fatherhood with paternity. In the story, the father bankrupts the patriarchal idea that a father is a provider, protector and giver of life. (p. 18)

In the first place, it was the father's irresponsible behaviour that resulted in Hama losing his leg in a car accident. The father was not repentant as he went on to lock up Hama in a 'dungeon' (p. 10). Comparing Hama's father in this narrative and Jeremiah and Mthebe given earlier illustrates how fatherhood lacks the same care for children as motherhood. Mothers' perseverance in safeguarding their children's lives in the selected novels is 'opposed to the stereotypical, passive, idealised mother [that] men [writers] allude to' (O'Brien 1994:148). This debunks erroneous assumptions made about women as weak as they actually have been the backbone of many families (Aina 1998).

## Mothers as heads of families: Demystifying notions of women as dependents

Although patriarchal normativity has excluded women from legal claims of headship of families, many women have effectively parented the children single-handed. As family headship has been a principle associated with manhood and not womanhood, many women have, consequently, been:

[E]nsnared in violent relationships by the fear that if they leave [the 'heads' of families] they will have nowhere to live and little money to support themselves and their children. (DVRC 2009:11)

African women continue to be viewed as 'needy beneficiaries ... [and] passive recipients of welfare programmes' from the government and from men (Razavi & Miller 1995:4). However, the way the roles of women as mothers are represented by Ngcobo and Dangarembga contests patriarchal assumptions that have undermined women's potential to lead and head their families.

The subtext of Ngcobo's novel creates pictures of many absentee husbands and fathers who flocked to urban centres seeking employment. Apartheid South Africa's migrant labour system saw many African men being holed up in towns close to a year without returning home. The migrant labour system was 'harsh on our mothers' (Daymond 1998:247). African women had to manage families and make important choices in the home. Many African women characters, such as Nomawa, Gaba, MaBiyela, Jezile (particularly after her divorce) and others, brought up their children single-handed, as heads of families. They had to improvise against all odds so as to accomplish their mothering roles. Although single parenting has placed the 'socio-economic burden ... on women' (Olayiwola & Olowonmi 2013:141), it has presented opportunities for society to realise 'women's functioning as the effective heads of rural families' (Daymond 2004:255). For instance, because of the actions of her 'weakling of a husband' (p. 17) who had deserted her, MaBiyela 'had been left to bring up the children single-handed, tend the stock, plough the fields to raise the crops, mend broken fences, father the growing children' (p. 16). She was not the only victim because '[t]he women of the village were in many ways like MaBiyela' (p. 17). Men's absence as father figures saw women shouldering much of the responsibilities in the home that ensured that children were fed. Ngcobo's portrayal of women successfully playing roles as heads of families exposes the emptiness of patriarchal gender attitudes that have confined women to subordinate roles and unjustifiably treated them as if they were inferior to men. Ensuring that families 'didn't die' was no minor achievement in the context of a suffocating apartheid environment and an equally oppressive African patriarchal system. The portrayal of the absence of fathers in the daily lives of their children and representations of women's devotion to the upbringing of the children reflects African feminist arguments that in spite of what patriarchy states about family headship, in reality 'most African women are

trapped in the daily business of securing the survival of themselves, their families and their communities' (Mama 2001:60; Aina 1998). This makes us question men's monopoly over the tag of breadwinners and heads of families, roles that women can also manage. Therefore, '[t]he erroneous belief that without a husband a woman was nothing must be disproved' (Nwapa 1998:95) because Ngcobo's novel shows the potential of women performing roles reserved for men by patriarchy, even better than men.

Today, many women continue to assume all family responsibilities single-handedly with negligible support from men:

For a range of reasons South African fathers have had very little to do with the lives of their children ... the mother (or grandmother) takes primary responsibility for all aspects of the family's welfare. (Narismulu 1999:72)

In *And They Didn't Die*, for the sake of their children, African women resisted apartheid administration by emptying dipping tanks of their contents and beer halls of their patrons. They struggled for the provision of a safe environment for their children who needed health facilities, not beer halls and dipping tanks. As mothers, they defended their children's health interests rather than watch them die. Their actions challenge the 'dismissal of maternal politics as nonfeminist politics' (ed. Nnaemeka 1998:18). African women's maternal roles and duties did not hold them back from aspiring to fight to improve the conditions for themselves and their families. This challenges patriarchal normativity's definition of women's roles as mothers and as wives as less important.

Jezile epitomises many African women's capabilities as heads of families. When Siyalo was rendered jobless and 'was at his wits' end' on how to provide for the family (p. 126), Jezile's resourcefulness and strength were visible. She took over the family responsibilities as breadwinner, and she:

[D]id work very hard. She always seemed to have alternative chores to do – when she was not cooking, she was fetching water; if not, she was trailing cattle wherever they were, looking for their dung, to make fuel. (p. 127)

Jezile did a lot of work, including working 'as a water carrier, a wood gatherer, a road mender' (p. 56). She even went out with other women to work at the Dumas, leaving her husband more of a 'housebound' – as apartheid capitalism had thrown him out of employment and rendered him incapable of helping the family. What women did was far more than the limited roles ascribed to women by patriarchal normativity. 'If hard work, providing and breadwinning define manhood' (Johnson 2014:134), then, clearly, the representation of Jezile's critical labour connected her to masculinity. The fact that Siyalo tried different vocations after losing his job and failed shows the fallacy of viewing men as complete on their own. Jezile's success where Siyalo, a man, failed, explodes patriarchy's conceptualisation of masculinity and femininity as 'binarised' terms. The notable contribution of Jezile and many other women affirms the goals of African Feminism, which 'seeks to give the women a

sense of self as worthy, effectual and contributing human beings' (Ifechelobi 2014:20). By making visible the importance of women's labour, their roles as heads of families and critical productive contribution, which unfortunately, patriarchal normativity has trivialised and 'rendered invisible' simply because it falls 'under the category of housework' (Razavi & Miller 1995:9), Ngcobo powerfully challenges patriarchal normativity. Given that Siyalo spent 10 years in prison and during that time Jezile's headship of the family greatly ensured family survival, it can only be grossly unfair to overlook her capabilities as a family head all the while.

Similarly, Dangarembga portrays Lucia who, despite being pregnant, rejected marriage to Takesure. She 'was a much bolder woman' (p. 127) who had greater faith in her own capabilities than in some man. She bluntly told the Sigauke family tribunal: 'As for Takesure, I don't know what he thinks he can give me. Whatever he can do for me, I can do better for myself' (p. 145). Her contempt for Takesure was further highlighted by her question: 'Tell me, Babamukuru, would you say this is a man?' (p. 144). Her readiness to raise her unborn child as a single mother and as the head of family reconstructs singleness as something women need not be ashamed of. Determined to create a positive self-identity and an enabling environment for her unborn child, she sought employment and went back to school. The portrayal of the capacity of many women as heads of families and breadwinners emphasises that 'the condition of motherhood is *[and should be]* viewed with pride and reverence by women themselves' (O'Brien 1994:149). This offers a powerful challenge to patriarchal normativity's erroneous negation of women and womanhood.

## Representations of mother as protector

Mothers have also taken the lead in shielding and protecting their children from abuse, working hard to provide a safe environment so as to optimise their children's health and well-being. The important role of mothers as protectors of their daughters is particularly represented through Jezile's relationship with her mother, MaSibiya, early in her marriage life. When Jezile had marital problems and was constantly harassed by MaBiyela's 'relentless persecution' for failing to give her son a child (p. 3), Jezile would weep 'for days and she could not look anyone in the eyes' as she felt shattered (p. 4). She found solace when she went 'back to Luvu to be with her mother' (p. 4). Retracing her footsteps back to her own mother's home was Jezile's means of evading the constant torture perpetrated by patriarchy through her mother-in-law. The identity of mother as protector ready to defend her daughter is clear.

MaSibiya was also Jezile's protector after she was raped by Potgieter, her white employer. After raping her, Potgieter ejected Jezile from Bloemfontein with a heartless brusque monologue: 'Look after yourself and the baby' (p. 211). Potgieter's aloofness towards Jezile after his grisly rape, and his failure as the father of the baby to assume parental

responsibility for the child's upbringing evokes so much horror of the heartless way many men continue to violate women and children's rights. Ngcobo exposes Potgieter's ghastly abuse of his patriarchal position as a man and exploitation of his apartheid position as Jezile's employer. Not only does he rape her, but also conceals his criminal act by ejecting his victim out of Bloemfontein. Dumped at the train station, with a baby born from the rape in her hands, Jezile's knowledge about how the African patriarchal system did not offer her any form of protection as a victim of rape made her realise that she was now virtually on her own. She felt silenced to explain the horrible injustice to the people in her community where there were no safety nets for victims of rape. Therefore, rather than head to her husband's home, it was to MaSibiya, her refuge, that she now went. When the sobbing Jezile arrived at her mother's homestead, depictions of 'mother and daughter clung to each other' (p. 212) demonstrate a mother's deep concern for her daughter, which her patriarchal society could not offer. Whilst Jezile 'wept on and on ... Ma Sibiya rocked her daughter as though she was the infant instead of the bundle on the mat. Slowly Jezile's sobs became quieter' (p. 213). MaSibiya's treatment of her daughter and concern for her psychological wellness contrast the responses of some 'relations and neighbours ... [who] talked discreetly about the inescapable temptations that face all young women without husbands' (p. 213). Rather than protect the victim, they blamed her. But as mother, MaSibiya worked hard to shield her daughter. This demonstrates the important role of mothers and 'God being the only protection' in times such as these (p. 213).

In sharp contrast to MaSibiya's struggle to protect her daughter, the actions of many men in their treatment of Jezile were shocking. The church minister 'censured' and 'excommunicated' MaBiyela for keeping Jezile at her matrimonial home when she had returned to her husband's home. He condemned both Jezile and MaBiyela for a sin committed by a man against a woman. Rather than sympathise with the victim, the church minister preferred throwing the victim into homelessness whilst the perpetrator was not held accountable and went unpunished. This exposes religion's duplicity in the mistreatment of women. For their part, 'the Majolas the following day ... agreed that Jezile should go back to her people to release MaBiyela from her remote responsibility' (p. 216). And so 'Jezile left Sigageni, her mind in torment .... The burden of shame was growing heavier with every decision and every decision was completely out of her control' (p. 217). However, when she went back to live with her mother, 'after a few days with her mother, she began to feel safe. In her house she learned to laugh again' (p. 217). Her mother protected her from her torment and gave back her life and laughter. Thus, clearly, patriarchal normativity should be challenged for its efforts to mask and undervalue the critical roles of mothers in the lives of children as sources of their protection.

When Jezile assumed the family responsibilities as sole parent, she confronted the appearance of another rapist in her life with a crushing response. She killed her daughter's would-be

rapist, denying him control over her daughter's body. Her actions portray motherhood as an identity women have to be proud of as it gives life. She might have failed to prevent her own rape earlier but managed to protect her daughter. Jezile had been afraid but was now capable of undertaking powerful resistance against men's mistreatment of women as sexual objects. Thus, her transformation and metamorphosis are clear as she gained strength to fight her fear and helplessness. As a mother, she was ready to kill and face the consequences of her actions. Although killing the rapist was not the most ideal response to violence (given its potential to perpetuate the cycle of violence), still it demonstrated women's potential to enact their resistance and protection of their families independent of men. The soldier's death 'serves as her own death sentence' (Daymond 1998:272). However, it also reflects a mother's sacrifice for the sake of her child. Mothers' preparedness to 'die' so that their children can live provokes so much praise and exposes the hollowness of patriarchal normativity that has undervalued women, womanhood and motherhood.

## Conclusion

The focal texts for this study have revealed a shift in the portrayal of motherhood from erroneous assumptions embedded within patriarchal normativity. The texts' representations of strong independent women who protect their families' interests affirm African feminist observations that 'African women writers have increased the level of dominance of female characters' (Olayiwola & Olowonmi 2013:144). This debunks tendencies rooted in patriarchy to portray women as weak and men as superior to women.

Both writers seem to agree in their portrayal of women that children's best interests lie with mothers rather than with fathers. Through Ngcobo and Dangarembga's literary representations of abusive men who mistreat, neglect or abandon their families, it can be concluded that many men cannot be trusted with this important role. The two texts' portrayal of women's vital role in safeguarding children's interests is a critical argument for reforming society to enable women to freely participate in the public sphere and guarantee the survival of families. If children are to have better lives, women's sociopolitical and economic conditions should be improved.

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## Author's contributions

C.R. is the sole author of this article.

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