

COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL
AFRICAN LITERATURE
African literature



ONLY STUDY GUIDE FOR ENG2603

Department of English Studies

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Printed and published by the
University of South Africa
Muckleneuk, Pretoria

ENG2603/1/2014

70064873

InDesign

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African literature

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MODULE



This introduction was compiled by Prof M Vambe

Welcome

We are delighted to welcome you to this module, *Colonial and Postcolonial African Literatures*. The field of African literature is vast. Over the course of this module we want you to remember that the concept “African literature” itself is controversial. However, this Introduction is not the space to explore the ways in which the notion of Africa has been invented and constructed. You should consider this module as merely an Introduction. Since this is a second-level module, you are expected to engage *actively* in making meaning and building knowledge. You can do this by investigating the multiple connections between what is “Colonial” and what is “Postcolonial” in the texts. Furthermore, you will be requested to question the very thinking behind the chronology suggested in the terms “colonial and postcolonial”. Our aim is to motivate you to read the texts we have selected for you with an open mind. We have set four critical outcomes that we believe you should be able to achieve by the end of reading the module, *Colonial and Postcolonial African Literatures*. Read through these outcomes and focus on mastering the skills that they emphasise.

Module outcomes

This module has four specific outcomes. A deeper understanding of the outcomes will be reached through a close focus on each of them in the units that follow.

Outcome 1: Students critically read a wide range of texts in different genres (fiction, auto/biography, poetry and drama) with comprehension and critical engagement at this intermediate level.

Outcome 2: Students write well-structured paragraphs and essays that critically discuss the creative choices made by writers of the chosen texts. Your essay should contain an introduction that tells what you want to argue and how you want to organise your ideas.

Outcome 3: Students explain how the politics of representation shapes literary texts and their reception in postcolonial contexts. Students are encouraged to think beyond the intended meanings of the text. As developing critics, students are also expected to come up with new meanings of texts that relate to students’ lived experiences.

Outcome 4: Students can employ the key concepts and debates in postcolonial literary theory. In order to answer the assignment questions and examination questions

insightfully, students must reveal that they have understood concepts in particular contexts. This often means mastering the critical vocabulary of the module and using these words to explain the complexity of the texts.

Structure of the module

Unit 1 focuses on a selection of poetry from *The New Century of South African Poetry* by Michael Chapman. In this unit, you will be invited to explore the complexities that arise when one tries to offer simple definitions of “colonial” and “postcolonial”. You will also learn how to apply terms such as “contact zones”, “stereotype” and “urbanisation” to your readings of selected poems. In Unit 2, the primary text will be a play, namely *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. Key concepts such as “representation”, “feminism”, “race”, “gender” and “class” will be used to guide you through the play. Unit 3 deals with the primary text, *Seven Steps to Heaven* by Fred Khumalo, in order to explore how a postcolonial text can be interpreted in terms of the social, historical and political context from which it emerged. Finally, Unit 4 considers how gender, race, patriarchy, identity and resistance are represented in *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga.

How did we select the primary texts for *Colonialism and Postcolonial African literature*?

Here are some of the reasons for our selection of *The New Century of South African Poetry* (2002), *Nervous Conditions* (1988), *Seven Steps to Heaven* (2007) and *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958) for study.

- First, we want you to form a broad view of literature from different parts of Africa, and to understand that this literature emerged as a response to specific contexts in different parts of colonial and postcolonial Africa.
- Second, we have included poetry, a play and novels so that you understand that different styles or forms can articulate similar topical issues such as representations of oppression and resistance in different ways.
- Third, we hope you will develop a critical understanding of the idea that the communities on which the primary sources are based have experienced “colonialism” and are now caught up in a phase that we can loosely call “postcolonial”. In each of these phases there are power relations that authors negotiate through different literary devices.
- Furthermore, we want you to note that in this module, we emphasise the terms “Colonial” and “Postcolonial” because they mean different things to different people.

In fact, as you progress with the reading of the units in this module, you will discover that there are differences and similarities in the ways that the authors depict or represent the matrices of power and powerlessness. You will also observe that the views of your lecturers who compiled this module may differ in terms of their understanding of what is meant by the terms “colonial” and “postcolonial”, as represented in the novels, play and poetry you are going to study. This should not discourage you. As with literary texts, different readings of theories are possible. Although readings may vary widely, it is always important to ground them in sound, substantiated arguments.

Colonialism and postcolonialism

The concepts of *colonialism* and its aftermath, *postcolonialism*, arise out of the settlement of any part of a country by people who originate from another country. They are then subject to full or partial control by the invading country. A colony, therefore, is the settlement of a country and it is as old as humanity itself. From the time of the absolute rulers in Japan, for instance, the establishment of overseas colonies was a way by which nascent nation-states established their economies and sustained their citizens. William Shakespeare, for example, wrote *The Tempest* (the first known printing appeared in 1623) which minutely examines the effects of colonialism on the former inhabitants of an island. Indeed, most of the modern nations arose as a result of being colonised (for example, the United States of America). For this reason, it makes sense to include a text by an African American author, such as Lorraine Hansberry, in a module on colonial and postcolonial African literature. While colonialism is not limited to Africa, most of the texts in this module emerged from Africa, since this is the context in which our university is located.

Colonialism is therefore the process of establishing and maintaining colonies and domination through political and/ or military means. And yet *postcolonialism* should not merely be equated with “after-independence” or “after-colonialism” since all ex-colonies display various senses of overt or covert forms of domination, be it at a cultural, economic, or political level. This is often called neo-colonialism. *Postcolonial theory* is therefore a complex system of thought that attempts to account for the many different cultural, economic and political ramifications for countries that had once been *colonised*. Formal political independence from foreign domination has not solved these problems. The writing of postcolonial societies display, in various forms, issues central to those societies’ evolving cultures as an act of defining the national characters that have not been left untouched by the colonial experience.

The concepts of “representation” and “stereotype”

We encourage you to observe that “representation” itself is a central concept used by all the authors discussed here. But what is representation? People sometimes mistakenly assume that literature “reflects” or “expresses” reality. There is little truth in these views. “To reflect” suggests that literature comes to us as it is experienced in real life. This is the same erroneous thinking that informs the view that literature “expresses” life. The two terms also wrongly suggest that in literature, life is brought to the reader as a unified whole. You will find that in *Colonial and Postcolonial African Literatures*, we prefer to say literature “represents” reality. This is a view that appreciates that literature is not exactly mirroring life as it is lived. Instead, we want you to think through the idea that authors manipulate words, create certain images and order them in particular ways that exclude other potential ways of representing reality through their art. This is important to remember, because this fact alone explains why authors differ in their depiction of the same event or portrayal of the same people.

When an author writes in a way that identifies a group of people as possessing unique values not found in other people, we say that the author is representing life through a stereotype. A stereotype is one way of depicting characters by emphasising singular values and not taking into account that a single character may possess different views or subjectivities that can be revealed in different ways in response to different stimuli.

Primary sources

- Chapman, M. 2002. *The New Century of South African Poetry*. Johannesburg & Cape Town: AD. Donker Publishers.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. London: Women's Press.
- Khumalo, Fred. 2007. *Seven Steps to Heaven*. Auckland Park: Jacana.
- Hansberry, Lorraine. 1958. *A Raisin in the Sun*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

LEARNING UNIT 1

Poetry: A selection from *The New Century of South African Poetry* by
Michael Chapman



This unit was compiled by Dr S Maithufi and Dr S Dambe

Introduction

Welcome to the first learning unit of ENG2603. The title of this module is *Colonial and Postcolonial African Literatures*. Let us begin by posing the question: What does “colonial” mean? South Africa comprises many cultures that originate from different parts of the world. However, in many respects, the heritage of the English culture has dominated ever since the first arrival of the English people in 1820. There is no doubt that this supremacy results from the fact that Britain once colonised Southern Africa and that, with time, black Africans appropriated the English language in processes of self-reclamation. Therefore, the language that was imported to Africa through the mission of colonial subjugation ultimately defined its overthrow.

You are required to familiarise yourselves with all the poems to which this Unit refers. Apart from the poem, “Song of the Wild Bushman”, the relevant excerpt of which we reproduce in this guide, all the poems are contained in the prescribed poetry anthology, Michael Chapman’s *The New Century of South African Poetry* (2002).

Learning unit outcomes

This learning unit has four specific outcomes, namely:

Outcome 1: Students read a wide range of poems with comprehension and critical engagement at this intermediate level.

Outcome 2: Students write well-structured paragraphs and essays that critically discuss the creative choices made by writers of the selected poems.

Outcome 3: Students explain how the politics of representation shapes poems and their reception in postcolonial contexts.

Outcome 4: Students can employ the key concepts and debates in postcolonial literary theory in their analyses of selected poems.

Background

How can we differentiate the colonial era from what presumably followed it, that is, “postcolonialism”?

It seems easy to define the “colonial era” by stating that it refers to a period when a people from outside presided over and dictated to a local population how it should define itself. However, it is rather peculiar when, after defeating the coloniser, the erstwhile colonised continue to use the language and values imposed on them by the coloniser, such as English, Christianity and Western education. Therefore, **irony** appears to colour what may be perceived of as the “postcolonial”. We may refer to the colonial encounter as the beginning of **modernity**, because this is where the coloniser and the colonised began to be entangled in one space with one another. Notice that this is a theme that you will explore when you study your other prescribed texts such as Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel, *Nervous Conditions*.

In your prescribed book, Michael Chapman’s *The New Century of South African Poetry* (2002), most of the poems by major English colonial writers such as Thomas Pringle and William Plomer express concerns for the plight of humanity; these poems do not appear to support the colonial mission. But we describe these poets as “colonial”, mainly because, as in the case of Pringle and Plomer, they wrote at the turn of the 20th century during the British reign over what later came to be known as the Republic of South Africa. Another reason for using this term to describe these poets may be found in the fact that their poetry registers an attempt at orienting the self within the country, speaking on behalf of its indigenous people, sometimes using **stereotype** and subtly depicting them as alien and strange. Even some of those who wrote after the formation of the Union of South Africa (1910) and who experimented in the English traditions of poetry, such as Guy Butler, seem to fit the category of the “colonial”.

According Homi Bhabha (1994:70), **stereotype** is used “to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction”.

Activity 1

Carefully read the following excerpt from Pringle’s “Song of the Wild Bushman”.

Let the proud White Man boast his flocks,

And fields of foodful grain;

My home is ‘mid the mountain rocks,

The Desert my domain.

I plant no herbs nor pleasant fruits,

I toil not for my cheer;

The Desert yields me juicy roots,

And herds of bounding deer

(Pringle, 1881:89)

Then, in a paragraph of four to six lines, discuss whether the definition of stereotype given above is reflected in this excerpt.

Feedback on activity 1

In this stanza, the speaker who introduces him/herself as being different from “the White Man” declares a love for the wilderness. The title of the poem, “The Song of a Wild Bushman”, hints at this speaker’s identity. However, it is strange that the poem presents the speaker valorising what appears to be the simple life of a hunter gatherer. The fact that the title of the poem introduces the speaker in derogatory terms, “Wild” and “Bushman”, makes us even more suspicious of the poet’s motives. This representation recalls colonial and 19th century European mythologies of black Africans.

As you will discover when you go through this study guide and the prescribed anthology, the so-called “colonial” poems draw extensively on ideas of humanity without emphasising the racial aspects that violate it. In some instances, black African poets also expand on this celebration of a common humanity, though often overtly attributing its violation to white racism and using other tools that are indigenous to Africa. It is for this reason that, on the whole, this selection of poems in this anthology seems to make the imagined binary opposition between colonial and postcolonial, white and black, appear rather fuzzy.

Therefore, the intention is that you take cognisance of how these poems use language and style. Also in this process, try to appreciate how the poetry that we describe as “colonial” and those we describe as “postcolonial” contrast according to other related themes. Taking this into consideration, we attempt to map how South Africa became the multi-racial or cosmopolitan country that it is today.

In this module, we would like you to keep the following assertion in mind:

By virtue of the colonial encounter, Africa became “*contact zones*”: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Mary Louis Pratt, 1991:34).

Activity 2

Let us consider Pratt’s definition of “contact zones” in a reading of Nontsizi Mqgqwetho’s poem, “A Red Blanket Addresses Christians” (p. 91). Read the poem, identifying the speaker, the tone and the addressee.

Feedback on activity 2

By now, you should be able to establish that the poem presents the speaker who depicts him/herself in terms of the metaphor “red blanket”. The speaker mentions this metaphor in the title, and in the last stanza it is preceded by the first person pronoun in the plural form, “We”.

The colour red is used here to refer to those Xhosas who allegedly refuse to embrace Christianity and Western modernity, who prefer to follow Xhosa rituals and customs and to decorate themselves and their couture in red ochre. This colour is dominant in this culture’s practices (Here you may wish to refer to Zakes Mda’s novel, *The Heart of Redness*, 2000).

You will also notice that this speaker addresses “Christians” and further that s/he is unhappy with them. **How do we know this?** Refer to the use of the second person pronoun, in the form of “you” and “your”, throughout the poem and consider how, through this perspective, the speaker introduces a sense of cold distance from those he calls “Christians”. However, the speaker’s attempt to establish distance from the Christians has just the opposite result.

How do we arrive at this assertion? Try this procedure to arrive at the answers:

Jot down in point form the commonality between the speaker and the “Christians” that s/he gradually discloses in the poem. Good answers should include the following points:

- The speaker refers to Christians as “your daughters” in line 1.
- You should have identified and evaluated the speaker’s reasons for disapproving of “Christians” in every stanza.
- You should also have commented on the concluding stanza where the speaker remarks that s/he also values the Christian God’s “truth”, noting that this speaker therefore paradoxically discloses his/her sense of entanglement with the Christians.

Activity 3

Write a one-page essay in which you discuss the irony in this poem. Use the following subheadings:

- Speaker’s cultural or religious identity
 - Setting
 - Conflict
 - Imagery
 - Tone
-

Complete **Activity 3** on a separate page.

Feedback on activity 3

It is worth highlighting at least two advantages of considering representations of Africa in terms of “**contact zones**”:

The colonised appear as active participants, using the very ideological resources based on racist lines of thought that the coloniser monopolises, as opposed to being mere objects who do not contribute to history.

Let us consider whether a comparable sense of irony and of “contact zones” informs another poem, Roy Campbell’s “The Zulu Girl”. Be aware that, in contrast to the poem “A Red Blanket Addresses Christians”, the speaker in Campbell’s poem mostly articulates his/her sense of distance from his/her focus, the Zulu girl. Notice that s/he refers to her, for example, in the generic ethnic identity, that s/he calls her a “girl” despite also describing her as a mother. Because of this speaker’s ignorance and tendency to generalise, it may be argued that s/he uses **stereotypes** (refer to the definition of “stereotype” given above).

However, also notice that from the beginning of Stanza 3 to the concluding stanza, the speaker assumes a sense of familiarity with the “girl”, despite opening the poem with a description of her as being physically distant from him and just a “girl”.

Activity 4

Write a one-page essay in which you map this change mentioned above and argue whether it is convincing. Be guided by the following points:

- The identity of the speaker and his/her main focus (“girl”)
- Setting
- Imagery
- Tone

Complete this task on a separate page.

Contestations over land(rural)scape, property and entries into modernity

Primary Sources

- Thomas Pringle (“The slave dealer” pp. 35–36)
- Isaac Wauchope (“Praises of Matanzima, Son of Sandile”; “Your cattle are plundered ...” pp. 49–50)
- Roy Campbell (“Klipspringer” p. 84)
- Ntsikana kaGabha (“Ntsikana’s Bell” p. 33)
- Andrew Geddes Bain (“The British Settler” pp. 40–41)
- St J Page Yako (“The Contraction and Enclosure of the Land” p. 120)

The kind of modernity that dawned in what later became Southern Africa was generally violent. The poetry written around this time witnesses this inauspicious beginning graphically by focussing on, for example, the discovery of minerals and subsequent urbanisation, the demarcation of physical space into racist enclaves, the beginning of the mining industry and the dispossession of the indigenous peoples of their ancestral

lands. We begin to see a substantive experimentation with style in this poetry and sharper articulations of political resistance to colonisation. We can therefore surmise that this poetry also introduces the unfolding of different versions of modernity.

Activity 5

We begin by considering how Andrew Geddes Bain's poem, "The British Settler", depicts the dominant form of modernity.

Read this poem carefully and slowly aloud, taking into account each pause and expressing each punctuation mark.

Identify the instances in which the speaker addresses himself from a first person perspective, "I", and the phrases that highlight the power that he ostensibly possesses.

Feedback on activity 5

A good answer should include the following points:

- the authority that the speaker claims as a "British" man or a masculine figure
 - his claims over livestock and the land, and
 - the **stereotypes** that he uses to **represent** people of other races.
-

Activity 6

Use the activity above as a starting point and write a 15-line essay in which you discuss whether the author presents the speaker as ridiculing himself as well as his beliefs.

Feedback on activity 6

In this poem, the speaker boasts about his exploits in conquering the Cape, ostensibly a place he finds alien. He takes particular delight in stating that "Charlie Somerset", a

reference to the governor of the Cape at the time, officially allocated him the land on which he subsequently “built a house” (l6) and from which he began to expand as an entrepreneur. Throughout the poem, he does not shy away from addressing himself as a settler, and from boasting about how he has repressed and conquered the land and the indigenous people, whom he refers to in racially derogatory terms. The reader may find this speaker stupid and insensitive, concluding that the poem makes a mockery of him and of the brazen sense of masculinity that he espouses. The entire poem may thus be described as **satire**. It is interesting that this critique taps indirectly into the experience of the colonised in order to make a case against the coloniser.

Activity 7

As evident in the poem, “The British Settler” and in other poems written by white authors during the late 19th and early 20th century, European settlers are depicted either as celebrating their annexation of Africa or as refusing to address the black racial question. By contrast, the black authored poems of the same period show African resistance on the rise, though seemingly not in explicit terms. For instance, Isaac Wauchope’s “Your cattle are plundered” portrays resistance to Europe’s colonialism in terms of the acquisition of Western education. This is a point that Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel, *Nervous Conditions*, expands upon.

Read the poem aloud, emphasising the exclamation marks and the verbs that the speaker uses at the beginning of some of the lines.

Rewrite the poem in the table provided below, and then account for it in a paragraph of 6 to 8 lines. Good answers will show a restructuring of the poem in a way that identifies the rationale, imperatives and warning. Here is an example:

Imperialism	Immediate imperatives	Diplomacy
Your cattle are plundered, compatriot!	After them! After them!	Take up the pen.

Feedback on activity 7

The table should look something like this:

Imperialism	Immediate imperatives	Diplomacy
Your cattle are plundered, compatriot!	After them! After them!	Take up the pen. Seize paper and ink.
Your rights are plundered!		Grab a pen. Put pressure on the page. Engage your mind. Focus on facts. And speak loud and clear. Don't rush into battle. Anger stutters.

At the heart of this poem is the conflict between the immediate and impulsive response to colonial oppression and the acquisition of Western education as well as diplomacy or calm rational thinking. The poem suggests that both responses have one rationale in the form of colonialism. The poem further depicts imperialism using two graphic metaphors: the plundering of cattle and of rights. It seems that the gist of the poem is focused on the column on the extreme right, as it is more detailed than the middle and the extreme left columns. A closer look at these specifics reveals that this poem equates Western education with reason, and contrasts both to an emotive and aggressive reaction. It may be argued that the preferred retort recalls the value that many Africans came to invest in Western education, especially after having been dispossessed of their land through the Berlin conference of 1884. At this conference, the major European countries divided Africa into fiefdoms to be shared among themselves. In one way, therefore, Africans may be seen as having entered into modernity neither on their own terms nor on those that aptly redressed the coloniser's brute force. The speaker introduces this violence in two lines that both contain one common verb, "plundered", and end with an exclamation mark. In its plosive sound and simple past tense form, this verb articulates the coloniser's authority more forcefully and meticulously than the verbs that the poet uses to encourage resistance to imperialism.

NB. The apparent contradiction in this poem resonates in many black poems of this time. A.K. Soga's poem, "Santa Cruz: The Holy Cross", is one such example. Other poems such as H.I.E. Dhlomo's "Valley of a Thousand Hills" are informed by contrasting conflict. In the latter poem, paradox takes the form of the author's remarkable experimentation with the poetic tropes of the English Romantic period and his invocation of a South African Pan Africanism.

Urbanisation

In this subsection we will introduce you to the poetic representations of South Africa's urban development and its underlying dominant economic order.

Primary Sources

- William Plomer ("Johannesburg" p. 85)
- Mongane Wally Serote ("City Johannesburg" p. 199)
- Elisabeth Eybers ("Witwatersrand" p. 102)
- B.W. Vilakazi ("Nightfall" p. 109)
- Siphso Sepamla's ("To Whom It May Concern" p. 203)

South Africa's modern mining industry began in the late 19th century. Since then, the far-reaching consequences of this growth have been the subject of many poems. In poignant and touching terms, these poems represent humanity mostly as a man who struggles to deal with the difficult conditions of the industry. At regular intervals, the images of a polluted ecosystem and of depressed and sometimes tragic men appear in these poems. However, there are significant contrasts between white and black authored poems on this theme, and between those who wrote in this period and in the second half of the 20th century.

Activity 8

Read William Plomer's poem, "Johannesburg".

Write a chronological account of how, according to the speaker, Johannesburg came into being.

Refer to the last 2 stanzas and then, in a paragraph of five lines, discuss the identity of the people whom the speaker addresses.

Discuss the "men" working on the "Rand" in the first 3 stanzas and then, in a paragraph of five lines, show how these "men" relate to those to whom the speaker refers in the concluding 2 stanzas.

Feedback on activity 8

By now, you should be alert to the following:

- that the speaker states that Johannesburg came into being from nowhere (line 1),
- that this city developed in gendered terms and conditions,
- and further, that it exploited these men and left them out in the cold on their retirement.

Looking at the 2 last stanzas, it is apparent that

- The speaker watches or imagines retired mine workers,
- he remarks that they exemplify the consequences of the exploitative mine industry,
- in its inception, mining was a gendered enterprise that (ab)used women (“girls” in line 4 and “whore” in line 12) as a form of entertainment for men at night (expressed as “light”),
- as they aged, these men changed from “swashbucklers” or “scamps” into “prim” and “sedate” elderly people (expressed as “Greybeards” in the fourth stanza).

It may also be argued that the sarcasm in the 6th stanza contains the high point of the poem’s criticism of the collusion between capitalism, Christianity and patriarchy. This criticism is carried over into the final stanza, the second and fourth lines of which rhyme. However, in order to understand how this criticism is built up and sustained, you need to go back to the first 6 stanzas.

In a paragraph of five lines, discuss how the rhyme scheme of Elisabeth Eybers’s poem, “Witwatersrand”, supports the critique of capitalism.

In an essay, comment on whether B.W. Vilakazi’s poem, “Nightfall“, elaborates on the lament for destroyed nature that is key to Eybers’s “Witwatersrand”.

Activity 9

In contrast to many poems written by white authors on the regrettable effects of the mining industry, those penned by black authors directly impute these repercussions onto the political system of white oppression. In many of these poems, structure is dispensed with and the articulation of anger seems to happen haphazardly. These poems depict the black experience. We focus on Mongane Wally Serote’s famous poem, “City Johannesburg”, and on B.W.Vilakazi’s poem, “Nightfall”, to elaborate on this black experience.

Read Serote’s “City Johannesburg”.

Using a three column table, jot down notes

- on the routes that the speaker travels and the regularity with which he journeys on them,
- on the imagery that he uses to convey his frustrations,
- on the imagery that he uses to describe the city, and
- on the imagery that he uses to convey his sense of entrapment.

Feedback on activity 9

Compare your completed table with the notes that follow below, and consider reconciling your answers with these notes:

Having completed the exercise above, it should be apparent to you that the speaker describes the city as a product of racist control

- where he is coerced by regular curfews to accept being discriminated against on the basis of his race,
- where the city is charted by racist laws that inhibit free movement,
- where he is forced to abide by the law’s demand that he must account for his presence in the city,
- where poverty and dreadful living conditions affect black people exclusively, and
- where these effects have turned black people against one another.

Notice that, while documenting the evidence of black oppression, this poem reads slowly. This calm pace recalls performance and “spoken word poetry”.

Some notes to ponder over: “Spoken word poetry” originates in the Harlem Renaissance, a widespread phenomenon of art and cultural revival concerned with articulating black people’s aspirations and outrage at slavery in America at the beginning of the 20th century. Since then, this poetry has developed into many types, and across the world.

Activity 10

In order to establish a comprehensive view of the kind of “event” or phenomenon that this poem enunciates, read the poem again, very slowly this time, and then discuss the following statement in seven lines:

In the poem, “Johannesburg”, punctuation marks dictate the rhythm of the poem, slowing it down. This allows the speaker to engage in a process that is musical; this effect is intensified by the poem’s refrain, “Jo’burg City”. It may further be argued that this constant refrain suggests a process of healing.

Feedback on activity 10

Perhaps as a result the frequent occurrence of enjambment or “run-on-lines” in Serote’s poem, “City Johannesburg”, reading it one feels as if one is involved in a musical event. The subject that this poem explores is rather weighty, as it concerns the trauma of the black experience. It is therefore no wonder that Serote deploys what seems to be the trope of music in order to deal with this history. After wandering through the depths of the pain of apartheid and driven by the power of the written word, the poem pauses regularly in the refrain. This refrain is intended to help the reader to return to a moment of calm. By implication, while the poem immerses the reader in the history of oppression through graphic images of entrapment, at the same time it overturns the evoked pain in the refrain.

The critic, Njabulo Ndebele ([1984] 1991, 2006:41–42) calls this type of poetry “the spectacular”, as, according to him, it merely confirms the surface realities of apartheid. Ndebele elaborates:

“The spectacular documents; it indicts implicitly; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge. It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. Nothing beyond this can be expected of it.”

Activity 11

In a paragraph of seven lines, use these points that Ndebele raises in order to evaluate Sipho Sepamla’s poem, “To Whom It May Concern”.

In the next subsection of this learning unit, we will discuss the significance of poetry in the mediations of the conditions of exile and imprisonment.

Primary Sources

- Dennis Brutus (“Letter to Martha, 4” p. 174)
- Jeremy Cronin (“Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang” p. 357)
- Arthur Nortje (“Waiting” p. 180)

Systems of political repression across the world have imprisoned people for holding different views. Attempting to evade this fate, a number of the political activists and artists such as Dennis Brutus, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi and Keorapetse Kgositsile went into exile. From both exile and prison, poetry emerged in rich and fascinating textures. One of these textures articulates the ingenuity of these beleaguered people in their efforts to survive subjugation and the corresponding forms of distress this caused. South Africa, as well as the rest of the world, boasts intriguing examples of such poetry. In this section, we introduce you to the poetic representations of both human rights abuses and individual moments of calm.

Activity 12

Read Dennis Brutus’s poem, “Letter to Martha 4”. Write a paragraph in which you explore the metaphor of containment that the speaker uses to describe the setting, and the images that he uses to elaborate upon this metaphor.

Feedback on activity 12

Good answers should include the following ideas:

- The metaphor of “containment” is the “single cell” (line 1), and it is elaborated on in the “awareness of the proximity of death” (line 6) (possibly because the cell in which the speaker is imprisoned is on death row).
- This metaphor is further expanded upon in the phrases “grey silence” and “empty afternoons” (line 14) (possibly because, being in solitary confinement, the speaker is gloomy and depressed).

Activity 13

According to the speaker, the dominant sense of doom that he expresses in the detailed image of entrapment in the poem, “Letter to Martha, 4”, is overturned in his religious appeals. He introduces these pleas in line 3 through the only verb in this first stanza. **Identify this verb, and then discuss its significance in a five to six line paragraph.**

Feedback on activity 13

The verb in question is “asserts”. This verb is the only one in this stanza and in the remainder of the poem which is intransitive, which contains an ‘s’ alliteration sound, and cadences in the plosive consonant ‘t’. As an intransitive verb, it does not take an object (or subject phrase). In this case, the phrase expresses the idea of spirituality or religion that the speaker argues is the prisoner’s refuge. The contrast between the solution and the adversary in the form of apartheid is very stark. However, the poem introduces this answer by associating it with the ineffable perseverance of those who have very remote access to political authority and who recognise themselves as powerless in the face of the transcendental or God. These are those who still observe “childhood” prayer rituals in stanza two, the “weak” in stanza four, or those who commune with “god” in the last stanza, for example. The syntax of this poem appears to chain together all these images into one sentence so that it is impossible to conceive of this poem without the dominant images of those who do not command sufficient power to influence bureaucracy.

Activity 14

Christianity, the religion that we touched on in **Activity 1** above, came to Africa with the juggernaut of colonialism. As evident in Dennis Brutus’s poem, “Letter to Martha, 4”, however, Christianity is being redeployed to serve the oppressed. The proposal is therefore that religion can be defined as an aspect of everyday life.

According to the philosopher Michel de Certeau ([1984] 1988: xii), everyday life concerns individuals who appropriate (or alter and individualise) the dominant economic order for their own different ends.

Let us now consider whether religion plays any centrality role in the poem, Arthur Nortje’s “Waiting”, the subject of which is depression. This is an “exile” poem, because it was written in exile. Read this poem carefully, paying particular attention to the speaker’s overwhelming sense of gloom.

In “Waiting”, Jacques Berthoud (1984: 5) remarks, Nortje

“presents his subject as located in time and place, achieving this by a subtle manipulation of depth of field, regularly shifting focus from background to foreground, and from present to past ... In this poem the community and the self are involved in each other at the deepest level. Indeed, the self does not appear as an autonomous given, but as something unstable, dependent and at risk. The art which seemed self-regarding ... is not merely aesthetic, but therapeutic. Floating up through some basic fracture of the mind, it is hailed as the only thing capable of checking the disintegration of a subject sundered from its origins.”

In three paragraphs, discuss the imagery that the speaker uses to convey his depression. Show whether he succeeds in recovering from his depression, and then consider whether this is on account of his limited sense of spirituality or religion.

In this subsection, we will be exploring the concept of the “post-anti-colonial”.

Primary Sources

- Sally-Ann Murray (“Pregnancy” p. 436)
- Wopko Jensma (“Lo Lull” p. 252)
- Antjie Krog (“For All Voices, For All Victims” p. 268)
- Seithlamo Motsapi (“shak-shak” p. 427)
- Heather Robertson (“Under the Sun” p. 457)

In this final section, we elaborate on the concept of “**contact zones**” by considering how this resonates in the poetry explored thus far that overtly expresses the idea of race. It is not at all possible to “box” these poems into one pigeon-hole, as they celebrate multiplicity and are very experimental – even as they articulate discontent with the human rights abuses that have racial connotations. This poetry may be described as “post-anti-apartheid” (Loren Kruger, 2003:70). Kruger explains that the “post-anti-apartheid” refers to the “minorities whose stories, once lost beneath the clash and clamour of the anti-apartheid struggles, have emerged to reflect but also to refract the complex of identities or, more plausibly, dynamic *identifications* in post-apartheid or at least post-anti-apartheid South Africa.” Altering Kruger’s notion slightly, we arrive at the “post-anti-colonial”.

Activity 15

Read “Under the Sun” and reflect on these questions:

- How does the poem construct the antithesis between searing light and feathery darkness?
- What do you think these antithetical images represent?
- Is the careful naming of the stars at all significant?

Feedback on activity 15

The structure of the poem is deliberately clear and stark, the two halves held neatly in balance by the isolated adversative conjunction “but”. Note how the verse structure is contained in the tight arrangement of repeated, yet varied specificities:

- spatial location: “under the sun”.
- role: daughter/comrade/lover/friend expanded in “they are me”/“I am them”.
- spatial location: “under the stars” expanded.
- role: “I am”, expressed not as above through a series of nouns denoting precise fields of loyalty and duty, to parents, lovers, friends and so forth, but as a statement of pure, individual existence: “I am”.

The poem’s subtle play on identification: “I am daughter ... friend”, “they are me”, “I am them” artfully mirrors the many facets of this woman’s spirit, the multiplicity

of roles she plays and culminates in the irrepressible surge of freedom and selfhood in the concluding lines: “I am/wonderfully/less than/vapour”. Note how immensely descriptive of a free state of mind the combination of adverbs “wonderfully/less” and the aptly chosen noun “vapour” is. In six words, only one noun: contrast it with the series of nouns in the opening lines and you will begin to detect the poem’s careful and delicate artistry. How remarkable that so much “being” is concentrated in the evanescent, almost imperceptible “vapour”. How is this effect achieved?

Note how the poem unfolds towards this single-word climax through some interesting rhetorical devices: for instance, the chiasmic arrangements of the central portion of the poem: “I do to please/and please to do” (ABBA structure) and “they are me/and I am them” (ABBA structure again). This repeated formal arrangement has the effect of enclosing visually (and rhetorically) the speaker of the poem in a cage-like structure. Note how, following the adversative “but”, the verse begins to unfold freely and pours itself out into a catalogue of evocatively named stars. Mythical reminiscences fuse into the vast vault of the night sky, under whose mysterious and liberating light the being is nothing but an evanescent form.

And, yet, the accurate naming of the stars provides a specific structure for the human being observing them, an alternative to the glaring, guiding light of the sun. Does the speaker in the poem need this alternative? Does she – who is labelled as, and executes (dutifully, we infer) the role of, “daughter”, “comrade”, “lover”, “friend” – need and pursue a different role, the role of a human being free of all obligations and duty (to country and kin)? Is this a sign of disloyalty, or the expression of an irrepressible impulse towards a state of freedom which is not to be coupled with political and familial issues? Submerging the self into “vapour”, an indeterminate element not susceptible of definition and categorisation, allows the speaker to attain a freedom which is beyond any granted by State, kin or friend. It is from this state of pure liberty that the speaker can reflect on the inward emotions and aspirations that animate her hidden life, as an individual untrammelled by quotidian duties and obligations to the world that exists outside of her own self.

Such a scrutiny of individual aspirations and display of an inner self which does not adhere to the dictates of duty (as comrade, relative, friend) would have been unthinkable in earlier poetry. We see, here, an evolution from poetry which responds to important themes of freedom and justice, to poetry which begins to narrow the scope back onto the individual, the core of humanity common to all. This development is noteworthy and ushers in a different aspect of literary creativity in the sphere of ideological responses to power.

Activity 16

The “post-anti-colonial” is also an outpouring of vitality and the unpredictable. Let us consider this assertion with reference to Seithamo Motsapi’s poem, “shak-shak”. Carefully read this poem, paying close attention to its musical quality.

Then, on a separate page, discuss how this poem captures the richness of life.

Feedback on Activity 16

This poem reverberates with music, dance and graphic art. The intention seems to be to depict a people who imagine themselves liberated from oppressive legislations or the norms. The poem conjures up this alternative space through the word, “carnival”, mentioned in line one, fourteen and twenty-six. Carnival is a site of imaginative and spiritual ‘richness’ that people affirm especially during traumatic experiences.

In imitation of carnival, the poem has a set of recognizable motif. I mention only a few:

“shak-shak”,
the usage of onomatopoeia in ways that call to mind bodily movements such as dance,
the references to the kind of music that is percussive and sometimes accompanied by the beating of bells,
voices or animated singing,

The performances identified above may be thought of as multiple voices that constitute a coherent discourse of political defiance. The latter is a concept that indicates that the participants merely imagine themselves liberated by engaging in synchronized choreographies in a communal or social gathering. As the poet states, “so the poor wd throw pots of paint/ curdled in the heart of the drowsy skies” (lines 5–6), the people spontaneously intone varied and animated supplications.

The poem powerfully articulates this charisma by beginning with an upbeat, “&”, and by making it a key motif. By virtue of also functioning as a conjunction, “&” further suggests an image of a persistent upsurge such as electrical voltage. The poet proposes this effect in line three–four. He also builds on the image of electrocution in different ways. In the first, he describes the performers as the “high/voltage jolly demons” (line 19–20). The second is apparent in his repetition of the phrase, “& the carnival entered the last streets”. In other words, the usage of the metaphor of electrical voltage corresponds with the idea of “madness”.

Why does he compare his soul to a site of dereliction, that is, “shantytown” which brings to mind a sense of improvisation, impermanence and poverty? Also, why is it important for him that he seems to be concerned about the carnival that appears to have already happened? It looks as if he is reflecting on how he became affected by watching the carnival. This means, therefore, that, by virtue of associating carnival with “madness”, that is, the kind through which emotions are expressed freely, he deliberately takes the persona of one of the performers of the carnival.

Conclusion

Perhaps, more than any genre that this Module explores, poetry disrupts the sense of neat division that may be seen to exist between the “colonial” and the “postcolonial”. As demonstrated in the activities in this Unit on poetry, it highlights individuals taking charge of those tools of meaning-making such as the English language and Christianity. In these ways, histories are being constructed in more complex terms than the ones decided by formal political institutions. To trace these complexities, we have to pay special attention to the written or spoken word.

A summary of unit 1's core ideas

This unit concerned itself with

- the ways in which South African poetry establishes its own history of the colonial encounter,
- the fact that this poetry highlights this encounter in terms of **irony**,
- that the encounter itself signals a “**contact zone**” where the coloniser and the colonized fight over deploying such tools such as language, Christianity and Western education as well as Western aesthetics,
- the notion that this encounter, which we referred to as **modernity**, is filled with tension.

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LEARNING UNIT 2

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry



COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL
African literature

This unit was compiled by Prof S Radithalo and Dr A Musvoto

When you start measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is. Lena Younger (ACT III)

Introduction

Welcome to this unit of the ENG2603 module which explores the representation of African Americans in the play *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. In the unit we will consider a number of key themes such as exploitative housing practices that are racially charged, feminism and how it is actualised by a character who is far-sighted, family values under erasure and generational conflicts motivated by changing times, as well as African American identities in relation to Africa and Africans in particular. In doing this, we shall be using key concepts such as “stereotype”, “feminism”, “gender”, “race” and “class”. “Stereotype” has already been defined and discussed in previous units, but in this unit we will apply it to the play, and relate it to the other concepts. We will define these concepts and learn how to apply them to a reading of a play.

Learning unit outcomes

This learning unit has four specific outcomes, namely:

Outcome 1: Students critically read a play with comprehension and critical engagement at the intermediate level.

Outcome 2: Students write well-structured paragraphs and essays that critically discuss the creative choices made by the author of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Outcome 3: Students explain how the politics of representation shapes *A Raisin in the Sun* and its reception in postcolonial contexts.

Outcome 4: Students can employ key concepts and debates in postcolonial literary theory, such as representation, gender, stereotypes, race, class, spacing and spaces. These concepts will be used continually in this and other units of the module.

Background

One of the great challenges of any society is to provide affordable basic services for all its citizens. In South Africa this remains a particularly acute challenge which is an ongoing process. With so much internal movement of peoples, it will remain a challenging process for some time to come. The United States of America also experienced tremendous internal migration in the decades of the 1940s and 1950s from the states in the south of the country to those situated in the north, such as Illinois and specifically the city of Chicago, where the play is set. This play is of great significance because it provides us with insights into how American society has evolved over the years. The United States, like South Africa, has a history of racially segregated social services even if, in the American case, this was not enforced by law after legal segregation was abolished in 1954. However, segregation continued through social conventions.

myUNISA Activity 1

On the *myUnisa* site for ENG2603, there is a “Discussion Forum” function. Under this tab, you will see a heading called “General Subject Related Discussions”. When you click on this, you will see a topic called “*A Raisin in the Sun* discussions”. In the message box, write a paragraph in which you explain whether you could relate the play to a particular social context. Do you think that knowing the background of the play will have an impact on your reading of the play, and why? For instance, how do you, as a reader, relate this particular extract from the play?

RUTH	Clybourne Park? Mama, there ain't no colored people in Clybourne Park.
MAMA	<i>(Almost idiotically)</i> Well, I guess there's going to be some now.
WALTER	<i>(Bitterly)</i> So that the peace and comfort you went out and bought us today!
MAMA	<i>(Raising her eyes to meet his finally)</i> Son – I just tried to find the nicest place for the least amount of money for my family.
RUTH	<i>(Trying to recover from the shock)</i> Well-Well- 'course I ain't one never' fraid of no crackers, mind you-but-well, wasn't there no other houses nowhere?
MAMA	Them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as houses. I did the best I could.

Feedback on myUNISA Activity 1

- As a starting point, you may wish to read about the law enacted by the South African government entitled the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act No. 49 of 1953. Already in 1948 in South Africa, “Whites Only” or “Slegs Blankes” notices had been placed prominently in most public places. Laws and regulations confirmed or imposed segregation for public amenities such as taxis, buses, elevators, benches, lavatories, parks, cinemas, restaurants and hotels, as well as schools and

universities. This Act was sometimes amended and given fresh interpretation as time passed.

- The play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) is probably the best known work of playwright Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry was an African American woman born in Chicago, USA, in 1930. She died in 1964. Her plays are renowned for their engagement with the problems afflicting Blacks* in an American context that is plagued by racial prejudices. *A Raisin in the Sun* is Hansberry's first play and it is the first play by a black woman to be produced on Broadway. The play was also the first by an African American to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the year.

***Note on vocabulary choice**

The term "black" refers to African Americans. In the era in which the play was set African Americans were referred to as "colored" though the standard term for African Americans was "negro". The word "black" gained prominence in the 1960s which saw massive socio-political changes as well as serious conflicts in the politics of identity.

- *A Raisin in the Sun* is celebrated for its particularly robust interrogation of laws that promoted racial segregation and frustrated the ambitions of African Americans. Some of these laws, such as the race restrictive covenant, prevented Blacks from residing in the same areas as Whites. Hansberry's family was once a victim of this covenant in 1937. Her father bought a house at 6140 Rhodes Avenue in an exclusive white Chicago neighbourhood resulting in some of the neighbours – not all – evoking the race restrictive covenant and demanding that the family depart from the area. This incident resulted in a famous and protracted Supreme Court case called *Hansberry v Lee* (1940) in which Lorraine's father contested the covenant. He eventually won the court case (on a technicality) and the family was granted permission to stay in their new house. The Supreme Court decision did not challenge the constitutionality of the covenants per se. It was not until 1948, in *Shelley v Kramer*, that the North's legal pillar of racial segregation – the race restrictive covenant – was declared unconstitutional.¹
- From this personal background of the playwright, it is easy to notice that there is an autobiographical element to this play and that its plot is a fictionalised account of this earlier event in Hansberry's life. However, the play cannot be simply interpreted as a completely autobiographical representation without ignoring the role of other social, political and economic problems that it explores. As you might have already noticed from your reading, important issues such as gender, class, race and stereotypes, among others, are dealt with in the play.

The title of the play

The title of the play comes from a line in Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" which appears as an epigraph at the beginning of the text. The poem is about a dream deferred, in which the persona makes use of striking imagery to try and describe the possible fate of a dream that is not realised. Does it end up "dry[ing] up/Like a raisin in the sun?/Or fester like a sore". These are all images employed to point to the possible endings of such a dream. In the wider African-American context, in which Hughes composed the poem, the dream symbolises the various aspirations and ideals of the marginalised African Americans, who are continuously frustrated in an environment

1 If you would like to know more about this background, please read the following article on myUnisa: Gordon, Michelle (2008) "'Somewhat Like War': The Aesthetics of Segregation, Black Liberation, and A Raisin in the Sun." *African American Review* 42(1):121–133.

that is stricken by racial prejudices. This is the same society in which the characters in Hansberry's play struggle to fulfil their aspirations. In the play, dreams appear as important and recurring metaphors throughout. They embody the hopes, ideals and ambitions of the characters. It is around these dreams that the plot of the play revolves and crystallises.

Activity 1

- 1.1 In a paragraph, explain what the images employed in the poem suggest about a dream deferred.

- 1.2 Select any two characters in the play and identify their aspirations. How do they seek to fulfil their ambitions? Write your responses in the space below.

Feedback on activity 1

- 1.1 What the poem suggests are possible reactions to a situation where a dream is deferred. The question requires you to think or imagine how an individual would feel when his/her ambitions are frustrated.
- 1.2 An overall understanding of the plot and the significance of the dream metaphor is necessary in engaging with this question.

Defining Representation

Now that you have a better understanding of the background and the title of the play, it is time to move on to the concept of representation which was introduced previously but will now be explored further. The concept of representation is widely used and is one of the most important critical tools in the study of colonial and postcolonial studies. Here is a short description and explanation of representation, taken from the website: <http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/representation/>:

“Representation is a critical concept not only in postcolonial studies and academia, but in the larger cultural milieu. The term itself can be defined in many different ways. Often, we think of representation primarily as ‘presence’ or ‘appearance’ where there is an implied visual component. Representations can be clear images, material reproductions, performances and simulations. We understand them to be re-presenting a particular ‘real’ thing; however, the relationship between the thing and the representation of the thing is one that has engaged philosophers, linguists, historians and artists for centuries. In a different context, we use representation to denote the relationship between a politician and her/his constituency. A single

person is endowed with the responsibility of representing many citizens; this is the foundational principle of representative democracy. For this discussion, we are highlighting the visual, political and artistic elements of this concept.

Representations – these ‘likenesses’ – come in various forms: films, television, photographs, paintings, advertisements and other forms of popular culture. Written materials – academic texts, novels and other literature, journalistic pieces – are also important forms of representation. Yet how can simulations or ‘impressions on the sight’ be completely true? How does one judge the accuracy or truth-content of a representation? Or rather, how does one interpret or read the representation? Representations can never truly be real or objective. Instead, they are constructed images, images that need to be interrogated for their ideological content.”

It should be clear that in the play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the characters are enacting the roles assigned to them by the script, that they are pretending to be the Younger family, giving us, the readers and audience, a sense of being given the unvarnished truth about this family. But they are representing characters from the written play itself, enacting roles that the playwright has written as a re-presence. Although there are autobiographical elements to the play, this in no way can be claimed as the ultimate unvarnished story of the Hansberry family itself. Lorraine Hansberry takes from her family history and *dramatises* an aspect of their struggle for a home in a segregated, racially restrictive community.

For another discussion of “representation”, see Learning Unit 5.

Elements of a play: How do we go about reading a play?

When we read a dramatic text, we essentially become engrossed in the playwright’s vision of what the critical points of conflict in the play are. The play has to give us a sense of a rising action and with it the accompanying tension that rises to an often unbearable pitch (**Climax**) and thereafter the devolution of the tension (**Falling Action**) leading to resolution of the initial conflict (**Denouement**), however satisfactory or unsatisfactory that might prove to be.

How we are introduced to the characters in a play?

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the very first scene of Act One introduces us to the main characters in the order of their appearance: Ruth, Travis, Walter Lee (Brother), Beneatha and Mama Younger. The character who does not appear on stage in this scene but will have a huge impact on the play’s outcome is Willy Harris. We observe the constricted space of the family home, the shared bathroom with one or more families, the sagging furniture that has “accommodated too many people for too many years” which has also been “scrubbed too often”.

It is important to pay particular attention to the **stage directions** – that is, what each character is supposed to be doing or how they react at each turn. **Stage directions** are usually in italics and are an important element of the play that

informs us of the mood, tempo and direction of the action that the characters carry out. See for instance the description of Walter Lee below. That tells you something of his **character**.

The most compelling words of the play at the beginning are uttered by Walter Lee (notice that he is described as *lean, intense, inclined to quick nervous movements and erratic speech habits*) when he immediately asks his wife, Ruth:

- “(Stopping and thinking) Check coming today?”

The check is the most significant factor that complicates the lives of the Younger family in the opening scene. This makes the readers/audience alert to the importance of money for the realisation of dreams and aspirations for the family. Even Travis, at ten years old, says:

- “Mama, this is Friday. (Gleefully) Check coming tomorrow, huh?”

Immediately following this observation, Travis complains about the fifty cents he has to bring to school, and he begs his mother to work as a parcel carrier at a local grocery store for pocket money. His mother denies him the fifty cents but his father gives it to him (ironically sacrificing his taxi fare in the process). Walter Lee rails against his wife’s refusal to help him convince Mama Younger to give him the ten thousand dollars so he and Willy Harris can open up a liquor store and “move up in the world”. Walter Lee is also disappointed with his sister Beneatha and his wife for not standing by his entrepreneurial dream, setting up the gender conflict that is at the heart of the play:

- “That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world . . . Don’t understand about building their men up and making ‘em feel like somebody. Like they can do something”.

Walter Lee is concerned about Beneatha’s ambition to go to medical school while the rest of the family works hard for her upkeep and frivolous pursuits in “discovering myself”. This sibling rivalry permeates the play till the very end.

Mama’s regal entry onto stage belies the momentous troubles ahead. She shows concern for the earlier argument, Travis’s bed, Ruth’s wellbeing, and Beneatha’s blasphemous attitude to God.

Activity 2

What do these small acts tell you about Mama Younger’s character?

Feedback on activity 2

Why do you think Mama Younger is central to the play as she draws all the other characters together as a family?

When Ruth tries to coax her into revealing her intentions for the money she is evasive:

- “Now don’t start, child. It’s too early in the morning to be talking about money. It ain’t Christian”.

This shows Mama’s indecisiveness, but also her clear indication that she abhors liquor trading. When Ruth points out that people will drink on regardless, her answer is instructive:

- “Well – whether they drinks or not ain’t none of my business. But whether I go into business selling it to ‘em *is*, and I don’t want that on my ledge this late in life”.

Thus the importance of the check is demonstrated as the source of the tension very early on in the opening scene. Ruth’s pregnancy further complicates the strained family circumstances as this means, in effect, an extra mouth to feed and house. When she collapses at the end of the scene the family’s dire situation is revealed in stark relief. For instance, when Beneatha learns of this pregnancy, her response is rather cutting. As Ruth tells her to mind her own business, Beneatha says:

- “It is my business where is he going to live, on the *roof*?”

Thus the idea of poverty is introduced and what the extra child will mean to the family’s well being. **You should also relate this to the death of Mama Younger’s Claude.** What was the cause of his death that you can surmise?

In the opening scene the play’s major themes are revealed:

- Upward mobility/class issues
- Moral responsibility
- Justice
- Identity
- Feminism
- Racial segregation

You will notice that these themes hinge on the characters’ concerns in life: for instance, Walter Lee’s and Beneatha’s dreams of improving their lives (through business and education respectively), Mama’s moral rectitude and Beneatha’s stance about why women cannot take on roles traditionally preserved for males. The following critical concepts are therefore crucial in the realisation of the play’s themes:

- Stereotype
- Feminism
- Gender
- Race
- Class

These concepts can be defined as follows:

Stereotype – originally taken from a process in printing, the term has become a Standard English phrase of a concept, term, or description that is fixed and unchanging – normally with a pejorative ring, suggesting that oversimplification and prejudice are involved in its formation and use ... [W]e can isolate stereotypes based on race or culture, on age, on profession, and so on. Moreover, stereotypes may masquerade as positive: thus the beliefs that women are naturally intuitive, or that Black people are always happy and have a wonderful sense of rhythm, are no less stereotypical than more overtly negative views ... It should be added that according to many theorists a stereotype is only fully effective in disseminating a particular ideology when it is not recognized as a stereotype but taken as truth or natural. (Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 2000:334–5)

Activity 3

Read the first scene again and answer the questions below:

- 3.1 Briefly explain how Walter Lee displays a sexist attitude towards his sister Beneatha's ambition/s? What stereotype of a woman is he imagining?

- 3.2 Comment on the ways in which Walter Lee's and Beneatha's dreams might be actualised by money.

- 3.3 Think about Mama Younger's concerns in the opening scene and how they contradict those of her children. Write a paragraph in which you explain these contradictions.

Feedback on activity 3

When you do the activities above, here are some questions that will guide you.

- 3.1 Why is Walter Lee incorrect in supposing that his sister should take on a less challenging occupation? How does this contradict the inherent equality of males and females?
- 3.2 Can we truly say that money is necessary for the actualization of our dreams? Can money make our dreams possible without ambition and drive? Compare Walter Lee's ambition to George Murchison (later in the play).

3.3. Is Mama Younger correct in nurturing the family through caring and creating the right environment without worrying about their ambitions and desires?

Feminism – Toril Moi makes a useful distinction between three cognate terms which provides a good starting point: *feminism* is a political position, *femaleness* a matter of biology, and *femininity* a set of culturally defined characteristics (1986b:204). It should be recognized that Moi’s suggested definitions have a political edge: she is as much arguing for how these terms should be used as describing an actual, existing usage. Of the three terms, feminism is probably the most complex. What is indisputable is that feminism is a broad church, one in which different persuasions can be found. Feminism as a socio-political movement experienced a resurgence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in Western Europe and the United States, a resurgence which continues and which has established a number of seemingly permanent changes in the developed world – and which has not been without an effect in the developing world. (Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 2000:114)

Activity 4

Who in the text is the most outwardly feminine character in the play, and why? Quote directly from the text to show textual evidence of your assertion.

Feedback on activity 4

In your reading you should pay close attention to what each of the main female characters has to say on a range of issues and how they defend their positions.

Gender – In current feminist usage, *gender* is used to refer to those characteristics of socio-cultural origin which are attributed to the different biological sexes. Within Linguistics this usage is sometimes varied in order to avoid confusion with linguistic gender, but generally speaking feminist influence has succeeded in establishing that *gender* involves society and culture and sex involves biology. Thus there are two sexes, but many different genders. The term *gender* was adopted by feminists to emphasise the social shaping of femininity and masculinity, to challenge the idea that relations between women and men were ordained by nature. (Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 2000:139–140)

Activity 5

Which character in the text is restricted by their traditional gender role and why do you think this is so? Motivate your response.

Feedback on activity 5

The work that each character does defines what their gender role is supposed to be. What is the work of each of the adult characters and can such work be done by a member of the opposite gender?

Race – As applied to groups of living organisms, the term “race” has been used in at least three different senses. The most common use of the word in biology has referred to a subspecies, a variety of a species that has developed distinguishing characteristics through isolation but has not yet lost the ability to interbreed and to produce fertile hybrids with other subspecies of the same species. Physical anthropologists used to speak of human “races” in the sense of subspecies, as in the great tripartite of mankind into Negroid, Mongoloid and Causasoid.

A second usage of “race” is a synonym for species, as in the phrase “the human race.” That usage is often deliberately antithetical to the first, when the stress is put on the unity of mankind (or “humankind”). Finally, a “race” is defined as a group of people who are *socially* defined in a given society as belonging together because of *physical markers* such as skin pigmentation, hair texture, facial features and the like. (E. Ellis Cashmore, *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*, 1991:237–238)

Activity 6

Read the first Act of the play again. What do you think is the role of “race” in this Act?

Feedback on activity 6

Why did the Younger family move to Chicago in the first place, and what was the experience like for them over the years?

Class – Discussion of social class entered the literary-critical discourse most obviously with the emergence of a Marxist literary criticism in the 1930s. Marxist views of class are not completely homogenous, and they have become more sophisticated in recent years. What is common to them all, however, is an insistence upon defining class in relation to the economic structure of society. Thus the traditional Marxist definition of a member of the working class is that he or she is someone who lives by selling their labour power (rather than, for example, living off capital, off subsistence farming, or as a self-employed worker). In general, Marxists have believed that membership of different classes does result in differences in economic level, culture, and beliefs, and it is this belief which has made this concept of class appear relevant to literary criticism, for if accurate it

would seem to offer the possibility of relating the content of a writer's work to his or her class origins or associations. (Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 2000:44)

Activity 7

In reading the play, which class do you believe the Younger family belongs to – working, middle or upper class? Motivate your response.

Feedback on activity 7

You can usually tell the economic class of a character in a play by the type of work they do and where they stay.

Extract 1

Read the following extract and answer the question below.

Lorraine Hansberry once complained that:

“Some writers have been astonishingly incapable of discussing [the character of Walter Lee’s] purely class aspirations and have persistently confounded them with what they consider to be an exotic being’s longing to ‘wheel and deal’ in what they consider to be (and what Walter Lee never can) ‘the white man’s world’.” (Robin Bernstein, “Inventing a Fishbowl: White Supremacy and the Critical Reception of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*”, 1999:19)

Write a three paragraph response in which you comment on whether Walter Lee’s class aspirations are valid or not.

The following critical articles on *A Raisin in the Sun* can be accessed directly from the Internet. **You may read these articles for a fuller appreciation of the play:**

- (a) “Inventing a Fishbowl: White Supremacy and the Critical Reception of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.” By Robin Bernstein in *Modern Drama* 42(1), 1999. <http://0-search.proquest.com.oasis.unisa.ac.za/publication/47987>
- (b) “‘Somewhat Like War’: The Aesthetics of Segregation, Black Liberation, and *A Raisin in the Sun*.” By Michelle Gordon in *African American Review*. Spring 2008, Vol. 42(1), 2008. <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.oasis.unisa.ac.za/ehost/results?sid=4d135672-1cc1-4413-8a0c-bed0a3536478%40sessionmgr104&vid=2&hid=127&tbquery=JN+%22African+American+Review%22+AND+DT+20080301&tbdata=JmRiPWFwaCZ0eXBIPTEmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d>

- (c) “Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*”. By Frank Ardolino in *The Explicator*, Washington 63(3), Spring 2005. <http://0-lion.chadwyck.co.uk.oasis.unisa.ac.za/display/printView.do?area=abell>
- (d) “Commitment amid Complexity: Lorraine Hansberry’s Life in Action”. By Steven R. Carted in *MELUS* 7(3) 1980. [http://0-www.jstor.org.oasis.unisa.ac.za/sici?sici=0163-755X\(198023\)7:3<39:CACLHL>2.0.CO;2-B&origin=LION](http://0-www.jstor.org.oasis.unisa.ac.za/sici?sici=0163-755X(198023)7:3<39:CACLHL>2.0.CO;2-B&origin=LION)

Rising Action/Complication

Now that the initial scene has laid the groundwork for the main causes of tension in the play thus far, you should be able to see the **development** of the plot as part of the rising tension in the following Scene and Act II. This is the day on which the check arrives, the day Ruth confirms her pregnancy and the day Joseph Asagai, an African friend to Beneatha, is introduced as her love interest. The tensions generated by so much expectancy reach fever pitch at the end of the scene. While everyone goes about their business, it is clear that they are waiting for the postman who is set to arrive at 10.30 a.m. The stage directions are clear on this point:

- *In spite of all the other conversations and distractions of the morning, this is what they have been waiting for ...*

As Travis plays outside, Ruth confronts her sister and mother-in-law with the truth. A subtle introduction of the harsh living environment is introduced when we read that the children are chasing rats as big as a cat, this showing that Southside Chicago at the time was run down and quite unsafe for human habitation, much less children in the streets.

The significance of Asagai

Asagai, we learn, is a Nigerian student studying in Canada and who is in love with Beneatha. She on the other hand is interested, as an African American, in defining her identity *vis-a-vis* a fellow African who is not stereotyped as the savage/heathen. Hence his gift to her is as appropriate as it is suggestive. Hansberry also introduces a subject of self-love/self-loathing in how African Americans maintain their hair as either processed (“mutilated” as Asagai wryly notes) or as natural. That points to whether they have assimilated the values of the dominant culture, or not. Remember this was in 1959, way before the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement and the adoption of the slogan “Black is Beautiful” as an affirmation of blackness. Asagai also serves to show how for all the well-intentioned aims of philanthropy by people like Mama, very little is known of Africa but even more crucially there is no interest from sections of the African American community. As Mama says “I think it’s so sad the way American Negroes don’t know nothing bout Africa ‘cept Tarzan and all that” she herself learnt this from Beneatha only minutes before Asagai arrived.

Activity 8

Asagai calls Beneatha “Alaiyo” (One for Whom Food is not Enough). What do you think is the symbolism embodied in that name?

Feedback on activity 8

The name Asagai gives to Beneatha touches on elements of her character.

The check sets in motion powerful emotions in all the characters, from Mama's rueful remembrance of her husband, Walter Lee's rage at being sidelined by his mother and his pleas seemingly falling on deaf ears, to the discourse on the changing inter-generational values. He is heartbroken when, referring to his contract with Willy Harris, he says:

- "You ain't looked at it and you don't aim to speak on that again? You ain't even looked at it and you have decided – (*Crumpling his papers*) Well, You tell that to my boy tonight when you put him to sleep on the living-room couch ..."

Where previously Mama's generation valued freedom from anti-black racism in the South, escaping from being lynched in search of employment, the right to vote and education for their children (hence settling in Northern America rather than live in the then segregated and deeply racist Southern America), Walter Lee is adamant that money is life itself.

It is rather in his treatment of Ruth that Walter Lee exasperates his mother to the limits of her strength. While Mama tries to tell him that she is pregnant and she may just abort the child, he flees the house, further adding to the tension and driving Mama out of the house in frustration.

Activity 9

9.1 Comment on the material conditions of the Younger home. Does this suggest sub-standard living conditions and negligence? Motivate your response.

9.2 When Walter Lee tells Mama that the job he is currently doing is not a job but "nothing at all" what do you think he is referring to given his plans? Explain.

9.3 Mama's injunction to Walter Lee, at the end of the scene is to "be the man he was" in reference to his father. What does she imply or mean by this? Explain.

Feedback on activity 9

- 9.1 In a house that is infested with roaches and an area teeming with rats, what may be the collusion between the sanitation services and the landlord?
- 9.2 What is Walter Lee's greatest ambition?
- 9.3 What was Walter Lee Senior's most enduring concern for his children?

The politics of identity

Act II Scene I of the play engages us in the politics of identity introduced in the opening scene of the play when Beneatha begins to enact her perception of why African women express enjoyment at the return of their folk. As she listens to one of Asagai's records, she dances and this pulls in her brother, Walter Younger, as he enters drunk and begins to dance on the table. Notice what Ruth, ever dutiful, drily says of this scenario: "Yes – Africa sure is claiming her own tonight." The entrance of George Murchison breaks the spell but introduces cross-class conflicts inherent between rich and poor blacks. His dismissal of Beneatha's appearance, forcing her to conform to his image of what a young lady going on a date should look like also shows gender conflict and his argument with Walter Lee shows how far he has been assimilated in the dominant white culture with his white shoes and manners. Beneatha's race pride and Walter Lee's stringent class aspirations ("*Man, I'm a volcano,*" Walter Lee says to him) do not matter to him at all. His dismissal of African heritage is offset by the presence of Asagai in the play as the voice that bridges the misconceptions between African American and African communities *at an intellectual level*.

What is the cause of Walter Lee's bitterness towards George Murchison?

Walter Lee's dismissive attitude towards his wife shows his disappointment at every turn and when he cuttingly says to her: "Who's fighting you? Who even cares about you?" we realise the depth of his bitterness. This theme of gender conflict reveals to us the stresses between Ruth and Walter Lee as working class people over-laden by the husband's vaulting ambitions of success.

It is this conflict that segues into the larger conflict when Mama Younger returns from an errand. This return accentuates the tensions that have been latent in the play and introduces a major theme in the play: the segregation of living spaces according to "race." As Walter Lee questions his mother, Ruth confronts Travis about his absence, further heightening the tense situation in the house at that moment. Mama's revelation that she bought a house means, therefore, that Travis will eventually own it as a grown up. This displays care for both current and future generations. In effect it destroys the dream of Walter Lee who cannot conceive of the money being put to such use.

It is important, at this stage, to note the different reactions to Mama's news from Ruth and Walter Lee. For example, Ruth is so joyous she praises God while Walter Lee sulks in furious anger. For Ruth, domestic bliss at having her own space and the sense that her coming child can be born and raised in a far better environment is key to her happiness. The fact that the house is in Clybourne Park, a so-called white neighbourhood, puts a slight damper on the announcement for the simple reason that Clybourne Park is an exclusively white neighbourhood that operates a racial segregation

through the “race restrictive covenant.” But Mama’s level-headed response shows also the exploitative nature that Chicago had to its black residents:

- “Them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other houses. I did the best I could”.

It is important to look at the scene in considerable detail. What do you notice and what do these things suggest?

Ruth is delirious with joy, wishing to know if the house has “sunlight’ flooding it. This reminds the critical reader of the sunlight that struggles to get through the Younger’s present residence, the potted plant that symbolically struggles to grow in such an environment as mentioned in the opening scene of Act I. Walter Lee’s parting shot as his mother explains herself to him shows us that the rising tension is at breaking point, when he intentionally says to her:

- “So you butchered a dream of mine – you – who always talking ‘bout your children’s dreams ...”

Extract 2: Read the following extract and answer the question below:

In the early summer of 1937, a mob arrived at 6140 Rhodes Avenue to convince the Hansberrys of Chicago to abandon their new home. The Hansberrys instead convinced their new white neighbors to disperse, with a shotgun. As expected, the neighbourhood “improvement association” sought an injunction against the Hansberrys, on the ground that blacks legally could not occupy any residence in any neighbourhood covered by the “race restrictive covenant.” In their attempt to combat legal segregation in the North, and to open up the desperately needed housing around Chicago’s Black Belt, the Hansberrys and local NAACP attorneys took their case before the US Supreme Courts. In its 1940 decision on *Hansberry v Lee*, the Supreme Court ruled in Carl Hansberry’s favour on a technicality, while declining to address the constitutionality of the covenants themselves. It would not be until 1948, in *Shelley v Kramer*, that the North’s legal bulwark of racial segregation – the race restrictive covenant – was declared unconstitutional.

Michelle Gordon, “Somewhat like War,” *African American Review* 42(1) 2008 [169 words]

In the light of the extract above, write a two page essay in which you demonstrate why Mama Younger’s buying of a house in Clybourne Park was neither an act of class nor of de-racialising segregated communities but fulfilling her homely aspirations. Motivate your response.

In the weeks that follow the dramatic confrontation occasioned by Mama Younger’s announcement that she has bought a house for the family, the tension dissipates but in Scene Two we are made aware of the lingering doubts that are present as the family prepares to move. Mrs Johnson, a neighbour, visits the Younger family brandishing a newspaper. Mrs Johnson brings false cheer to the family, enthusing about their move while raising their fears by declaring:

- “You mean you ain’t read ‘bout them colored people that was bombed out of their place out there?”

At the same time she falsely attempts to soothe the Younger family by declaring:

- “You hear some of these Negroes ‘round here talking ‘bout how they don’t go where they ain’t wanted and all that – but not me, honey. (*This is a lie.*)”

In such an instance, it is difficult to imagine what motivates Mrs Johnson enough to visit the family except envy and a desire to unsettle them. The scene foreshadows Mr Lindner’s visit in the following scene. It is for this reason that Beneatha is level-headed enough to declare:

- “Mama, if there are two things we, as a people, have got to overcome, one is the Ku Klux Klan – the other is Mrs Johnson”.

In this scene, immediately when Mrs Johnson departs, we encounter the dormant family tensions: Walter Lee is literally wasting away, dodging work and simply being listless. His dreams are festering and sagging in him and Mama Younger, showing her despair at how her son is turning out to be, plaintively asks, addressing the spirit of her husband:

- “Oh, Big Walter, is this the harvest of our days?”

Mama Younger realises just how dangerously close to breaking point her son is, and gives Walter Lee the remainder of the money, \$6 500 to put in an account for Beneatha’s studies and for the rest to be held by him in trust. In effect, Mama Younger cedes her **leadership of the family** to him. It is in this recognition that the scene ends on a high, for Walter Lee, in speaking to Travis, can see the endless vistas of his dreams unfolding. Walter Lee’s words set the reader audience for a grand finale that evokes his aspirations, which makes the climax all the more telling. He declares to Travis:

- “You wouldn’t understand yet, son, but your daddy’s gonna make a transaction ... a business transaction that’s going to change our lives”.

Activity 10

Provide a possible reason why Mama Younger’s daughter is called Beneatha.

Activity 11

Is Mama Younger correct in her decision to give up her headship of the family to Walter Lee? Motivate your response.

Activity 12

What sort of action does Mrs Johnson's visit foreshadow?

Climax

The drama of the events that have been unfolding in the earlier scenes of the play reaches its climax in Act Two, Scene Three.

The scene opens on an innocuous note with Ruth and Beneatha making plans about what they are going to do the moment they set foot at the new home. Romance between husband and wife is blooming and Walter Lee's happiness is described as "deep in him." He slowly dances with his wife and baits his sister. This warm, picturesque scene is shattered by the appearance of Mr. Lindner, a representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association who is there to attempt to buy back the house from the family. This introduces a sour note given the prevailing gaiety a moment before he arrives.

Activity 13

Is the visit to the Younger family justified? Write a two-paragraph response in which you comment on Lindner's visit and whether, in your view, it is justified or not. Motivate your response.

Lindner is the chairperson of the New Neighbours Orientation Committee. As he makes his presentation, we are made aware of how uncomfortable he is (see the stage directions in particular) and it is the ever bright Beneatha who is the first to know precisely what he is there for. Lindner is here to tell the family, on the contrary, that they would not be welcome in the neighbourhood and as he starts to read from the form so the Younger's may sell their home Walter Lee's anger is palpable when he admonishes him to

- "Get out of my house, man."

A Ray of Hope

Mama returns and for a while the earlier gaiety is re-captured and the banter between them shows how much everyone is looking forward to going to the family home. Even Travis has bought his grandmother a gardening hat that she appreciates as well as the gardening tools from the other children. There is also Beneatha here chastising her mother for wishing to take her small potted plant (see Act I Scene One) to the new place.

Into this feel-good part of the scene Bobo comes in, the bearer of very bad news. Bobo is described minutely as dressed in a not so prosperous business suit, with *haunted frightened eyes*. This is a crucial description for it contrasts markedly with Walter Lee's exuberance as he goes to open the door, shouting '... sometimes it hard for the future to begin!' Bobo's eyes are on the floor as he settles himself, for he is ashamed. Slowly Walter Lee draws the story out of him. First, he did not go to Springfield with Willy Harris where the business transaction was to be concluded. Walter Lee's mood changes as he senses a disaster and he screams at Bobo to tell him what happened and Bobo breaks into tears, sobbing that that was '... all the extra money I had in the world ...' This means that Willy Harris ran off with all their money, all of the \$6 500 Mama Younger had entrusted to Walter Lee, including Bobo's share. Bobo's words to Walter Lee seal the fate of the Younger family. As Walter Lee insists on tracking down Willy Harris, Bobo says:

- *"(In a sudden angry, frightened agony) What's the matter with you, Walter! When a cat take off with your money he don't leave no road maps!"*

The Disillusionment of the Family

All of the Younger family members react differently to the new developments and their reactions are informed by their individual dreams. The development throws into doubt their collective dream of moving into the new house and also threatens their individual aspirations. What will happen to Beneatha's ambition to become a doctor? What will happen to Walter Lee's aim of becoming a businessman? What of Mama's aim of owning a house? This event becomes a mental test for members of the family in as much as it stretches their moral fortitude. The tension is also exacerbated by the reactions of each member of the family. Take a look at the incident described below after the disclosure that the money has been lost.

- *There is total silence. Ruth stands with her face covered with her hands; BENEATHA leans forlornly against a wall, fingering a piece of red ribbon from the mother's gift. MAMA stops and looks at her son without recognition and then, quite without thinking about it, starts to beat him senselessly in the face. BENEATHA goes to them and stops it.*

Mama Younger's reaction is related to how her husband had slaved for all those years so they could have a better life. And her striking her son is in mortal frustration at his stupidity, his sheer lack of foresight to what the consequences may be for the family

if the business transaction went bad. All are devastated. This climatic scene ends on a sombre note of despair as Mama Younger prays desperately to God for strength.

Also important is that the loss comes in the wake of some telling developments. Remember Walter Lee's dialogue with Mama in an earlier scene where he accuses her of having butchered his dream and how this prompts Mama to put the money that remains after the down payment of the house into Walter Lee's care – part of which should be used to finance Beneatha's studies? There is no doubt that the realization of loss throws the entire family into a crisis and prompts each family member to reflect on their dreams. The event threatens to scupper what the family had hoped for so far. In short, Walter Lee's dream becomes a nightmare, a turning point in the play; the moment at which the characters have to make critical decisions. Remember that all along, most of the tension has been in anticipation of the check and how it ought to be used to help each character realise their dreams.

Falling Action

After the climax is reached with the realization that Walter Lee has lost the money to Willy Harris, a series of events follows. The falling action begins in Act Three. The reason behind Beneatha's dream of becoming a doctor is revealed for the first time in this part of the play; it is not about social mobility, class or money, but something deeper – an event that she witnessed in her childhood (revisit her dialogue with Asagai in Act Three). The dialogue between the two significantly reflects the extent to which Beneatha has been devastated – she is agonized about human strife. The dialogue also affirms both characters' commitment to their African roots but Asagai's faithfulness to his heritage and idealism about bringing positive change to Africa are not shared by Beneatha who is wary of post-independence Africa. Beneatha presciently points to the possibility that the new African rulers might turn out to be as corrupt as the erstwhile colonial masters.

Consider Beneatha's views below:

"... All your talk and dreams about Africa and Independence. Independence and then what? What about all the crooks and petty thieves and just plain idiots who will come into power to steal and plunder the same as before – only now they will be black and do it in the name of the new Independence – What about them".

Beneatha's comments are probably informed by Willy Harris's actions and how they frustrated Walter Lee's aspirations to start a business and attain financial freedom for himself and his family. The actions of Willy thus symbolize betrayal and to an extent demonstrate that race as an identity category does not always provide solidarity. Other interests such as class aspirations and vices like greed can undermine the cohesion provided by race. Beneatha warns that it is naïve to believe that African leaders would serve the interests of their people simply because they come from the same racial group. However, this does not dampen Asagai's enthusiasm about returning to Africa. Instead, he chides her for being pessimistic and having constructed her dreams solely around her father's insurance money.

Following this discussion, Beneatha is scathing of her brother's failures, sarcastically calling him 'Titan of the System!', 'Symbol of a Rising Class' at the time when Walter Lee is considering selling the house to Mr Lindner in a bid to recoup the money lost

(Act Two Scene Three). If this act is carried out, it will undermine the family's dignity and pride, which Walter Lee had defended when he rejected the same racist offer earlier on.

The Desperation of Ruth

While Walter Lee is out, Mama Younger announces that the family is staying put, but this brings out a very desperate plea from Ruth who cannot countenance life in the dingy flat. She commits herself to work and work and work just to leave the abject poverty behind:

- *(Turning and going to MAMA fast – the words pouring out with urgency and desperation)* Lena – I'll work ... I'll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago ... I'll strap my baby on my back if I have to scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if I have to – but we got to MOVE! We got to get OUT OF HERE!!

It is this desperate plea that shows the mean conditions that the family lives in and the sacrifices Ruth is prepared to undergo to make at least this one dream realisable.

Walter Lee's re-entry marks the lowest point he is prepared to go to in making amends for his mistake. His miserable rationalisation about life ("Life is just like it is. Who gets and who don't get") and his preparedness to 'put up a show for the man' in a coon-like fashion deeply offends and horrifies his family and Mama sums up the true situation for her son in words that denote race pride:

- "Son – I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers – but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor. *(Raising her eyes and looking at him)* We ain't never been that – dead inside".

This new development creates an acute sense of suspense and throws into doubt the final outcome of the conflict as Walter Lee's family and the audience wonder about his next action. What surely horrifies the audience and readers is Walter Lee's intention to subject himself to Mr. Lindner, re-enacting slaves' most degrading debasement in the presence of a master. It is also in this Act that the audience becomes aware that Mama has lost the hope (at least temporarily) of moving into the new house and that Beneatha has also given up on her dream of studying medicine. Her words of damnation regarding Walter Lee are countered powerfully by Mama Younger's way of demonstrating that there is worth even in the most abject of individuals:

- "When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got wherever he is".

Activity 14

- 14.1 What informed Beneatha's aspiration to become a doctor? Is it the need to address her family's poverty?

- 14.2 To what extent would you equate Walter Lee's struggle to achieve financial independence to aspirations for national independence in Africa?

Feedback on activity 14

- 14.1 Think of her dialogue with Asagai in Act Three.
- 14.2 Consider Harris's betrayal, Asagai's idealism and Beneatha's comments about Africa.

Denouement

It is in the denouement of the play that the conflicts in the plot end and [are] resolved. There are also certain changes that can be noticed in the characters. Note that the independence that Walter Lee achieves at the end is not financial. He significantly chooses to maintain the identity and pride of his family as well as that of his race by refusing to accept the money. What makes this more poignant are the financial setbacks that the family has suffered. This ending highlights a change of perception in Walter Lee; he realizes that money is not life itself. He emerges at the end of the play as a more mature individual with a more sophisticated understanding of life and the marginal spaces occupied by people of his race. That growth is revealed in the reassuring confidence with which he dismisses Lindner.

- “What I am telling you is that we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud and that this is – this is my son, who makes the sixth generation of our family in this country, and that we have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father – my father – he earned it ... We don't want your money”.

In general, at the end of the play, the entire Younger family emerges with new consciousnesses and an acute sense of understanding of most of the things that were creating conflicts in their midst. When thinking of the resolution of this play, it is also critical to bear in mind the closure of the subplot – the drama and conflicts of Beneatha's love life. She seems, as she decidedly mentions to Mama at the end, to be enchanted by Asagai's proposal to marry him and the prospects of accompanying him to Nigeria. Regard this new development in the context of how it enhances the audience's overall understanding of the play, especially Walter Lee's remark that:

- “Girl, if you don't get all them silly ideas out of your head! You better marry yourself a man with some loot ...” (106)

This remark suggests that Walter Lee has not completely transformed as a character; some earlier traits of him as an individual who overly worships money are retained in this pronouncement.

Activity 15

- 15.1 In two paragraphs, comment on the aspirations of any two characters in the light of the resolution reached at the end of the play.

- 15.2 Would you say Walter Lee's attitude towards Beneatha has changed at the end of the play?

- 15.3 What would you say informs Walter Lee's decision to refuse Mr Lindner's offer? Is it the need to maintain his family's identity and sense of self worth?

Feedback on activity 15

- 15.1 At the end of the play would you say the characters have realized their dreams?
- 15.2 Think of the statement that Walter Lee makes with regard to Beneatha's disclosure that Asagai has proposed to marry her. Are Walter Lee's remarks driven by gender or class stereotypes? Consider his comments about George Murchison and Beneatha's response.
- 15.3 Think of Mama's statement: "He finally come into his manhood today, didn't he? Kind like a rainbow after the rain ..." (107)

Conclusion

Drama as a mode of representation captures human experiences in ways that are often different from other genres of literature, such as poetry, short stories and the novel that you encounter in this module. When you study a play, it is important to take cognizance of how it creates meanings. Pay attention to its structure – how the plot unfolds and unravels the themes that are couched in it. The themes that Hansberry explores in her play are not entirely new to African American literature, but it is how she effectively appropriates the form of drama to order them, that renders them timeless and continue to earn her world-wide recognition. (Remember Langston Hughes's poem, the epigraph of the play; it is evidence of the broader African American literary tradition which influences what Hansberry writes about.)

A summary of Unit 2's core ideas:

- Lorraine Hansberry's play looks at the issue of *housing* in the United States of America at a time of heightened racial discrimination.
- It puts on stage the idea that people's *dreams* (for instance, with Mama Younger's ambition to own a spacious home and Walter Lee Younger's dream of financial emancipation) cannot be postponed forever in spite of racial discrimination.
- It crucially looks at economic disparities in the United States of America regarding *intra-communal class differences* (George Murchison and Walter Lee Younger's positions).
- It also looks at how *economic disparities between races* account for better or poorer living conditions and how this affects housing itself.
- The play interrogates the need for African American communities or families to *better themselves* and the sometimes legal challenges and obstacles that were placed in their way.
- The play anticipates the strong *feminist* movement that would later sweep the world (consider, for example, Beneatha Younger) and the emancipation of women in all sectors of society.
- There is a strong *gender* thread in the play in which differing ambitions clash within the same gender (when comparing the need and wishes of Beneatha and Ruth Younger, for instance).
- The play questions the *stereotypes* that African American men do not care about their relationships, that they lack ambition, and that they do not dream of a better future for their children (in the character of Walter Lee Younger, for instance).

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LEARNING UNIT 3

Seven Steps to Heaven by Fred Khumalo



This unit was compiled by Prof K Masemola

INTRODUCTION

A hearty welcome to this unit, in which identity and stereotyping are made manifest. Through a study of Fred Khumalo's *Seven Steps to Heaven* (2007), this unit aims to show you how a postcolonial and/or transitional literary text can be interpreted against the background of the social, historical, political and personal circumstances in which it was written. In this unit you will see that a literary text can reflect the zeitgeist of the period in which it was written. Set in the exciting but uncertain period beginning in 1991, the year after the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, the novel will enable you to see how literature is employed both to express feeling and to comment on broader society.

Literary expression is a function of representation, which means that a particular kind of reality or events are deliberately portrayed using or resisting certain textual structures to enhance the novel's varied meanings. A novel such as *Seven Steps to Heaven* uses certain forms of expression and stylistic elements and references beyond the text to construct a form of reality. Narrative techniques are crafted and laid out to present and map out a certain world or situation. Thus is laid bare – or even rendered complex – the personal context of larger social themes in the novel.

Learning unit outcomes

This learning unit has four specific outcomes, namely:

- **Outcome 1:** Students understand key characteristics of identity and stereotyping in the post-apartheid novel.
- **Outcome 2:** Students understand the deployment of specific forms of representation in *Seven Steps to Heaven*.
- **Outcome 3:** Students engage critically with literary and contemporaneous critical texts on gender and masculinities through analysis and synthesis.
- **Outcome 4:** Students present sustained arguments about texts, with arguments substantiated from text and context, in accordance with appropriate academic conventions, in particular in academic essays.

Background

Seven Steps to Heaven preoccupies itself with the problem of identity, showing how complex this can be. Using an image such as that of making soup or the peeling onion, it depicts the complexity of characters associated with the protagonist Sizwe Dube, who is a talented but strange writer. Although Sizwe defines his identity by asserting that he is a successful writer, his writing defines him through others. For instance, he successfully writes as someone else: Vusi Mntungwa, author of *Ramu the Hermit*. Writing as someone else is often described as a *nom de plume*, “an assumed name used by a writer instead of their real name; a pen-name” (www.oxford dictionaries.com).

Sizwe also has a childhood friend Thulani Tembe, who haunts him later in his adult life. The haunting spectacle is expressed through anguish when he looks at the mirror and sees Thulani in it, thus becoming part of him: a part of Sizwe’s split self. Ordinarily Thulani would be understood as an alter ego. The latter is the other self within the persona of Sizwe Dube, distinct from the normal personality. This complicates his identity as it evidences a layered personality. This is also known as multiplicity, that is, the protagonist’s persona has many facets.

As the title of the novel suggests, there are seven steps, or stepping stones, that, in oriental religion, lead you close to God. This is a spiritual journey; yet given the life devoted to bacchanalian enjoyment we could say that the title is deliberately ironic, because the novel deliberately attends to secular matters. Notably, the title could be borrowed from Miles Davies’ 1963 album, that is, *Seven Steps to Heaven*. This is an interesting trend, for another of Fred Khumalo’s novels, *Bitches Brew*, borrows its title from a Miles Davies album of the same name. Through such references, therefore, we establish that music has a role in defining the setting and the meanings that are embedded in the context of the social action of the novel.

What could the significance of this be?

Through the Hillbrow setting where we are introduced to Sizwe at the beginning of the novel, we discover that music is also used to make a statement, as when there is the blaring sound of Harold Melvin’s “Wake Up Everybody” (6) in Sis Joy’s Oasis in Hillbrow Heights. Later on we also see the significance of the song “Paradise Road” as it echoes through a shebeen of the same name in the Exclusive Park setting of Sizwe’s upbringing in KwaZulu-Natal. This is not simple intertextuality, where one text migrates across another medium. These songs have meaning and an intention to both inspire and offer solace to patrons. As Sizwe the writer is an alcoholic, we are able to understand why time and time again he gets to hear these songs that, from the narrator’s keen observation of his environment, imbue a new meaning to his life. Songs add a non-physical dimension to the setting in this case. They are like the score of a movie.

myUNISA Activity 1

The myUnisa site for ENG2603 provides “Discussion Forums” interactive functions that allow you to access “[General Subject Related Discussions](#)” by clicking on a tab. Click on this and find “*Seven Steps to Heaven* academic discussions”. Use the space provided in the message box to write two short **paragraphs** in which you explain how the novel’s characterisation is simple or complex as far as the representation of racial identity and gender are concerned. The rule of thumb is that reasons from the text must always be provided in support of your answer. Your

written responses in the form of paragraphs will be monitored by lecturers at least once a week. You may also respond to the paragraphs of other students.

Activity 1

Read through the very first chapter, which is only seven pages long, and determine whether the many faces of Sizwe Dube say something about his being multiple in terms of identity.

Feedback on activity 1

As a writer, Sizwe Dube experiences writer's block and, as a result, takes heavily to the bottle. As he contemplates the lack of progress on his book he says "Sometimes I think I am one of three people; sometimes I think I am Thulani, or Thulani lives in me ... sometimes I think I am the third one" (2007:6). Besides this uncertainty, there is another sense in which he attributes his determination and resilience to his Zuluness. "This here Zulu boy will show you what he's made of" (2007:7).

Further notes on multiple identity:

- Sizwe Dube's uncertainty about who he is ironically confirms his multiple identities.
- *Seven Steps to Heaven* involves a writer and a book that is difficult to finish. More than that, it shows the presence of "a book within a book", whereas there is likewise a Thulani "author" who lives in him (2007:6).
- When Sis Joy exhorts Sizwe Dube to finish the novel, she not only encourages him but also taunts him through words that cast doubt on his sexual identity. She asks: "Where are your balls, man! Don't be a fokken moffie. Stand up and be proud like a real manne, you donder se jelly-kneed moffie" (2007:7). Casting being gay in a negative light, i.e., something Sizwe should *not be* if he is to accomplish anything, makes one wonder what this bias has to do with anything. It turns out that Sizwe Dube, as we shall see later, is successful as a writer and also exhibits gay or at least bisexual behaviour. This adds a new dimension to being multiple.

The ability to discern commonplaces about stereotypes goes hand in hand with a sense of knowing that identities are not fixed or stable: at one point Sizwe is himself; at another he is Thulani Tembe or Vusi Mntungwa. Also, for a while he is sexually involved in heterosexual sex with Nolitha, which is replaced by an intense relationship with Patrick McGuinness, the white student he meets on the first day at university. Sizwe is ever changing. He exhibits multiplicity.

Activity 2

Consider the passage below and comment on the relationship between Sizwe and Thulani:

“You are dead. Now you come here bothering me. Who do you think I am? God? You think I can bring you from the dead?”

No, it's you that are dead. You are dead before dying. You are a nobody because there is nothing that marks you out as you. You are always trying to be somebody. You are always living in the shadow of other people's words, ideas beliefs. That's why you are here. It is not that you love me, that you wanted to empathise with me as they pumped bullets into me. You are here because without me you can't be you.” (2007:41)

Feedback on activity 2

In the above passage the imaginary conversation between Thulani and Sizwe confirms that the man in the mirror is not Thulani but himself, framed through his alter ego. At face value, Sizwe is somewhat delusional. Yet the conversation shows that his identity is split and unstable. In order to fully understand this, Sizwe tells the barman:

“Ideas aside. Words are a sword. Cut the abyss open. So we can plunge together in the dark abyss. You. Me. Him. The oneness of two in three.” (41)

Sizwe's identity is complex and multiple, as “The oneness of two in three” suggests. Further to that complexity, throughout the novel there are signature phrases that uphold such layered multiplicity. Let us take one example. On page 28, Sizwe remembers his mother's aphorism.

An aphorism is a wise and memorable thought, usually expressed in an unforgettable and impressively clever form.

“People are like onions, his mother used to say, they come in layers. ‘When I was young, if I made soup and I was chopping onions’ – that's what she would be thinking. Layers, everyone has layers. You have to see them in yourself and others”.

This aphorism about layers adds to the sense of being multiple in this novel. We cannot, as readers, understand Sizwe the protagonist without his connection to others; we have to take a journey into the interiority of the writer. He finds recourse in this aphorism, as in page 38, when he wants to defend originality yet recognises that “these were no longer his stories” (2007:38).

Activity 3

In two paragraphs or so, explain the relationship between Sizwe and Thulani, and compare it with the one between their fathers.

Feedback on activity 3

The relationships are ever-changing: from childhood camaraderie and experimentation with sex and liquor to a serious re-evaluation of relationships with their fathers and, especially, the women in their lives. Both of them are intelligent and have a flair for writing that leaves us wondering whether their attitude to sex is not inconsistent with their obvious intelligence. Sizwe uses Nolitha for sexual gratification. In a strange way, Rev Tembe and his father have sexual dalliances with Sis Lovey from the Paradise Road shebeen, too.

Are there any interesting parallels? This kind of thinking is indicative of masculinities, which is a part of patriarchy. In other words, masculinities – the attitude and practices of defining manhood in terms of power and undue domination over women – reflect the priorities of patriarchy. In the next learning unit on *Nervous Conditions* you will find a comprehensive description of what counts as patriarchy.

For now, suffice to say that patriarchy is a system where men dominate society, especially women, through power that disguises itself as “natural” when it is really culturally constructed and imposed.

myUNISA Activity 2

So far we have seen how masculinities find expression in sexual relations where women gratify men at their (women’s) expense. Do you find that there are women who resist sexual exploitation? Write a paragraph in the myUnisa discussion forum detailing resistance to exploitation under “*Seven Steps to Heaven* discussion forums”.

myUNISA Activity 3

Visit <http://scholar.google.com> and enter “Fred Khumalo Seven Steps to Heaven” in the search bar, with a view to sourcing articles on this novel. It is important that you should be able to source different perspectives on the novel. You should be able to classify their arguments and compare at least two articles. Make a list of at least three relevant articles and post them on the myUnisa discussion forum.

Activity 4

What are the implications of reading the text and character as the “oneness of two in three”? Use the space below to explain fully.

Feedback on activity 4

“The oneness of two in three” complicates characterisation as it defies a simple and straightforward character development. In other words, an element of doubt is introduced to the narrative inasmuch as the protagonist is multiple. Clearly this allows for the undermining of stereotypes too. This means that stereotyping is not allowed throughout. This multiplicity is part of a narrative strategy of resistance and defiance.

Activity 5

How effective is the aphorism about onions in helping readers to understand multiple and entwined identities, especially considering the relationship between Sizwe and Patrick?

Feedback on activity 5

The use of the aphorism is significant as it shows the many sides of characters. These sides are facets you discover as you “peel” the onion to reveal character depth.

myUNISA Activity 4

Issues of bias and discrimination against blacks and gays remain prominent and relevant. In the discussion forum “*Seven Steps to Heaven* academic discussions” post your thoughts about racial and sexual stereotyping in the novel.

Activity 6

The mirror at the bar has a symbolic role in explaining the identities of Sizwe Dube and Thulani Tembe. Discuss the recurrence of the mirror whenever the protagonist contemplates his merits as a writer. How does it express his identity?

Feedback on activity 6

The mirror allows Sizwe literally to stare himself in the face. While he sees Thulani in it, the mirror lays bare his soul and brings to view his confrontation with himself. One needs to understand that it is a device that allows us entry to his psyche, which is clearly split. The “reality” of the mirror, however, suggests itself as delusion. As Sizwe looks in the mirror, he sees Thulani haunting and taunting him, which scares the barman who witnesses his rants.

Can we proceed to say that there is an alternative reality in the mirror, such that it functions more and more as an oracle through which he goes to the inner recesses of his soul? Read the novel and see if you can find positive aspects in the confrontation with the mirror.

Stereotyping as both symptom and critique of bias in *Seven Steps to Heaven*.

Whereas the sexual exploits and drinking sprees of Reverend Tembe unseat our expectations of “a holier than thou” predisposition, it is stereotyping that renders characters controversial.

Stereotyping, simply put, is a set of false and often negative assumptions about an individual or group that is taken as natural, often disadvantaging the said individual or group.

For example, in Chapter 24 of the novel we find an encounter between Patrick McGuinness and Sizwe Dube on the latter’s first day at university. Patrick McGuinness, clad in baggy jeans and a Lakers shirt, speaks to him in a pseudo-black American accent. He uses expressions such as “Yo, bro, I’m talking to you, huh” (141) in one part of their conversation. In another, he says “You seem lost bro”. Sizwe disapproves of the condescending manner in which he is spoken to. He is aware of the stereotype that blacks do not deserve to be spoken to in normal and equal terms. The stereotype is that Sizwe the student is deficient in standard language use. More than that Patrick McGuinness is patronising him, asking him “And what is your moniker, dude?” (2007:141).

Activity 7

Do you agree with the assertion that Patrick McGuinness is merely being friendly, or is he patronising when he uses non-standard English? Please argue with reference to the text as you agree or disagree.

Feedback on activity 7

Patrick switches between the pseudo-black American accent and South African English, depending on the authority he asserts. Speaking of his black girlfriend, Thembi, Patrick seems to have no sensitivity to what Sizwe thinks:

‘You see, Thembi’s a good bitch, but ...’

‘Why are you calling her a bitch?’

That jolted Patrick. Then he smiled, ‘Yo, nigger, where you from, huh?’ He continued smiling, pointing an accusing finger at Sizwe. ‘Nah, nah, nigger you from the sticks; you don’t dig the lingo’.

‘Man, don’t call me a nigger’ he raised his voice, attracting the attention of the other white people in the queue (2007:142).

Patrick patronises and offends. Yet he tries to reach out to blacks, dressing like Afro-Americans and addressing blacks in a way that controversially allows him, unlike many other white students, to enter their world. The words “bitch” and “nigger” are not exactly terms of endearment, especially when used by a white person in a country with a sad and bitter apartheid past. Studying towards a Masters in Irish Literature, Patrick’s use of certain words is deliberate. He may want to cross over and use the words “nigger” and “bitch” as in the American context, where these index close affection.

He proudly explains:

“You see, me, the darkies don’t like me because I get on well with the black dolls. The honkies don’t like me either ‘cos they say I’m letting them down, trying to be black, always voting with the black students at SRC meetings. Me, I go to hip-hop when my white brothers are getting high and puking and smashing each other with baseball bats at their rowdy rock sessions” (2007:143).

Activity 8

What do the following words mean to you in a South African context? Are they always offensive?

- Darkies
 - Honkies
 - Nigger
 - Bitch
 - Dolls
-

Feedback on activity 8

Words operate in a particular context with particular intentions. Patrick seems clearly not to be racist in his attitude. In fact, he inverts the normal use of these words such that he blunts their racist edge. Note that these words are not used in anger and tend to be neutral in attitude instead of being denigrating. The way he describes his “white brothers” as “honkies” suggest a degree of humour, too. There is a clever intention to exploit racial stereotypes. He renders these racially explosive words neutral and so

undermines stereotypes. Do you think that if these words were used by Sizwe Dube their meaning would be different?

It is noteworthy that when Sizwe learns of the review of his manuscript “The Oneness of Two in Three” by Sheree le Roux, the senior editor, without his permission, he cries foul and uses foul language, too. Neither impressed nor appeased by the prospect of the novel being published “like yesterday” with huge financial gains, Sizwe’s explosive reaction is underscored by his language:

“That fucking manuscript is sacred, not to be touched by anyone, not a publisher, not God himself. The first time I saw you I realized you were a fake, a patronising piece of shit trying to talk black! A fucking manipulator. You whites are all the same. Every time we give you a hand of friendship, you chop it off. Fucking patronising pieces of shit” (2007:158).

These are choice words from one angry gay lover to another in a scene of supposed betrayal, before they “kissed and exchanged pleasantries over coffee” (2007:158), a far cry from Patrick being told “You moffie bitch!” in exasperation (2007:157). The use of discriminatory language is in two directions: veering towards racism on the one hand and self-deprecating homophobia on the other. The fact that they kiss and make up does not necessarily mean that Sizwe and Patrick do not have moments of weakness or lapses, where invidious stereotypes reign supreme.

The narrator places readers in a position where, in retrospect, we realise that there is a deliberate play on stereotyping with a corresponding language that seeks to upset the addressee whilst ironically undermining the racial and gender stereotypes. Since they are an interracial gay couple they could probably not reinforce negative stereotypes about gay masculinities, for instance.

Activity 9

Describe in very clear grammatical expression the ambivalent use of biased language, considering for example the manner in which Patrick McGuinness complains about his then girlfriend, Thembi, at the point where he blurts out: “She is so full of herself, you’d think her pussy is made of gold” (2007:149).

Feedback on activity 9

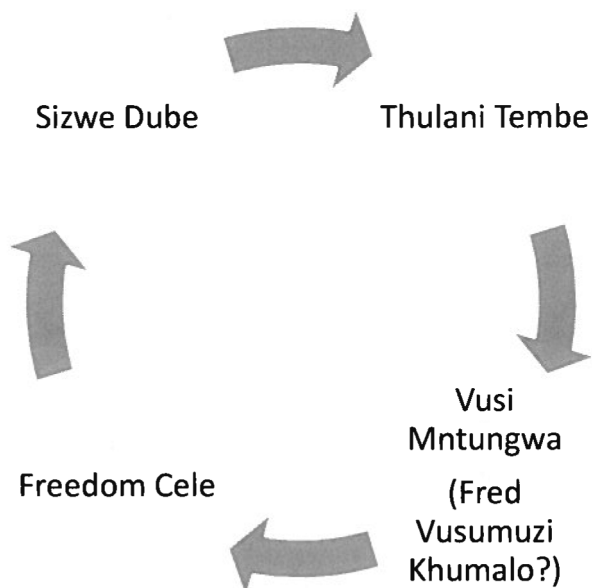
There are moments in the novel that show the desperation of dealing with false masks. Just as Sizwe berates Patrick for relapsing into male prostitution, Patrick is upset that he is being used by Thembi as a trophy white boyfriend as well as a constant supplier of unaffordable outfits for countless funerals. Thinking about how meaningless the relationship was, he finds recourse in language that may seem out-and-out discriminatory yet, upon close scrutiny, has elements of humour. Take as an example the “pussy made of gold” (2007:149)

Does this generally reflect attitudes to women in the novel, you may ask. Think about Nolitha, who makes good later in life having had a threesome with Sizwe and Thulani that resulted in an embarrassing sexual infection. Similarly Sis Lovey also has a threesome with Rev Tembe and Mandla Dube. Then there is Sis Joy, the shebeen queen who encourages Sizwe but also lambasts him about the alcoholism which she directly fuels. What about the white women? Are they invisible or too virtuous to mention alongside women like Thembi?

Not at all. We are introduced to a very pretty Sheree le Roux, who is the book editor at the publishing house. She makes an impression on Sizwe as she wears an unbuttoned floral shirt showing a sexy bra beneath, a very short black skirt and high black stilettos (2007:168). She makes a revealing statement about the aesthetics of self-representation, too:

“A lot of men who know that I am a dyke are always amazed about the way I dress. Hahaha! They expect us to dress like men, as many people expect moffies to dress and behave like women, with all those spaghetti writs and feminine intonations: Ooooh, you look gorgeous, doll!” (2007:169).

Sheree as a lesbian defies stereotypes as she plots the confusion about the unnamed author of the definitive *The Oneness of Two in Three* as a marketing ploy. She insists, as in her unconventional sartorial code to Sizwe: “Let’s do a postmodern thing” (2007:174). No language is stable, no sartorial code denotative, no author knowable: Freedom Cele and Thulani Tembe, Vusi Mntungwa and Sizwe Dube – these are but one person in a layered multiplicity, as discovered photographs show. When Sizwe is arrested in Zimbabwe as being part of the dogs of war, he is in possession of Thulani Tembe’s passport. It is a curious fact that the name Vusi Mntungwa is derived from Fred Khumalo’s actual name. “Vusi” is Fred Khumalo’s middle name, while “Mntungwa” refers to the Khumalo clan name normally used during ceremonies to refer to the extraordinary deeds of a common founding ancestor. The author is also present in his work of fiction. It is indeed, a “postmodern thing”, as Sheree le Roux would have it.



To add to this, there is a discovery in the courtroom by a psychiatrist and writing experts of various documents, “including those attributed to the personas he had used” (2007:208). His defence lawyer, Dries van Wyk, observes that his client keeps calling himself Freedom Cele. He strategically relents and says to the Zimbabwean State Advocate, Simba Chigumburi: “Counsel, I don’t know what’s going on. But I think the identities of the two men have been fused so much that the men themselves do not know who they are, or who they want to be.” (2007:208). Similarly, as the novel draws to a close, Sizwe insists from his cell that the part of him called Thulani, who in turn calls himself Freedom Cele, “must die”. The author must die. Thus closes the novel.

Conclusion

The activities in this Learning Unit have shown how the aphorism borrowed from Sizwe’s mother is adopted by him as an oft-repeated trope throughout the novel to show multiplicity regarding gender (including masculinities), representation, race and resistance to patriarchal codes through defying stereotypes. In many places you should have noted how surface representation is disrupted by an almost abrupt interjection that suggests the peeling of onions or the many layers of people, whenever Sizwe cites – often out of the blue – “if I make soup” as though it is a mantra of layered multiplicity and split identity.

A summary of Unit 3’s core ideas

- The book shows how representation is complex, particularly in the depiction of relationships usually regulated by stereotypes of race, gender and sexuality, even rurality and urbanity.
- It shows how the protagonist’s identity is layered, expressed throughout *Seven Steps to Heaven* as a multiplicity.
- The use of aphorisms in the narrative reveals the layered nature of characters; for example, Sizwe’s mother’s aphorism about soup and onions brings to view the multi-layered nature of what normally count as fixed categories of behaviour.
- The novel exhibits the skilful use of creative language and symbols to reinforce (and complicate) the meaning of the language. Consider for instance the repeated use of the anagram to draw a link between scrambled words like “Words kill” and “Sword kills,” and “Ideas” and “Aside”, or “Skill” and “Kills” throughout the novel. There is word play that is also paradoxically serious. The same can be said reference to reverie.
- In this novel the musical references are not simply intertextual: they form part of the setting as much as they contribute to the making of meaning – from Harold Melvin’s “Wake Up Everybody” to the famous local number “Paradise Road” by the Joy trio. The lyrics of these and many other songs in *Seven Steps to Heaven* are a pause for thought and function as mood setting, just like the musical score of a film.
- The novel’s total meaning and concerns are also articulated in the title of “a novel within a novel” namely, *The Oneness of Two in Three* apparently authored by the protagonist’s alter ego Thulani.

LEARNING UNIT 4

Nervous Conditions by Tsitsi Dangarembga



Compiled by Prof J Murray and Ms B Janari

Introduction

Welcome to this module in which we will be exploring the representation of female and male characters in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*. Although we will be considering the important male characters, our focus will be on how the women exercise choice and resistance in a context of patriarchal oppression. In order to do this, we will be using a number of key concepts, including "gender," "race," "patriarchy," "identity," "representation" and "resistance". Over the course of this learning unit, we will be defining these concepts and we will learn how to apply them to a reading of the novel.

Learning unit outcomes

This learning unit has four specific outcomes, namely:

Outcome 1: Students read a novel with comprehension and critical engagement.

Outcome 2: Students can write well-structured paragraphs in which they critically discuss Tsitsi Dangarembga's creative choices in *Nervous Conditions*.

Outcome 3: Students understand that representation is political and that it shapes literary texts.

Outcome 4: Students can meaningfully employ the concepts of gender, race, patriarchy, identity, and resistance in their analysis of *Nervous Conditions*.

Background

Whenever we read any text, we must start by paying close attention to the **setting**. Remember that a setting has two aspects, namely a spatial and a temporal dimension. The spatial dimension refers to the geographical space in which a text is set, while the temporal one refers to the time period.

myUNISA Activity 1

On the myUnisa site for ENG2603, there is a "Discussion Forums" function. Under this tab, you will see a heading called "General Subject Related Discussions." When you click on this, you

will see a topic called “*Nervous Conditions* academic discussions.” In the message box, write a **paragraph** in which you explain whether you found the novel easy or difficult to read and understand. Remember to provide reasons for your answer. Your paragraphs will be monitored by the lecturers once a week. You may also respond to the paragraphs of other students.

Activity 1

Look at the first page of the novel and note any clues about the spatial and temporal setting. In other words, look for dates and place names.

Feedback on activity 1

The first date we notice is 1968 and we are told about a mission school which is “twenty miles from the village, to the west, in the direction of Umtali town” (Dangarambga, 1988:1). The country in which the novel is set is Rhodesia. When Rhodesia gained independence from British rule in 1980, the name was changed to Zimbabwe. When you write about *Nervous Conditions*, you need to refer to Rhodesia. It would not make sense to talk about the setting as Zimbabwe, since the country was called Rhodesia at the time in which the novel is set.

Further notes on setting

- Rhodesia was a British colony and as was the case with other colonies, the colonial power made its mark in many spheres of the indigenous people’s lives. Villagers were moved to less fertile areas to make way for farms, cattle ranches and massive plantations of gum trees.
- *Nervous Conditions* hardly ever refers to any specific political event. The novelist seems less concerned with describing national political developments and more interested in the effects of the political context on the lives of people in a black community under white colonial rule.
- However, some very specific dates are recorded in the text, and these help us to place the novel in an exact historical context.
- The dates in question range from 1965 when Babamukuru and his family return from England – an event which precedes the main action of the novel – to 1971 when Tambu, at the age of sixteen, enters form one (grade eight) at the Sacred Heart Convent.
- These dates are important: they embrace the bitterest period of white hostility to black liberation. 1965, the date of Babamukuru’s return, is historically important.
- Following the freedom and independence of Northern Rhodesia, the government of Ian Smith declared itself Unilaterally Independent from Great Britain.
- From this period on, diehard white Rhodesians elected to maintain control of the country at all costs: repressive measures were introduced by the Rhodesian government, sanctions were imposed by the world community, and war, involving the uprooting and loss of many lives, continued right until 1980 when finally liberation was achieved.

Once you know where and when the novel is set, it is useful to look at the **narrator**.

Activity 2

Read the first paragraph of the novel. Who is telling the story? What do you notice about the person telling the story? Which other characters are mentioned by the narrator?

Feedback on activity 2

The first word of the novel is “I” and this tells us that we have a first person narrator. Later in the novel we learn that her name is Tambudzai, but she is mostly called by her shortened name of Tambu. We learn that the narrator had a brother who died when she was thirteen and that she was not sorry about this. This should immediately prompt you to ask yourself why she was not sorry. She also mentions characters called Lucia, Maiguru and Nyasha.

Tambu’s account of her early youth is autobiographical. The inclusion of exact historical dates, specific place names and cultural realities in the former Rhodesia makes the story seem more “authentic.” We have the impression that whatever is recounted is based on a woman’s first-hand experience. The story which Tambu narrates seems to be a faithful account of her own youthful experience. Note, however, that the young girl’s interpretation and judgement of events is not necessarily reliable: what she says is mediated (affected) by her own perspective, context and interests. This brings us to the concept of **representation**.

Representation means words or signs that take the place of something else. It is an act of naming and forming connections related to reality. In literary criticism, representation has three definitions:

- To resemble something
- To stand in for something or someone
- To re-present meaning

We should always remember that representations “are not just a matter of mirrors, reflections, key-holes. Somebody is making them, and somebody is looking at them, through a complex array of means and conventions (Kappeler, 1986:3). In other words, representations are not neutral and they are not direct reflections of reality. They are constructions and they are ideologically and politically loaded.

Activity 3

How do you think this novel would have been different if Tambu’s brother, Nhamo, or her uncle, Babamukuru, had been the narrator?

Feedback on activity 3

Do you think Nhamo or Babamukuru would have been as concerned as Tambu about the fact that boys are given educational opportunities before girls? Do you think they would have encouraged the reader to wonder whether it was fair that Babamukuru make decisions about the money his wife earns?

Images of control, and women's desire to escape from that control, are introduced in the first paragraph of the novel as Tambu asserts that her story is about "[her] escape and Lucia's; about [her] mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion" (Dangarembga, 1988:1). As a critical reader, you should ask what these characters are trapped by and what they are rebelling against or seeking to escape.

Patriarchy is an important theme in the novel. The text suggests that one of the reasons why Tambu and her brother are not treated equally is the patriarchal system.

Patriarchy refers to a system of practices and structures in which men have more power than women and are able to use their power to dominate and oppress women.

Patriarchal distributions of power affect all the major female characters. Like many Western and African cultures, the Shona culture is patriarchal in nature. Men make and implement the rules; women obey. From a very early age, children are sensitised to their roles in society with the boys being taught that they are stronger, more intelligent and more important than girls and women, and that females need to be looked after. These power relations manifest themselves in all aspects of social life. Therefore, when Nhamo asks Tambu, "Don't you know I am the one who has to go to school?" (Dangarembga, 1988:21) he is expressing a belief he has been raised with, namely that he is entitled to all advantages because he is a man. He has not been exposed to anything different. When Tambu asks Nhamo why she cannot go to school, he says: "It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl." It is at this point that Tambu stops being concerned about him: "My concern for my brother died an unobtrusive death" (21). Her unexpected opening sentence in the novel, that she was not sorry when her brother died, is directly linked to her resistance to the prevailing norms of patriarchal and sexist behavior in her society. Nhamo has been socialised into a system that is both sexist and patriarchal and he continues to entrench those behaviours and beliefs in his relationship with Tambu: he sabotages her efforts to go back to school by deliberately stealing her maize cobs that she had planted to get enough money to go to school, and he deliberately gets Tambu and Netsai to fetch some of his luggage from the nearby shops just to make them do things for him.

Gender is a social construction. This means that particular societies expect women and men to fulfil certain roles and exhibit certain characteristics. In other words, women are expected to behave in traditionally feminine ways while men are expected to behave in traditionally masculine ways.

What do we mean when we say that gender is a social construction?

“The social construction of gender takes place through the workings of ideology. Ideology is that system of beliefs and assumptions – unconscious, unexamined, invisible – which represents ‘the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence ...’; but it is also a system of practices that informs every aspect of daily life – *the clothes* we wear, the machines we invent, the pictures we paint, *the words we use* ... it authorizes its beliefs and practices as ‘universal’ and ‘natural’, presenting ‘woman’ not as a cultural construct but as eternally and everywhere the same” (Greene and Kahn, 1985:2–3).

myUNISA Activity 2

We have now discussed a number of the characters in the novel. Are there any of the characters you can relate to? In other words, are there some characters whose actions and feelings you find easier to understand than those of others? Write a paragraph in the *myUnisa* discussion forum (in the topic called “*Nervous Conditions* academic discussions”) in which you respond to this question.

myUNISA Activity 3

On the *myUnisa* site for ENG2603, there is a tab called “Additional resources”. When you click on this, you will see a folder labelled “Useful links”. Here you will find a link (<http://www.wmich.edu/dialogues/texts/nervousconditions.html>) to a discussion of the novel that is hosted by the Western Michigan University. Browse through this website for interesting comments on the novel and its context.

Activity 4

Below are a list of activities and characteristics. In the space next to each one, write “woman” or “man,” depending on which gender comes to mind first when you see the activity or characteristic.

Preparing food _____

Taking care of children _____

Mowing the lawn _____

Being the family breadwinner _____

Wearing trousers _____

Wearing dresses _____

Being rational _____

Being emotional _____

Being aggressive _____

Being nurturing _____

Working as a surgeon _____

Working as a nurse _____

Feedback on activity 4

Many people associate domestic tasks, emotional behaviour and caring professions with women, while outdoor tasks, working in the public sphere and rational thinking are associated with men. However, none of these connections are innate (something that someone is born with). Rather, they are social constructions. This is what we mean when we say that gender, or femininity and masculinity, is a social construction.

Activity 5

Reflect on your own life and think about examples where your gender determined your life experiences. For instance, if you are a woman, were you raised to like pink clothes and play with dolls? If you are a man, are you expected to fix the car and change the light bulbs? Did gender expectations affect your career choices? Does your gender influence the clothes you choose to wear?

Feedback on activity 5

Think about your answers above and then consider how your choices and experiences might have been different if you were a different gender.

myUNISA Activity 4

Patriarchy is as relevant in contemporary South African society as it is in the context of *Nervous Conditions*. Write a paragraph in the myUnisa discussion forum (in the topic called “*Nervous Conditions* academic discussions”) in which you respond to this statement. Remember that you may agree or disagree with the statement but you must provide reasons for your opinions.

Activity 6

Who is the central patriarch in *Nervous Conditions* and how does his power shape the lives of the female characters?

Feedback on activity 6

Go through the novel and try to identify examples of how Babamukuru wields patriarchal power over the different female characters in *Nervous Conditions*. Babamukuru is represented as a man with considerable power. He is well-educated and he is the headmaster at a mission school. His status and financial resources allow him to make important decisions for the members of his extended family. Tambu remembers that it was her “uncle’s idea that Nhamo should go to school at the mission” so that he could have a career that would enable him to lift his “branch of the family out of the squalor in which [they] were living” (Dangarembga, 1988:4). He seems to assume that, because Nhamo is a boy, he should receive an education and take responsibility for the financial welfare of the family. Simply because Tambu is a girl, Babamukuru does not even consider that she might be better suited to provide for the

family. It is only after Nhamo's death that Babamukuru offers her the opportunity to go to school. Yet he still expects that she should conform to gendered expectations of what a woman's role should be when he tells her that an education will allow her to assist "the family before she goes into her husband's home" (Dangarembga, 1988:56). He assumes that, as a girl, her destiny is to become a wife and to join her husband's home in much the same way as Maiguru joined his home.

Even though Maiguru is as highly educated as Babamukuru, she has none of his power. She is expected to be first and foremost a wife and a mother. In her deference to Babamukuru, Maiguru is no different from the other women in the family. When Babamukuru finds Lucia a job, Maiguru must join her and Tambu's mother on their knees in gratitude. Kneeling in front of another person is a powerful image of submission. Lucia "knelt in front of Babamukuru, energetically clapping her hands" (Dangarembga 1988:160) and insisting that they "could not survive without [him]" (161). After Tambu's mother "knelt worshipping beside Lucia," Tambu notes that "it was Maiguru's turn to take her place on the floor" (Dangarembga 1988:161). At this stage, Tambu is still "so impressed with Babamukuru [that she] could not stop admiring him" (Dangarembga, 1988:161).

Earlier in the novel we said that Tambu was the narrator. We could say even that the central focus of this book is on the **identity** of Tambu as she struggles to make sense of her life in the various contexts she experiences, and struggles to understand who she is. Both the very first and the last paragraphs of the book suggest that this story explores the contexts within which Tambu finds herself:

... I shall not apologise but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion – Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful (Dangarembga, 1988:1).

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it began (Dangarembga, 1988:204).

Below is an extract from an article about *Nervous Conditions*. To help you find your way through it, we suggest you take a dictionary and look up the meanings of the words listed here if they are unfamiliar to you. You should do this before looking at the extract.

Activity 7

Find the definitions of the following terms: genteel; insipid; categorical, eclipsed; enigma; linear; coherent; elusive; composite; enervated; unified.

A critic's view

One literary critic has this to say about the novel. You may find some of her ideas difficult to follow. However, you may also find her perspective interesting, even if, for any reason, you do not agree with her. After reading it, look at the next box, which contains a short summary and a discussion of this extract.

Tambu describes herself as a young girl wanting to find another self; with her uncle's guidance at the mission school, she "expected to find another self, a clean, well-groomed genteel self who could not have been bred, could not have survived on the homestead" (58–59). ... Tambu's self-conscious search for an identity reveals the complexities of the "I" position. She sees herself growing insipid and tentative at the mission school; her "concrete and categorical" self from her younger days is partially eclipsed as she attempts to understand the enigma that is her cousin Nyasha (75). For Tambu, Nyasha is that small part of herself which is adventurous and explorative; everything about Nyasha spoke of alternatives that could wreck Tambu's linear plans for her education and for a clear-cut, wholly unambiguous sense of identity. The myth of attaining a coherent sense of self that Tambu sets out to find becomes ever more elusive as she becomes intimately and intricately involved with her cousin, who was the first person Tambu became fond of and "of whom I did not wholeheartedly approve" (78). Tambu's struggle for self-identity evolves into an awareness of her ... complexity. She comes to sense that her identity is a composite of shifting selves; she is not only obedient, hard-working, ... she is also adventurous, rebellious, strong-willed in her enervated position as daughter, cousin, niece, schoolgirl, confidante and self. Tambu's narration is that process of recognition that Trinh Minh-ha explains in *Woman Native Other*: " 'I' is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. 'I' is, itself *infinite* layers. ... Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain and mend, [such] categories [of self] always leak" (94).

McWilliams, Sally. 1991. "Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions: At the Crossroads of Feminism and Postcolonialism." *World Literature Written in English* 31(1):103–112.

myUNISA Activity 5

If you are interested in the rest of the article from which this extract is taken, you may read it on myUnisa under the eReserves.

What does this critic think about Tambu?

- Sally McWilliams says that Tambu wants to find another identity, a new self. (We should ask ourselves, though, how her new self will be different from her old self. You might find it useful to make notes for yourself about this.)
- She also believes that "Tambu's self-conscious search for an identity reveals the complexities of the 'I' position." She feels that Tambu looks for a "wholly unambiguous sense of identity" but finds that this is impossible because it is a "myth" (specifically, a "myth of attaining a coherent sense of self"). McWilliams thinks that Tambu discovers that her identity and her ideas about herself (her "sense of self") become complicated when she discovers that she can both like and dislike

someone at the same time. Nyasha causes Tambu to feel contradictory emotions and this leads her to see that her own life can contain contradictions. Tambu comes to see that her own identity could contain characteristics that are just as contradictory and complicated as Nyasha's behaviour and as her feelings about Nyasha. A "coherent sense of self" is sometimes difficult because a person's behaviour and reactions to situations are not always predictable and do not always seem to make sense in the light of other things you know about that person. If, like Tambu, you are interested in thinking about your own identity, you frequently discover that there are parts of your life which do not fit neatly or in a linear fashion with other parts. Instead, you find that you are a "composite," or made up of various parts.

McWilliams compares this with the ideas of another critic, named Trinh Minh-ha. She says that what Tambu recognises about herself is what Minh-ha discusses in her academic writing about gender and postcoloniality. This recognition is that any "I" is not fixed and that it is not useful to think about identity in terms of "true" and "false." In other words, someone's identity should be thought of as a collection of different aspects all affected by the events and contexts which he or she experiences. There might not actually be a "true self" under a layer of "false selves," but instead all the various aspects and characteristics might together form the "self," the identity, of that person.

Activity 8

In the space below, write a paragraph in which you discuss how Tambu tries to escape from various types of oppression over the course of the novel.

Feedback on activity 8

Remember to consider the ways in which Tambu's gender as well as her race and economic status contribute to different types of oppression.

Activity 9

In the space below, write a paragraph in which you compare Tambu and Nyasha.

Feedback on activity 9

When you compare two characters, you should consider the ways in which they are similar as well as the ways in which they differ. Tambu is completely dependent on Babamukuru's continuing goodwill as displeasing him could result in her forfeiting her chance to get an education. He never misses an opportunity to impress upon her that he was paying for her school fees, for the house she was living in and for the food she was eating. Tambu's "heart swelled with gratitude" for the "sacrifice" (Dangarembga, 1988:88) Babamukuru makes to give her these things. However, her cousin, Nyasha, refuses to be the silent and obedient daughter that her father expects her to be. When Nyasha challenges her father's authority, he is so shocked at her audacity that one could hear "his voice cracking in disbelief" (Dangarembga, 1988:85). Tambu realizes that, above all, Babamukuru expects passivity and unquestioning acceptance from a good daughter. She reflects that she "was not concerned that freedom fighters were referred to as terrorists, did not demand proof of God's existence nor did [she] think that the missionaries, along with all the other Whites in Rhodesia, ought to have stayed at home" (Dangarembga, 1988:157). It is only as "a result of these things that [she] did not think or do" that "Babamukuru thought [she] was the sort of young woman a daughter ought to be and lost no opportunity to impress this point of view upon Nyasha" (Dangarembga, 1988:157). Although Nyasha attempts to challenge her father's control, she cannot escape her relative powerlessness in his patriarchal household and she starts suffering from anorexia and bulimia. As with Tambu, he reminds her of his economic power over her: "If she doesn't want to do what I say, I shall stop providing for her – fees, clothes, food, everything" (Dangarembga, 1988:193).

Activity 10

Lucia is the most successful at achieving freedom in the novel. In the space below, make some notes in response to this statement.

Feedback on activity 10

Lucia's escape seems highly successful. Some of the factors which enable Lucia to succeed are:

- She avoids marriage, which would otherwise draw her into the patriarchal system.
- She takes advantage of her relative freedom to live according to her own wishes, even though this brings her into disrepute.
- She enjoys bodily pleasure but avoids dependence on the male. (This is brilliantly expressed in her comment on Takesure: "A woman has to live with something," she shrugged matter-of-factly. "Even if it is only a cockroach. And cockroaches are better. They are easy to chase away, isn't it?") (Dangarembga, 1988:153).

- She wins Babamukuru’s qualified respect for her forthright and outspoken manner. This suggests that, in spite of favouring the male, the community’s culture is not rigidly dogmatic. It can, therefore, accommodate an unconventional response.
- She gets Babamukuru to serve her own ends, and thus turns the patriarchal system on its head. Babamukuru says of her, “She is like a man” (Dangarembga, 1988:175)!
- Her solidarity (supportive relationship) with other women prevents her from alienating herself from her family. Note that, unlike Tambu, she enters into the spirit of the wedding, and, relying on instinct, is able to revive Tambu’s mother.

From these points it is clear that Lucia’s escape implies her freedom to act both in accordance with her conscience, and independent of patriarchal conventions. She is thus the most successful at offering **resistance** to oppression.

Activity 11

Write a paragraph in which you discuss Maiguru’s entrapment.

Feedback on activity 11

Here are some notes to help you complete this activity:

- As Maiguru is intellectually highly qualified (she has an MA degree) we might expect her to be a shining example of women’s emancipation in the novel. However, as the narrator points out right from the start, she is trapped, and, ironically, indicates the way to failure rather than success.
- She is married to a patriarchal male who has high status in the community.
- She pampers his male-ego, rather than questioning it. For example, look at this extract: “No, no, my Daddy-dear, chirped Maiguru, fussing with the dishes. ‘We were only just about to begin. But now you have come. Help yourself, my Daddy-pie!’ With this she removed the lid from the serving-dish nearest Babamukuru and put it away on the sideboard. Then she picked up a plate from the pile in front of Babamukuru and held it for him respectfully with both hands while he spooned food on to his plate” (Dangarembga, 1988:81).
- She adopts, by virtue of her advanced education and financial security, the values and habits of white culture. (Note the description of her house, daily routine, cooking routines.)
- She conceals her own inward dissatisfaction in order to keep up the image of the well-to-do black family. (It is her money which keeps Tambu at school and supports her family: the details of this are on page 172.)
- When Maiguru does rebel it is only for a few days. It does her good, but she is no match for her strong-willed husband. For example, she tells Babamukuru “I am sick of it Babawa Chido. Let me tell you I have had enough!” (Dangarembga, 1988:174). She explains her feelings to him: “And when I keep quiet you think I

am enjoying it. So today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy anymore in this house” (Dangarembga, 1988:175).

It is interesting to note that Dangarembga does not see the idea of patriarchy as explaining everything in the situations which Tambu experiences. She says that patriarchy is not a full answer to the question of why Tambu and Nhamo (her brother) are treated unequally because men in Tambu’s home context are also relatively powerless. The political situation prevailing in the former Rhodesia at the time of Tambu’s childhood is colonial, with power belonging to whites: black people, whether male or female, lacked political power and therefore patriarchy provides only half an answer in any analysis of the characters’ situations.

It is important to remember that these literary characters are often too complex to just simply say that they are “good” or bad,” or that they are “victims” or “perpetrators.”

Activity 12

Make notes in the two columns below. In the first column, write down the good things we see Babamukuru do in the novel and in the second column, write down some of the bad things he does.

Good	Bad

Now complete the table below by indicating whether Babamukuru is powerful or powerless in these situations. Make a cross in the appropriate block.

	Powerful	Powerless
While Babamukuru was studying he was also “putting in a full day’s work on the farm” (Dangaremba, 1988:19).		
The missionaries thought that Babamukuru “was a good boy, cultivatable, in the way the land was ...” (Dangaremba, 1988:19).		

Babamukuru tells Nyasha: “I expect you to do as I say. Now sit down and eat your food” (Dangaremba, 1988:85).		
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myUNISA Activity 6

Can you think of any other examples in the novel where Babamukuru is represented as powerless? Note such examples on the myUnisa discussion forum.

Look at the columns and the table above and then write a paragraph in which you offer a critical analysis of Babamukuru’s character.

Feedback on activity 12

In your paragraph you should discuss the complexity of Babamukuru’s character. In some situations we see him wielding patriarchal power, which he has because of his gender as a man. In other situations we see him disempowered because of his race as a black man. He is the perpetrator of violence against Nyasha and he oppresses his wife and other female characters. However, he is also the victim of racial oppression by the missionaries who regard him as a boy who should be grateful for his education.

Theoretical reading 1: The following is an extract from an academic article by Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter:

“Southern African women’s writing resists the social silencing and political disenfranchisement* of African women in colonial and neocolonial communities. placing women at the center of textual representation refuses their relegation to a ‘matrix of marginality’ that oppresses according to race, class, gender and culture, and restores women’s centrality in cultural and self-definition. African women are represented by such writers as Tsitsi Dangaremba as agents and actors; they engage in multiple experiences, maneuvering within and around oppression, certainly, but living their lives in spite of it. The African women of *Nervous Conditions* do not merely react; they act. And in their very action-in their refusal to live their lives only

in response to oppression-lies their resistance. By defining themselves within African- and women-centered spaces, Tsitsi Dangrembga's female characters become none 'other' than themselves, with all the complexity and contradiction 'self' entails.

The complementary and contestatory voices of Dangrembga's cast of women resist prevailing representations of 'African woman' as victim and replace reductive stereotypes with a full yet subtle spectrum of individual and cultural identities" (Pentolfe Aegerter, 1996:231).

*disenfranchisement: To deprive someone of their power, rights or privileges.

Activity 13

Read "Theoretical reading 1" a few times and then answer the following questions.

- Do you agree that *Nervous Conditions* resists the silencing of African women? Explain your viewpoint.
- Look back over this learning unit and then note how different characters experience oppression because of their race, class, gender or culture.
- Can you think of any "women-centered spaces" in the novel?

Feedback on activity 13

Remember that some characters can be doubly or triply oppressed. For example, a woman who is black and poor can be oppressed because of her gender, her race and her class. Can you identify such characters in the novel? How do you think "women-centered spaces" could help women offer resistance to oppression?

Conclusion

This unit has demonstrated how we can usefully apply concepts such as "gender," "race," "patriarchy" and "identity" to our reading of Tsitsi Dangrembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*. We have also seen how important it is to consider the spatial and temporal setting of a novel. It would be very difficult to understand this novel without first understanding the impact that colonialism had on Rhodesia. In this unit, you have completed activities that guided you in applying a number of postcolonial theoretical concepts to your critical engagement with *Nervous Conditions*.

A summary of Unit 4's core ideas

- In *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangrembga explores representations of gender, race, patriarchy and identity through the perspective of a first person narrator called Tambu.
- Representations are not neutral and they are not direct reflections of reality. They are constructions and they are ideologically and politically loaded.

- In the novel, we see how patriarchal distributions of power affect all the major characters, especially the female characters.
- Patriarchy refers to a system of practices and structures in which men have more power than women and are able to use their power to dominate and oppress women.
- Gender is a social construction.
- A central focus of this book is on the **identity** of Tambu as she struggles to make sense of her life in the various contexts she experiences, and struggles to understand who she is.
- In the novel, we see how Tambu's gender as well as her race and economic status contribute to different types of oppression.
- It is important to remember that these literary characters are often too complex to just simply say that they are "good" or "bad," or that they are "victims" or "perpetrators."

Acknowledgment

The material in this Learning Unit has been adapted from a discussion of the novel written by Prof A Weinberg, and notes written by Dr B Makina.

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