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Not So Funny: Humour, Gender and Sexualities in Niq Mhlongo's "The Stalker" and "Woman to Woman"

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Abstract: The themes of gendered humour, queer relations and societal norms are common tropes in South African literary traditions. However, they are seldom researched in conjunction with one another. This paper analyses Niq Mhlongo's two short stories, "The Stalker" and "Woman to Woman", from the collection *For You I'd Steal a Goat* (2022), through this intersectional lens. In the two short stories, Mhlongo uses the backdrop of traditional marriage to capture an aspect of human experience, critiquing marriage, homophobia, and patriarchal norms in South Africa. Through the strategies of absurdity, the banter of the characters, sarcasm and situational humour, both stories provoke amusement and offers a critique of the patriarchal view of women and women's bodies. The study makes use of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Alleen Nilsen and Don Nilsen's theory of the features, functions and subjects of humour. In so doing, it exposes the constructed and performative nature of gender, sexual identities and moral conservatism in post-apartheid South Africa. We argue that the humour in the stories derives from the characters' misconceptions about gender and their homophobic attitudes, serving both to entertain and to sharpen the critique of "traditional" views of women and men.

Keywords: gender; humour; patriarchy; post-apartheid South Africa; sexualities

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Introduction

In South Africa, the short story tradition occupies a rich and contested cultural terrain, one shaped by colonialism, apartheid, and the lingering complexities of the post-apartheid era. This genre has emerged as a form that encapsulates the tensions, traumas and triumphs of South African life. Fossati (2024, p. 3) attributes the success of the short story on the continent "to materiality and to the writing and publication conditions available to African writers". However, while short story writing is central to the trajectory of South African literary history, it remains marginalised in South African scholarship (Marais, 1995; Fasselt et al., 2020; Fossati, 2024) and "in 'postcolonial' literature courses abroad" (Chapman 2025, p. 29). Fasselt et al. (2020) hold that the short story "continues to be a viable genre for the depiction of transitional moments" in South Africa. For instance, critical studies have focused on the genre's

contribution to protest literature (Cornwell, 1980; Mzamane, 1977), and the ways in which the form reflects social diversity (Chapman, 1998; Pillay & Pillay, 2018). Gaylard (2008) explores adaptations in the genre, its literary expectations, the role of race and identity, and the pressures of protest and representation. In addition, Graham (2023) investigates how narrative techniques reflect the legacies of apartheid in relation to race, class, memory and violence. Fossati (2024) switches the focus, analysing the tensions between ethics and aesthetics, and how Black writers negotiate the expectation of protest literature and literary concerns. Marais (2005) turns to the transnational capabilities of the short story, noting how some South African short story collections show both a convergence and divergence with international forms, owing to specific cultural, historical and geographical contexts. These studies demonstrate the genre's potential as "a serious discursive and aesthetic site" (Mangena & Nyambi, 2022, p. 71).

It is clear from the above that the short story reflects the changing socio-political landscape and realities of South Africa. This paper seeks to contribute to this discourse, using Niq Mhlongo's two short stories, "The Stalker" and "Woman to Woman" from the collection *For You I'd Steal a Goat* (2022). The stories use humour to make serious points about gender, sexual identities and moral conservatism in post-apartheid South Africa.

Mhlongo is an established South African writer, holding a BA in African literature and political studies from the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. He has published creative works such as *Dog Eat Dog* (2004), *After Tears* (2007), *Affluenza* (2016) and an edited volume, *Hauntings* (2021). He has won numerous awards, such as the Spanish literary award, La Mar de Letras, the Nadine Gordimer Short Story Award and a National Institute for Humanities and Social Science award. Mhlongo's stories are influenced by his experiences in his hometown of Soweto, using humour and irony to critique how urban, Black middle-class communities think about gender, sexuality and respectability. Although the anthology offers a rich site for diverse investigations, this paper focuses on "The Stalker" and "Woman to Woman" to understand how the aesthetics of humour are used to expose the constructed and performative nature of gendered sexual identities and moral conservatism in post-apartheid South Africa.

In the South African literary imagination, humour is often deployed in diverse and layered ways. The unique past and present of South Africa have offered writers a myriad sources of humorous narrative strategies. Humour has been wielded not only as a tool for laughter, but as a powerful mechanism for survival, resistance and reflection. In a country as diverse as South Africa, it is not surprising that humour often intersects with dominant ideologies on politics, race, traditions and cultures. According to Mackie, 1990, p. 11), the "pervasive" nature of humour makes it a ubiquitous tactic in communication. Focusing on its prevalence in literary works, Weaver et al. (2016) hold that "comedic texts draw on prevalent ideologies, stereotypes, and cultural codes". Kuiper 2009, p. 17) notes that "humour is related to a group of boundaries, as jokes and other humorous utterances frequently draw on implicit reference and inside knowledge, as they often tend to refer to sensitive topics that may offend people". Conceptualising gender and humour, Palmer 2003, p. 81) advances the notion that representations of gender in jokes reveal some "functional attributes". Thus analysing gendered humour offers a unique perspective for understanding contemporary perceptions and stereotypes of highly charged issues such as gender and sexuality.

Much of the research on the intersections of humour and gender has focused on the functions of humour and how humorous devices shape discourses on gender, such as gendered stereotypes (Meghana & Vijaya, 2020; Cendra et al., 2019). Abedinifard's 2016 study focuses on how humour is deployed for policing the gender order. Along the same lines, Kehily and Nayak (1997) investigate humour's potential in the negotiation of sexual hierarchies. Mushtaq (2017) finds that humour functions as a tool for gender construction and deconstruction. Gbadegesin (2020) states that humour can "express ... new tendencies in gender ideological orientation in the society". In this paper, we are interested in how "humour plays a role in the social construction of gender" (Mackie, 1990, p. 13) in the selected short stories. Through close reading, we analyse how the tensions between gender and gendered relationships find expression through humour. By investigating the portrayals of traditional gender roles and sexualities in the context of humorous situations and utterances, we demonstrate mis/conceptions, re/constructions and attitudes to gender, including homophobia.

This paper draws from Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) concept of "intersectionality" to understand how different identities intersect to privilege and disadvantage certain groups, rather than working independently. We use it in this paper as an analytical approach to uncover how the experiences of marginalised characters are shaped by various social categories and socio-cultural contexts. By employing the lens of intersectionality, the analysis presents dynamic interpretations of the way in which identities are dealt with in the short stories. We explore

how tradition, gender and sexuality intersect in the construction of literary jokes and how, in turn, the humour reveals the way in which people of marginalised identities navigate "traditional" power systems. This lens is important for this paper's focus on the diverse post-apartheid context in South Africa, helping to elucidate the socio-political function of humour in the selected texts.

Taking a cue from feminist studies, we note that gender is fluid and complex. To understand some of these gender complexities, the paper draws from Butler 1993 theory of gender performativity. According to Butler 1993, p. 11), "gender is not something one is, but something one does – a series of repeated acts, gestures, and performances that produce the illusion of a coherent identity." This understanding of gender as a performance is a useful tool in our analysis, used to show how humour and gender performativity, when read together, reveal the absurdity of traditional gender roles, exclusions of queer identities and "traditional" heteronormative discourse. For our analysis of humour, we draw from Alleen Nilsen and Don Nilsen's theory of the "features, functions and subjects" of humour (2019, p. 1), according to which humour rests not only on linguistic and stylistic features (such as puns, irony, hyperbole and incongruity) but also on its function in a given context (such as bonding, coping, criticism or persuasion) and on the subject of the humour (such as everyday situations, political and social issues, or gender and cultural stereotypes). Thus humour is a layered construct. Marlene Mackie (1990, p. 12) notes that although humour is ubiquitous, "the essence of humour – why something is funny … depends upon one's point of view, a consequence of factors that vary from the state of one's digestion to one's social moorings." Nilsen and Nilsen (2018) framework is helpful for our analysis, helping us to dissect not just what makes something funny, but how and why humour works within a particular context (Palmer 2003). By analysing the aesthetic features of humour, we are able to demonstrate its function in a given context. An examination of the subjects of the various humorous expressions in the two stories enables one to understand how they "reinforc[e] cultural, ethnic and gendered identities" (Nilsen and Nilsen (2018), p. 196) in social settings.

According to Chiaro and Balirano (2016):

> Humour may [...] work to signify the recurring upsetting of pre-established social beliefs through the systematic threatening of the familiar, the normative, and what is universally deemed as socially acceptable or "normal" (2016: 1).

This idea offers a useful lens for examining how humour may be used to critique preconceived ideas about what is "normal" in societies, and, in turn, what falls outside the boundaries of "normal" in relation to gender. This may include the humouring of queer identities and sexualities. For Reed (2011, p. 764), humour and "queerness rest on a conscious recognition of the multiple and contradictory nature of subjectivity". Taking a cue from Weaver et al. (2016, p. 227), this paper considers how "humour and comedy both maintain and disrupt gender, as processes of performative discourse, hegemony, and resistance". Thus, we consider how the twin lenses of humour and gender subjectivity function together, subverting the "normal", how humour works as a narrative tool to illustrate the slipperiness of gender; and the various ways in which gender is "performed" in conservative South African settings

"A woman can steal a man's wife?": Gendered humour in "*The Stalker*"

In "The Stalker", humour plays the role of raising questions about queer sexualities, traditional gender roles and homosexual shame. Ntando and Amahle are a young couple with a six-year-old child. We use concept of marriage in this section, as explained by Ntando that "he paid half lobolo to [Amahle's] family thinking she was marrying a woman" (97). Ntando suspects that Amahle is having an extramarital affair and follows her to validate his suspicions. On this shadowing trip, he discovers that Amahle is having an affair with a woman named Samu. The story conveys Ntando's jealousy and obsession to highlight the performance of "traditional" masculinity(Connell 2016,). The story opens with Ntando "following her every movement with his eyes" (99) as Amahle leaves their home for the day. He borrows a car from their neighbours to follow Amahle, who takes a taxi from Meadowlands to Braamfontein. His behaviour recalls the concept of "hegemonic masculinities" (Plester 2015), which is "not assumed to be normal but it is normative insofar as it embodies 'the currently most honoured way of being a man'" (Connell and Messerschmidt, in Plester 2015, 2015). Ntando's assertion of dominance is exaggerated so that the act of stalking his wife appears comical. On arrival at the Parktonian Hotel, the characters are contrasted to demonstrate Ntando's masculine absurdity. Amahle is described as poised and "stylish in her tight black jeans and orange T-shirt" (100), while Ntando walks into the hotel with "his running shoes … [wet from] being submerged in a large puddle" (100). This comic contradiction hints at Mhlongo's mockery of an insecure man following his wife around and too insecure to simply confront her with his infidelity

suspicions in private. Ntando's actions and character come across as absurd, creating humour and simultaneously revealing him as a fragile man.

Inside the hotel, Amahle meets with her lover, Samu. They check into the hotel, proceed to their room to change and then go to the swimming pool. Here, Ntando confronts the two women. The confrontation further positions Ntando's behaviour as comical. The narrator tells us that "he caught them kissing – a deep, passionate kiss. The object of his observations touched the ears of her lady friend tenderly" (101). Ntando is "validated and embarrassed" (101) watching the scene unfold. He moves closer to confront the pair:

> "Amahle, how long has this been going on?" He glanced at her. "You told me you had a job interview when you left home this morning. Is this what you mean by a job interview?"
>
> Shock and terror reflected in her eyes. "Ntando, what are you doing here? Did you follow me?"
>
> "Hey!" the woman with the peroxided hair said. "What are you, some kind of sicko stalker?"
>
> "I am her husband," Ntando said through clenched teeth.
>
> "Oh". The woman seemed unfazed. "You're that guy." A contemptuous smile played around her mouth (100–101).

While Ntando validates his suspicions through "unwanted intrusions" (Mullen et al., 2000, p. 11), justifying his behaviour as the actions of a concerned husband, the pair contends that he is a "stalker". This interpretation of his actions subtly pokes fun at his threatened "traditional" masculinity, showing that in trying to assert his authority he is seen as nothing but a common stalker. He then insults Amahle, calling her a "slut" (101). We notice how Samu is offended by these insults and shouts, "Hey, don't call her that. You have no right to call my girlfriend that ugly name." (101). Here, Samu performs the "traditional" role of a protector, defending Amahle against Ntando's insults. The altercation is humorous in that Ntando had not anticipated a scenario in which his wife is having an affair with another woman. This recalls idea of the multiplicity of sexualities. The humour is twofold: first, in the depiction of Ntando as a threatened vulnerable man who "stalks" his wife, and second, in the discovery that Amahle's extramarital affair is with a woman, something he is quite unprepared for. We notice this in the shaming, homophobic and hyper-masculine approach used when the two families finally intervene.

The story proceeds as Ntando calls for intervention from the elders in both his and Amahle's families. It is a common practice in African societies to resolve conflicts in this way, which creates as "opportunity to interact with the parties who are involved in the conflicts, this provides and promotes consensus-building social bridge reconstruction and enactment of order in the society" (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014, p. 138). Amahle's family, the Celes, are summoned from Ixopo in KwaZulu-Natal to a meeting to "solve the matter between our two children […] apparently the two are no longer at peace with each other; hence they are no longer living together" (103). The following scene captures how the elders delegitimise queer sexualities and legitimise "traditional" masculinities:

> "Wait, mshana, you say you caught makoti cheating with another woman?" asked uncle Mgiliji.
>
> His uncle was shaking his head. "What kind of nonsense is this?" His incisors sank into his lower lip. "Are you mad in your head? You mean you brought us all the way from KwaZulu because you think your wife is in love with another woman? Where have you heard such nonsense? Look at your wife." He pointed towards Amahle, and she glanced up at him quickly. "She is a full-blooded woman. Does she look like a man? She is as feminine as they come" (104–105).

In the above interaction, the humour rests on two aspects of the scene: First, the outcome of the meeting is again not at all what Ntando expected; he expected the elders to shame Amahle and legitimise his standing as the scorned husband, and instead they simply disbelieve his contention that she is having an affair with a woman. Johnson (2012, p. 416) reminds us that humour is used to "regulate social norms through shame". Uncle Mgiliji's comments turn the trajectory of the meeting, producing a result that shames Ntando rather than Amahle. Amahle's behaviour calls to mind Butler's observation that gender performativity is linked with cultural norms. Amahle disrupts the gendered expectation by refusing to perform in expected ways. In doing

so, she inadvertently turns the tables on Ntando, whose masculinity is subtly questioned by the elders through "silence and glances" and their comical suggestion that Ntando is mentally unstable. His uncle drives home the unexpected conclusion by stating, "I'm shocked to hear that my nephew thinks a woman can steal a man's wife. If that were true, he would not be a real man" (106). This is not what Ntando expected. His words not only delegitimise Ntando's claims, but question his own masculinity to boot.

The scene illustrates Crenshaw's (1991) idea of intersectionality. As a traditional Black married man, Ntando is subject to social expectations, just as his wife is. In subverting these expectations, Amahle has inadvertently called into question Ntando's own conformity with social expectations. Mackie (1990, p. 13) states that humour may be used to "affirm societal standards". In the "patriarchal hetero-masculinist tradition" (Ratele, 2013, p. 134) in which Ntando and his uncles live, a "real man" is not intimidated by a woman. In calling together the elders to put Amahle in her place, Ntando has used a "traditional" strategy to cope with an entirely "untraditional" situation – one that the elders simply cannot grasp. Thus the strategy backfires horrendously; Ntando, rather than Amahle, finds himself the object of censure. By claiming that his wife is having an affair with a woman, he has effectively demonstrated that a woman is providing what he was unable to provide. The unexpected outcome is humorous and serves to poke fun at gender stereotypes.

The second aspect on which the humour rests is the portrayal of the elders' view of queer relations. Their complete lack of understanding is a source of humour in the story. Zyl (2011) states that, "In 1996 South Africa was the first country in the world to safeguard sexual orientation as a human right in its Constitution" (2011, p. 335). Thus, the Constitution protects same-sex marriages (and relationships), with variations in sexual orientation included in human rights policies. In the story, the families find it humorous that Ntando is accusing Amahle of having an affair with a person of the same sex. The idea that Amahle is in a heterosexual marriage and has same-sex desires is inconceivable to them. However, their humorous take on the situation masks a prejudice against the queer community. There is no humour in the fact a woman might be having an extramarital affair with a woman; the "constructions of the joke" (Smith, 2015, p. 2) directed towards same-sex relationships, is "a tool to facilitate prejudice […], a subtle way to put down and delegitimize" the same-sex relationship (Friedman & Friedman, 2019, p. 56). We notice here how the elders' understanding of queer relations is presented in a comical way. Through evocations of femininity, Uncle Mgiliji associates Amahle with a gender-conforming woman. He praises her femininity and beauty "She is as feminine as they come", which to him distinguish her from non-gender-conforming women. Through this imagined "femininity" lens, Amahle, as a married "feminine" woman, cannot possibly be sexually attracted to another woman. This assumption is in itself a source of humour. In line with this, Cook (2016, p. 192) notes "the persistent refusal to acknowledge the variety and intensity of women's emotional and erotic experiences". Amahle can be read as a bisexual woman who is afraid to reveal her sexual orientation.

The resolution to the situation is similarly humorous, in that it ends with Ntando's family deciding they will "perform rituals for him. After exorcising him, we will come back for our makoti" (107). The diction of exorcism is interesting, in that it builds on the earlier idea, expressed by the elders, that there is something wrong with Ntando, and not with Amahle – that he is mentally unstable. This conclusion alludes to the way in which the family (and most African societies) construct manhood in relation to heteronormative marriages. The story ends in an ambiguous manner, with Amahle unwilling to accept Ntando's claims, although he witnessed the affair. We are told, "Amahle was left wondering what, exactly, she had won" (107). This alludes to the invisibility of non-heteronormative sexualities in traditional African societies. Amahle has come off blameless in the meeting, but she is no freer than before to pursue the relationship she desires.

Our analysis shows how heteronormative societies regulate sexual expression by enforcing strict norms in order to uphold and perpetuate patriarchy through "traditional masculinities" and maintain heterosexuality.

The humour of words in "*Woman to Woman*"

"Woman to Woman" takes the form of a letter written by an imprisoned woman to another woman. The writer of the letter, Boipelo, addresses MaKhumalo, the mother of Lesego, whom she has murdered. When Boipelo discovers that her husband, Thapelo, is having an extramarital affair with a beautiful younger woman named Lesego, she deploys many methods to get Thapelo and Lesego to end their relationship. However, none of her interventions produce the result she wants, and she later discovers that Lesego and Thapelo are expecting a child. She resorts to violence, confronting them in a park and shooting them. The humour in this story does not lie in its violent theme, nor the plot; rather, we locate it in Boipelo's unfiltered and exaggerated descriptions in

the letter, and her tone swings from polite civility to sarcastic outrage, showing both vulnerability and pride. The images we analyse in this section demonstrate Mhlongo's ironic use of the myth of the "irrationality of females" (Hartman, 2015, p. 80), stereotypes that are usually used to preserve patriarchy. Our use of the term "irrational" borrows from Guignard (2019, p. 2) conceptualisation, as "all phenomena and thoughts in the [story] that are beyond the logic of rational reasoning on which the laws of reality rest … include[ing] the fantastic, the supernatural, the strange, distorted perceptions, hallucinations, paranormal phenomena, metamorphoses, the staging of split personalities, monstrosity, animality in humans, involvement in a world beyond death, exaltation and exacerbated emotions". We demonstrate how the author uses the trope of the "irrational female" not to "reflect and reinforce existing social constructions of gender but "to challenge them" (Mackie, 1990, p. 2). This humour aesthetic functions to critique the value that society places on marriage, by asking the reader what boundaries females are willing to cross to protect their marriages.

In the story, Boipelo first suspects her husband of infidelity when "studying" pictures on the social media outlet, Instagram, posted by Lesego. Boipelo tells us that she "analysed [their] body language and was convinced that the two were dating" (139). We see how Boipelo's conclusion is not based on fact, but on her interpretation of nonverbal cues, which are often ambiguous. Her fragile logic reveals her vulnerability. The tonal juxtapositions of "analysed" and "convinced" operate as a window into her subjective interpretation, which is amusing to the reader, given that her conclusion is based on so little evidence.

Boipelo also describes Lesego in a comic manner. She writes,

> She was wearing silver hoop earrings that were as big as bracelets. Her eyelashes were bushy ... large breasts sticking out her front and buttocks that were like pumpkins in the back. She wore a blue bondage-tight skirt. Her black heels made her feet look bound, too (139).

The hyperbolic descriptions, with their absurd comparisons and visual exaggeration, have a comic effect. We see this in "hoop earrings … as big as bracelets" and "buttocks … like pumpkins", and "breasts sticking out". The "bushy eyebrows" hint at unkempt shrubbery, a humorous image that depends on incongruity, one of the stylistic features named in Nilsen and Nilsen's (2018) theory of the "features, functions and subjects" of humour. The overall visual image is of an absurd, exaggerated female figure of which Boipelo is clearly critical. The humour rests on these descriptions and the fact that the reader can see what Boipelo cannot see; that she is critical of Lesego's body because she is biased. She deploys these techniques in her description from a position of contempt for the woman.

Furthermore, this comic tone and humorous description is used by Boipelo to show herself as a "decent" woman in comparison to Lesego. As she looked at the pictures, she tells MaKhumalo, "anger stuck in my throat" (139). This sensation is a common physical experience for people experiencing stress; however, in this context it is used to portray Boipelo as exemplifying "strange, distorted perceptions" (Guignard, 2019) in her irrational response to the situation.

Stark (2009, p. 154) argues that humour "plays a key role in constructing and nurturing relationships … mediating power and solidarity". Boipelo's use of humour indicates a subconscious sense of solidarity with other women (and other genders) who have experienced disloyalty in their marriages. This idea is further captured in the title and the form of the story, in which Boipelo is conversing "woman to woman" with a single person who, in her mind, may represent others who share similar realities.

We notice a similarly humorous tone in Boipelo's description of her confrontation of Lesego. Lesego tells Boipelo that she "had a figure like a frog … bragged that [Thapelo] was about to leave her because it was difficult to make out [Boipelo's] waist" (141). The comic comparison here of a woman's figure to an inherently unglamourous frog is all the more humorous because it is reported by Boipelo herself. In reporting Lesego's words verbatim, she demonstrates a humorous raw honesty, vulnerability and self-deprecation. The author is also subtly critiquing women's obsession with body image. Boipelo's words subtly highlight the absurdity of society's patriarchal expectations of women and the notion that a successful marriage relies on the woman and the appearance of her body. They also invite the reader to critique the notion of the "perfect wife", showing that it is performative – something women feel pressured to enact to maintain social respectability, even when their husbands fail them.

Society's unrealistic expectation of women as the responsible party for their husbands' actions is highlighted again in a conversation between Boipelo and her mother. When she shares her marital worries with her mother, her mother responds in a humorously unsympathetic tone saying:

> Do you remember what I said to you a year ago when you complained that he didn't come home? I told you to make sure that you enjoy your marriage while it lasted. That's men for you. Before you know it, your breasts will drop like mine. Your Thapelo will find a younger version of you, with nicely curved and snuggled hips within the embrace of a pair of jeans (140).

The significant element of this interaction is the comic portrayal of femininity and aging. The mother's dark, comic wisdom reveals societal stereotypes about aging female bodies. Her mother's reference to "drooping breasts" is a metaphor for fading desirability, viewed through a patriarchal lens. This is both funny and tragic, in that again, the description comes from a woman, who has clearly absorbed a patriarchal view of her own body. Her remarks reveal her bitterness and resignation at being an older woman. The statement's laughable reduction in "that's men for you" buttresses the patriarchy of her views, portraying men as predictably disloyal and normalising men's unfaithfulness in marriage. The statement is a comic generalisation that plays off widely accepted (and often exaggerated) stereotypes of male disloyalty. The laughter it elicits rests on the familiarity of the trope. The image of a "younger version in nicely curved and snuggled hips" is a similarly humorous description, hinting at the mother's powers of observation and her resignation as someone with experience, capable of delivering biting truths. She puts a humorous spin on the situation, caustically debunking the myth of eternal femininity that society imposes on women. This also exposes the cultural script that dictates that men will inevitably "trade in" aging wives for younger women. In the quotation, Boipelo is the subject of the joke, portrayed by her own mother as unreasonable in expecting loyalty from her husband. In this regard, Billingsley (2013, p. 2) argues that "[h]umor often reinforces … patriarchal structures in society". Another comic insight is the line "I told you to … enjoy your marriage while it lasted". The humour lies in the unexpected realism of its redefinition of marriage as a fleeting stage. It challenges the idealistic rhetoric that persists in relation to marriage – that it is a lifelong union – and is an especially apt remark, given the reality that a high proportion of marriages end in divorce. Her words reflect a layered critique of femininity, aging and marital expectations.

Lastly, Thapelo justifies his infidelity by framing it as "natural" and even using Lesego as a scapegoat for his transgressions. When Boipelo confronts Thapelo, he says, "What do you want me to say, Boipelo? Women like that always happen to you suddenly as a man. You don't plan to have a relationship with them" (141). This passage reflects an emotionally aversive hegemonic masculinity. Thapelo's rhetorical question, "What do you expect me to say?" signals a defensiveness, often associated with avoiding emotional accountability in intimate relationships (Ratele, 2008). Here we notice a subtle humour in the absurdity of his logic. He positions himself as a victim of Lesego's beauty, rather than an agent of the betrayal. Lesego is further described as beautiful, captured in the passive construction of "women like that". The indirect tone of "women like that" and "happen to you" are used to suggest an avoidance of personal accountability, while inviting the reader to critique his attitude. His remarks are flippant, insensitive, and humorous to the informed reader. This recalls Raewyn Connell 2016 studies, which point out that men often use culturally sanctioned behaviours to maintain status within patriarchal systems, sometimes cloaked in humour to ameliorate the effects. Thapelo uses subtle humour, evident in his tone and the absurdity of his logic, to reflect how certain types of masculinities are both predictable and performative (Butler 1993). His absurd justification of his behaviour relies on the social script that men are often seduced by attractive women – an entitlement that is not afforded to women in similar situations. The humour lies not only in what is said, but in how transparently Thapelo tries to make the unacceptable sound inevitable.

Conclusion

This paper has contributed to the discourse of gender, humour and sexualities in African texts, specifically the short story genre. It shared insights on the way in which humour is used to poke fun at patriarchal attitudes and to delegitimise the marginalisation of same-sex relationships. Much of the humour rests on the discrepancy between what the reader knows and what the characters know. In addition, the characters themselves use humour: In "The Stalker", they do so in order to delegitimise same-sex relationships, while in "Woman to Woman", the blunt talk and exaggerated descriptions serve to convey the absurdity of the patriarchal view of marriage. In our analysis, we used queer theory as a disruptive interpretive tool that unsettles normative assumptions about identity and desire. Reading through a queer lens enables one to see the instability of binary categories such as male/female and heterosexual/homosexual within the text. In "The Stalker", Mhlongo uses the elders to show the absurdity

of the suggestion that Amahle, as a feminine woman, could not have a same-sex relationship. Mhlongo also critiques feminine categorization in how Amahle is viewed as "a feminine woman" who could not have feelings for another woman. Thus, both humour studies and queer theory shed light on the critique of normative sexual and gender identities in this story. While the author sees these normative sexual identities as socially constructed, to the characters they are entirely normal and natural, and their transgression is unnatural. This discrepancy between what the author and readers know and what the characters know contributes to the humour in the story.

Our analysis of "Woman to Woman" has shown how humour can function not just to entertain, but to expose the expectations and pressures paced on women in a patriarchal society. In a patriarchal system, women are shamed for aging, thus granting men reasons for engaging in extramarital affairs. Through blunt speech, comic exaggeration and vivid imagery, Boipelo, the narrator of the second story, conveys the tragicomedy of the situation, with the laughter arising from the reader's realisation of painful truths. In this story, the author uses the narrator's subconscious self-deprecation and use of stereotypes to ironic effect. Boipelo's mother functions as a humorous foil to Boipelo's outrage, pointing out that once a woman starts to age it is normal for men to go looking for younger women. Her remarks convey the tragedy of the aging woman who has fully absorbed the patriarchal narrative, while her bitterness reveals the costs of this attitude. The frameworks of Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity and Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal notion of intersectionality highlight how individuals' experiences and social positions are shaped by gender, sexuality and age. These frameworks allowed a nuanced analysis of the way humour operates in these two stories, revealing both their subversive and conservative abilities. Nilsen and Nilsen (2018) framework of the features, functions and subjects of humour guided the analysis. Through viewing the two stories through the lens of these three theories, we were able to develop a deeper understanding of Niq Mhlongo's use of humour in spotlighting and dismantling cultural and gendered identities.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: The interdisciplinarity is established by analysing South African short stories through the lens of humour, gender, and sexualities to reveal how Niq Mhlongo uses laughter to question gender, sexualities, and social norms. This approach connects literary study with gender and queer theory, showing how humour exposes and resists inequality.

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