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Laughing with a "Forked Tongue": Subversive Humour in Sindiwe Magona's *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night*

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Abstract: Domestic workers occupy a central place in South African society, representing the historical entanglements of race, class, gender and labour. Despite their significance, they have received limited sustained attention in literary scholarship. This article examines Sindiwe Magona's *Living, loving and lying awake at night* (1991), a short story collection that draws on her own experiences of domestic work on the cusp of South Africa's democratic transition. Focusing on the interlinked series "Women at work", we argue that Magona employs humour as a mode of "doubled subversion," simultaneously critiquing racial oppression and patriarchal authority while fostering solidarity among black women. The stories show how laughter emerges from the kitchens and servants' quarters of apartheid households as a means of survival, critique, and community. Our analysis draws on Samuelson's (2012) notion of the "forked tongue" and Bakhtin (1968) theory of the carnivalesque to illuminate how Magona's characters use irony, satire, and parody to ridicule apartheid's absurdities and expose gendered vulnerabilities. By foregrounding humour in the representation of domestic work, Magona anticipates the feminist comedic strategies of contemporary South African women writers. We position her as a foundational figure in a broader genealogy of African feminist humour that mobilises laughter as both critique and resistance.

Keywords: apartheid; domestic workers; humour; South African women's writing

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Introduction

More than three decades after the official end of apartheid, the social and economic divisions between black and white South Africans remain deeply entrenched. A large proportion of black people—particularly women—continue to occupy positions as domestic workers, cleaners, and nannies. The figure of the domestic worker holds a persistent and central place in South African society, embodying the historical entanglements between black and white, rich and poor, urban and rural, and employers and employees (Baderoon, 2014). Despite this significance, representations of domestic workers in South African literature have received limited critical attention. Notably, Gabeba Baderoon and Ena Jansen have offered detailed analyses of literary and visual representations of the

profession in "The ghost in the house: Women, race and domesticity in South Africa" (Baderoon, 2014) and *Like family: Domestic workers in South African history and literature* (Jansen, 2019), respectively. This article is in conversation with these works and considers humour's role in representations of how black domestic workers navigate(d) the multiple gendered and racial oppressions endemic to their societies.

Sindiwe Magona, an award-winning writer and seminal figure in African women's writing, experienced domestic work first-hand and fictionally documents the roles and lived experiences of domestic workers on the brink of South Africa's transition to democracy in her short story collection Living, loving and lying awake at night (1991). This article pays particular attention to "Women at work", a self-contained series of interlocking short stories positioned at the beginning of the collection. The first piece in the series, "Leaving", details the emotional and physical struggles of Atini, who must leave her children behind in her rural home to secure employment for their survival. The following eight narratives are set in one of the white suburbs of East London, where Atini finds work as a domestic worker. Each story unfolds as a conversation between Atini and another domestic worker she has befriended, often in the form of a monologue in which Atini's responses are implied. The first and last stories are narrated by Atini herself, framing the experiences of the other women. Published in 1991, "Women at work" emerges at the cusp of the political transition that would culminate in South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 and the labour law reforms that began in 1995 (Ally, 2010). Set in a time of political change, when its characters anticipate that shifts in state governance might alter their working lives, "Women at Work" can be read as a study of domestic labour in transition.

One of the most striking features of the collection is Magona's use of humour. In their conversations with Atini, the women narrate the absurdities of their lives under apartheid, often framing them in satirical and ironic terms. This article interrogates what Magona's deployment of humour allows her characters to do. It argues that humour functions as a site of "doubled subversion" for the domestic workers that Magona depicts, enabling critique as well as solidarity. By laughing at the incredible—and incredulous—oppressions they face in a racist and sexist society, Magona's characters reclaim a measure of agency within conditions designed to strip them of it.

To frame this argument, we draw on Samuelson's (2012) theorisation of black women's writing under apartheid, which highlights the "forked tongue" or "double-voiced discourse" through which women's texts simultaneously resist racial oppression and critique patriarchal structures.

> Some women writing under apartheid resist the state's dichotomous, discriminatory logic through various counter-discourses; others speak through forked tongues or a 'double-voiced discourse' enfolding their critiques of patriarchal structures deep within anti-apartheid plots (Samuelson, 2012, 761).

The idea of speaking with a "forked tongue" refers to the ways in which black women's writing under apartheid refuted apartheid ideology while simultaneously critiquing gendered oppression, often through techniques of irony, satire, and other subversive modes. Taking Samuelson's "forked tongue" as its point of departure, this article also draws on Bakhtin's (1968) theory of the carnivalesque to explore Magona's representations of domestic work. The analysis focuses on how satirical humour operates as a mode of survival and critique, enabling characters to mock racial hierarchies, exposing patriarchal expectations, and ridiculing the absurdities of apartheid laws and logic. In so doing, we position Magona as a precursor to contemporary South African women writers who deploy humour as a mode of feminist and political subversion. In contexts where domestic workers' voices were routinely silenced, humour provided both a covert language of critique and a communal strategy of survival.

In foregrounding Magona's humorous portrayal of domestic workers, this article positions her as an important but under-examined precursor in a broader genealogy of South African feminist humour. While Magona has often been read primarily in relation to themes of apartheid resistance and women's lived experiences, less attention has been given to the ways in which her deployment of humour anticipates later uses of irony, satire, and parody in post-apartheid women's writing. By tracing a line from Magona's *Living, loving and lying awake at night* to more contemporary art such as Celeste Ntuli's comedy, this article demonstrates how humour functions as a feminist strategy that both critiques systemic oppression and cultivates solidarity among women. In so doing, it offers a new perspective on Magona's work—not only as social testimony, but also as being foundational to the development of a distinctly South African feminist literary tradition that mobilises laughter as a mode of subversion.

Theorising domestic work

Domestic work in South Africa has a long history that can be traced back to slavery and practised first by the Dutch and later the English in the colonial period between 1658 and 1839 (Baderoon, 2014, 175; Gqola, 2010, 6). As Baderoon (2014, 175) notes, black women were compelled to enter domestic service "from the very beginning of colonial settlement in South Africa". The figure of Krotoa, the first Khoisan woman forced into the Cape Dutch colony as a child (renamed Eva), illustrates this history. She worked as both a domestic servant and an interpreter, roles that, as Abrahams (1996) has shown, required of her to translate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Baderoon (2014, 176) extends this insight by observing that the role of the domestic worker itself was a form of translation, as "the role of the domestic worker translates between public and private, inside and outside". Krotoa/Eva's positioning reveals how household labour has long mediated black women's access to public space in South Africa, making the domestic sphere simultaneously a site of exclusion and negotiation.

This relationship between domestic labour and public space was intensified under apartheid (Cock, 1989). The Native Land Acts of 1913 and 1936, which ensured that 87 per cent of South African land was white owned, cut off black rural women from land, livelihood, and agricultural practices (Cock, 1989, 5). Combined with the Group Areas Act, the Trespass Act, and the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act, these laws entrenched black women's alienation from public spaces. With few educational opportunities available, domestic service became one of the only viable forms of employment (Cock, 1989, 4). Even then, the pass laws rigorously regulated women's movement into urban areas, ensuring dependence and precariousness. The conditions of domestic work under apartheid further underscore its dehumanising nature. Women endured irregular hours, undefined duties, low wages, and no legal protection (Cock, 1989, 3). Many lived in "servants' quarters" or "back rooms" on their employers' properties, where their lives were subject to constant surveillance. Employers routinely inspected belongings and restricted visitors, collapsing any boundary between work and private life. As Baderoon (2014, 175) observes, the "private sector of the house confirmed the public reality of racial separateness and hierarchy". Domestic work thus illustrates how apartheid's hierarchies were reproduced daily in intimate spaces. The design of white suburban homes, with their segregated servants' quarters, mirrored the larger spatial order of homelands and townships, perpetuating patterns that "lingered from the placement of slave quarters on colonial farms" (Baderoon, 2014, 179).

Interpersonal relationships within the home also served to achieve ideological ends. As Cock (1989, 4) notes, white children were socialised into racial hierarchies through their nannies, while black domestic workers were at the same time forced to neglect their own children. Domestic work therefore strengthened not only ideology but also labour power: it enabled white families to enjoy leisure, pursue careers, and accumulate cultural and financial capital (Ally, 2010), even as it deepened black women's dispossession. Taken together, these dynamics show that black women's relationships to domestic space under apartheid were both profoundly dehumanising and intensely political. The white household functioned as a site where apartheid's hierarchies were enacted and naturalised, often under the guise of intimacy and care. Crenshaw, 1991Black women experienced compounded oppressions: as women, they bore the brunt of gendered expectations of care; as black people, they endured systemic racial subjugation; and as workers, they occupied the lowest rungs of the class hierarchy. The domestic space thus emerges as a nexus where race, gender, and class oppression intersected. It is precisely this nexus that Magona foregrounds in "Women at work". By centring her narratives on domestic workers, she illuminates the political dimensions of labour often relegated to the margins. Importantly, in Magona's fiction, these historical realities are not a mere backdrop; they actively shape the humour through which her characters resist their living conditions. The surveillance of belongings becomes the subject of parody; the infantilising language of employers is mimicked and mocked; and the hardship of long hours is retold as ironic anecdote. In what follows, we explore how Magona refracts the oppressive structures of domestic work through carnivalesque satire, allowing humour to emerge as both coping mechanism and critique.

Theorising humour

Bakhtin's (1968) theory of the carnival or "carnivalesque" in literature refers to any literary work that subverts hegemonic power structures through humour and the chaos of the carnival. The latter refers to a ritualistic spectacle that allows traditional, cultural, and societal norms and hegemonies to be temporarily suspended. In other words, "carnivalesque" is both a description of socio-cultural practice and a broader theory associated with transformation. Bakhtin's carnivalesque was established on the back of ancient celebrations in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, through which he suggested that an individual during the former and latter periods lived two lives – one subjected to the hierarchy of the hegemonic "official" order and the other, a counter-hegemonic

"second life" of freedom, laughter and "grotesque realism" that challenges the "official" order (Bakhtin, 1968). Magona's *Living, loving and lying awake at night* constitutes a form of "carnivalized literature" as the text is characterised by Menippean satire and Socratic dialogue. Magona uses a blend of realistic narrative and satirical elements to expose not only the oppressive nature of apartheid, but the physical and psychological challenges of black women trapped in absurd situations due to the system's restrictions. Furthermore, through the interactions of the characters, Magona highlights how friendships characterised by humour can promote Socratic dialogue by fostering an intimate space for open discussion, critical thinking and challenging the status quo.

Writing in the context of Nigerian civil society, Obadare (2009, 243) asks why "laughter constantly reverberate(s) in spaces and places where everyone (including those laughing) agrees there is little or nothing to laugh about". In addressing this paradox, Obadare (2009, 244) demonstrates that laughter is widespread in many African societies and their literary representations, yet remains under-explored in scholarship, often overshadowed by attention to "hard politics" and social ills. For Obadare (2009, 245), "… jokes have always been iconic tools in the hands of society's subalterns, used to caricature those in power, subvert authority, and, in some instances, empower themselves." Following Obadare, we are particularly interested in the subversive potential of humour in Magona's "Women at work*"*, where women who are in multiple instances oppressed by race, class, and gender, nonetheless use laughter as a political and communal resource.

Steiner's (2021) study of humour in Abdulrazak Gurnah's oeuvre is one of the most sustained accounts of humour in African literature. In her reading, Steiner (2021, 124) argues that.

> … humour is not blind to injustice and asymmetrical relations of power, it is not a flippant strategy of trying to laugh reality away; on the contrary, it can enable what Frantz Fanon describes as a 'process of disalienation' (Fanon, 1986, 231) by confronting suffering in a different mode.

This framing is crucial for understanding Magona. In "Women at work"*,* humour is not escapist: it does not deny the hardship of domestic labour, but instead enables the women to name it, ridicule it, and forge solidarity in the process. The women's anecdotes of long hours, humiliating treatment, and racial stereotyping are often narrated with ironic twists. For example, when Virginia recounts how her employer buys her soap in a thinly veiled insinuation of uncleanliness, she incorporates this insult into her narrative of "bad luck" and jokes that someone must be using witchcraft to chase her away from her job (35). The joke functions on two levels: it undercuts the employer's racist assumptions and repositions Virginia as a knowing narrator who exposes the absurdity of apartheid domesticity.

Donian (2021, 1), in her exploration of apartheid's comedy-scape, identifies three overarching modes of humour: (1) humour as an instrument of social control; (2) humour as social protest; and (3) humour as an instrument of social and political transformation. The first mode was often evident in state-sanctioned comedy films of the 1970 s and 1980 s, which trafficked in racial stereotypes and naturalised inequality, thereby reinforcing apartheid propaganda (Donian, 2021). The second mode, humour as protest, found expression in satirical forms such as the comic strip *Madam and Eve*, which lampooned white employers and foregrounded the racialised hierarchies of domestic labour. *Madam and Eve* was one of the first widely circulated cultural texts to highlight the entanglements of madam/maid relations and remains iconic in its satirical resistance. The third mode, humour as transformation, recognises laughter as a practice that can reimagine social relations and point toward political change. Magona's text contains traces of all three modes but leans most strongly toward protest and transformation. On the one hand, her stories expose how domestic work could serve the purposes of social control: Atini and her peers live under constant surveillance, with employers policing their bodies, quarters, and even friendships. On the other hand, through satire, parody, and conversational wit, the women push back against this control. Their whispered jokes and ironic asides constitute protest, but they also enact small transformations, creating spaces of belonging and solidarity in kitchens and back rooms otherwise marked by alienation. When Sheila, for instance, questions whether white women can ever stop calling them "girls" (25), her incredulity becomes both comic and critical. By laughing at the implausibility of reform, she simultaneously articulates disillusionment and sustains hope for change.

Contemporary scholarship further contextualises Magona's humour within a broader South African genealogy. Ndlovu (2020) demonstrates how authors such as Ndumiso Ngcobo and Fred Khumalo deploy humour to discuss otherwise taboo topics — race, gender, sexuality, death, illness, disability — in ways that invite public dialogue. Similarly, Pakade (2020) analyses comedian Celeste Ntuli's work as a feminist practice of "making

the personal the political" (2020: 24), showing how Ntuli uses humour to foreground black women's sexualities and to subvert normative gender expectations. Like Ntuli, Magona foregrounds embodied women's experiences — menstruation, exhaustion, hunger, sexuality — but she does so within a literary rather than a performative register. Both writers, however, demonstrate how humour transforms the intimate into the political, destabilising racial and gender hierarchies. By aligning Magona with this tradition of feminist humour, we sharpen her place in a genealogy of black South African women's humour that stretches across literature and performance. Where *Madam and Eve* lampoons employers for a mass readership and Ntuli stages laughter in public arenas, Magona embeds humour in women's intimate conversations, showing how satire can emerge from the margins of the domestic space. This "double-voiced discourse", as Samuelson (2012) calls it, enables the women to laugh with forked tongues: their humour critiques both apartheid's racial oppression and patriarchy's gendered inequalities.

"Heteroglossia" and grotesque realism in "leaving"

"Leaving" opens the series of nine interlocking narratives that make up "Women at work*"*. Unlike the following eight stories, which are characterised by razor-edged humour, "Leaving" is suffused with pathos. Its protagonist is initially unnamed — a striking choice, given that the subsequent narratives reveal her as Atini. The decision to withhold her name in the opening text highlights the fact that her struggle is not singular, but part of a collective experience shared by millions of black women under apartheid. Naming, or in this case the withholding of it, functions dialogically. While failure to name erases individuality, it simultaneously foregrounds the protagonist's representativeness: she speaks as one woman, yet her exhaustion, poverty, and despair resonate with a broader community of women similarly displaced and exploited. In Bakhtinian terms, this creates heteroglossia — a multiplicity of social voices contained within a single narrative position.

Magona intensifies this heteroglossic quality by embedding the protagonist's interior voice within descriptions of her bodily labour. The narrative opens with an image of absolute exhaustion: "She was tired. Spent, body and mind. The tiredness of her mind and body and heart came together as one. It robbed her of sleep" (3). The short, staccato sentences communicate the rhythm of breathlessness, underscoring the physical and psychological strain. Here, language itself mimics the fragmented, depleted condition of the character, transforming exhaustion into an embodied narrative strategy. The grotesque realism Bakhtin (1968) identifies — the emphasis on the "lower bodily stratum" — emerges vividly in these passages. In this way, the body becomes the primary site through which her identity and lived experience are articulated. The protagonist is defined not by her intellectual pursuits or aspirations but by her aching limbs, sleepless body, and heavy heart.

This bodily emphasis is sustained in the description of her daily chores: feeding her children, smearing dung on the floor, fetching water. The detail with which these tasks are narrated underscores their centrality:

> One bit of floor at a time, until the whole floor was smeared; she spread her love through her fingers: dung and water and her tears mingling in her offering, seeping through her fingers as it spread, sending its scent up her nostrils (4).

This passage exemplifies a form of grotesque realism. The act of cleaning is at once degrading (performed while crying) and elevated (figured as love). Bodily fluids — tears, sweat, the smell of dung — mingle with the textures of labour. In Bakhtinian terms, this fusion of high and low, sacred and profane, signals the carnivalesque. Magona transforms the domestic act of cleaning into a ritual that both sustains life and reveals systemic injustice.

The protagonist's exhaustion is not only physical but also tied to the oppressive structures that confine her. Her husband is absent, working in Johannesburg's mines; his wages are meagre, his paternal responsibilities absent. Patriarchal structures ensure that she must deal with childcare and subsistence alone. At the same time, poverty dictates that she cannot remain with her children — she must leave them in order to secure work in a white home. The grotesque realism of her fatigue thus condenses the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, and class. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) Atini's exhaustion is produced by the simultaneous demands of patriarchy, racial capitalism, and labour exploitation.

While humour is largely absent in "Leaving," the narrative nonetheless foreshadows the ironic laughter that dominates the later stories. The grotesque imagery — dung, sweat, tears — carnivalizes labour itself. In carnival, degradation is paradoxically linked to renewal: out of the "low" emerges the possibility of rebirth. Magona signals this potential in the journey motif. As the protagonist walks toward East London, she traverses "razor sharp stones" and "brooding mountains" (9). The description of dawn — "angry red blotches" and "warm, wet,

dying foliage giving birth to new soil" (9) — figures her departure as a painful rebirth. The body is once again central, but here its suffering anticipates transformation.

The heteroglossia of "Leaving" thus lies in the coexistence of despair and possibility, of degradation and love, of silence and voice. The unnamed protagonist is simultaneously an individual and a collective figure, her voice both personal and polyphonic. By beginning her cycle with this story, Magona frames domestic labour as a site of grotesque bodily exhaustion and systemic violence, but also as a crucible from which satire and laughter — the hallmarks of the later stories — can emerge.

Carnival as dialogic in "women at work"

If *"Leaving"* foregrounds pathos and grotesque realism, the subsequent eight stories in "Women at work" shift toward humour, irony, and satire. These narratives unfold primarily through conversations among domestic workers, where Atini listens to the stories of her peers. Dialogue becomes the structuring principle, and it is here that Bakhtin's concept of the carnival as dialogic space becomes most evident. Carnival, for Bakhtin (1968), is characterised by the suspension of hierarchies, the profanation of the "official" order, and the celebration of laughter. In Magona's text, the kitchens and servants' quarters of white households become miniature carnivals: spaces where black women, ostensibly subordinated, temporarily invert hierarchies through storytelling and laughter. Their conversations are counter-discourses, mocking the absurdities of apartheid while forging solidarity among themselves.

For instance, when Sheila recounts her employer's insistence on calling her "girl" despite her being an adult, her incredulous question — *"Will they ever stop?"* (25) — is both comic and subversive. The humour lies in the repetition of a word intended to infantilise: Sheila parodies its absurdity and strips it of its intended power. The laughter her question provokes dismantles the employer's linguistic domination, if only within the intimate circle of her peers. Similarly, when Virginia narrates how her employer buys her soap as an insinuation that she is unclean, she reframes this insult as her second stroke of bad luck that day, joking that she should consult a witchdoctor to find out who is cursing her. The women laugh not because their situations are trivial but because humour enables them to reframe humiliation as comedy, thereby creating a protective distance between themselves and the racism they endure. Carnival is dialogic not only because it contains many voices but also because it disrupts the singular "official" discourse. In apartheid South Africa, the state, the law, and the white household all sought to impose a monologic narrative of racial superiority and black subordination. Magona's women counter this monologism through heteroglossia — a multiplicity of voices that parody, ridicule, and destabilise official ideology. Their gossip, jokes, and ironic observations function as "double-voiced discourse" (Samuelson, 2012), simultaneously addressing one another and critiquing the structures that oppress them. When Stella ridicules her employer's demand that her children leave school to work in her place while she is sick, her story is both a personal anecdote and a pointed commentary on the exploitation of black families. The absurdity of the demand, rendered through Stella's sardonic retelling, exposes the grotesque logic of apartheid labour relations.

Humour in *"*Women at work" is also relational. The women's laughter is not solitary but collective, generated in conversation and shared in solidarity. This distinguishes Magona's work from purely satirical texts directed at an external audience. Her humour circulates within the community of workers themselves, enabling what Fanon called "disalienation" (1986: 231). Through laughter, the women transform alienation into connection, even if temporarily. The act of gossiping about Imelda — whose absence becomes a recurring motif — demonstrates this. On the surface, the women mock Imelda for being unreliable, but their fragmented stories also reveal her vulnerability to sexual and medical violence. The gossip sessions are therefore double-edged: they reproduce judgement, but they also preserve fragments of her silenced narrative. In this way, humour generates a dialogic chorus in which trauma and satire intertwine. Generational difference adds another dimension to this carnivalized dialogue. Lillian, the eldest, couches her critique in dry humour, joking about broken promises of pensions and the futility of relying on employers' goodwill. Her tone is at once comic and despairing, exposing the systemic betrayal of older women who gave their lives to domestic work. In contrast, Joyce, the youngest, insists on the necessity of structural change, mocking white feminists' paternalism and demanding fair pay as the foundation of equality. Joyce's ironic observations reveal her sharper political edge, situating her as a figure of future feminist consciousness. Read together, these intergenerational voices underscore the heteroglossia of Magona's text, where humour both bridges and highlights differences in perspective.

Magona's use of humour also underscores the gendered dimensions of carnival. Unlike Bakhtin's medieval carnival, often marked by masculine grotesque excess, Magona's carnivalesque emerges from the embodied

experiences of black women. Menstrual cycles, pregnancies, exhaustion, and sexual vulnerability become sites of both suffering and laughter. When women joke about their employers' ignorance of menstruation or their paranoia about black sexuality, they transform intimate bodily realities into weapons of satire. This re-gendering of the carnivalesque situates Magona firmly within an African feminist tradition, where the politics of the body is central. In this way, *"Women at work"* presents the domestic space not only as oppressive but also as paradoxically generative. Within kitchens and back rooms — the very spaces that epitomise black women's marginalisation — humour produces a dialogic carnival in which hierarchies are mocked, solidarity is forged, and survival is reimagined. The stories are not utopian; the women remain exploited and vulnerable. Yet their laughter signals a refusal to accept apartheid's monologic narrative of subordination. By carnivalizing domestic labour, Magona reveals that even within structures of profound inequality, black women have carved out spaces of critique, creativity, and community.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Sindiwe Magona's *Living, loving and lying awake at night*, and particularly the "Women at work" sequence, deploys humour as a form of doubled subversion: one that challenges the racialised hierarchies of apartheid while simultaneously exposing the patriarchal structures that circumscribed black women's lives. By situating Magona within a broader genealogy of African feminist humour, we have shown how her use of irony, satire, and grotesque realism anticipates later feminist humourists such as Celeste Ntuli. Magona's writing demonstrates that humour in African women's texts is not a frivolous escape from the harshness of reality but a politically charged practice that creates solidarity, sustains resilience, and enables subtle critique within oppressive structures. In *"Leaving"*, Magona foregrounds the exhaustion and isolation of a woman forced to choose between caring for her children and securing their survival through domestic work in a white household. Here, humour is absent, and instead, grotesque realism conveys the embodied costs of apartheid. Yet, as the sequence shifts into the city, humour emerges as a collective strategy. Through dialogue, gossip, and satire, Magona's domestic workers carnivalize their working conditions, parodying the authority of their employers and reframing humiliation into laughter. Kitchens and servants' quarters, spaces designed to enforce subordination, are reimagined as dialogic carnivals where women forge solidarity, critique oppression, and reassert their humanity. This study has also demonstrated the importance of reading Magona's humour through the twin lenses of Samuelson's "forked tongue" and Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Samuelson's framework enables us to see how Magona embeds gender critique within racial critique, while Bakhtin's theory illuminates the dialogic, communal dimension of laughter. Taken together, these frameworks reveal humour as a feminist practice that is both relational and political, one that allows Magona's characters to endure and resist intersecting oppressions.

At the same time, our analysis underscores the need to integrate literary, historical, and theoretical perspectives in understanding humour in African women's writing. The histories of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid domestic labour are not simply backdrops in Magona's fiction; they are refracted through carnivalesque satire, shaping the kinds of humour her characters produce and the solidarities they form. This synthesis between socio-historical context and literary form is central to appreciating how humour functions as both coping mechanism and critique. In conclusion, Magona's work compels us to reconsider the place of humour in South African literary studies. Too often, domestic worker narratives have been framed in terms of suffering and marginality alone, while humour in African literature has been treated as incidental rather than integral. By foregrounding humour in *"Women at work"*, we reposition Magona as a foundational figure in a feminist tradition of humour that continues in the work of contemporary writers and performers. Her characters' laughter does not erase pain; it transforms it into a mode of connection and critique. Future scholarship could extend this analysis in several ways. Firstly, comparative studies might situate Magona alongside other African women writers who mobilise humour, exploring continuities and divergences across national and linguistic contexts. Secondly, more sustained engagement with African feminist humour theory could refine our understanding of how laughter operates as a specifically gendered form of resistance. Finally, further research into the reception of Magona's humour — both historically and in the present — could illuminate how audiences have understood and responded to these strategies of doubled subversion. Such work would continue the project of tracing a genealogy of African feminist humour, one in which Magona stands as a crucial precursor whose legacy remains urgent and generative.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This article demonstrates an interdisciplinary scope by integrating historical, sociological, and literary research on domestic work in South Africa to analyse the role of humour in South African women's writing on domestic work, with a specific focus on Sindiwe Magona.

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