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Magical Laughter: Humour and Play as Subtexts in Angela Makholwa's *The Blessed Girl* (2017)

Isaac Ndlovu

[1]**Department of English, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa**

Abstract: Angela Makholwa's novel, *The Blessed Girl* (2017), suggests that the blesser-blessee phenomenon is an extreme manifestation of uncurbed lust and unbridled urge for material accumulation. Thus, both the blesser and blessee are figures of discontentment and mirror the dominant attributes of contemporary urban South Africa. Makholwa relentlessly satirises the pervasive spirit of sexual greed and the extreme desire for material goods through her sustained humorous and playful depiction of the infamous South African blesser-blessee phenomenon. Makholwa's achievement lies in that humour and play are not dispensable and auxiliary communicative strategies subordinated to a seemingly urgent need to pass moral judgement. Humour and play are integral to the articulation of the thematic concerns of the novel. They serve as the subtext of Makholwa's fiction that satirises the toxic and destructive nature of the blesser-blessee relationships in order to give, in the Nietzschean formulation, aesthetic delight rather than moral pleasure.

Keywords: humour; laughter; Makholwa; play; subtext

Introduction and theoretical framework

> "*He laughs. It's such a magical sound. Even if he is laughing at me*" (***The Blessed Girl***, 2017: 228)

Angela Makholwa's novel, *The Blessed Girl* (2017), humorously engages with the contentious South African blesser-blessee relationships. The story is presented as a memoir of the 28-year-old female protagonist who apparently leads a happy and "glamorous life" (187) but encounters a series of misadventures leading to her committing suicide. The foundational paradox of the novel is that despite the protagonist's tragic existence, humour and play permeate the story. Although entertaining and often funny, the humour and play of the story primarily function as subtexts; essential narrative strategies that persuade the reader to engage in an amoralistic manner with the text's thematic concerns. Evan Kingston (2015, n.p) argues that "humor can act as subtext in literature, deepening the unspoken bond between author and reader by letting the reader share in making the meaning of the story". Laurent Pernot (2021, p. 8) similarly observes that subtexts operate through "making something more understood, or something other than what is expressly stated". In *The Blessed Girl*, humour and play are deliberate and nonaggressive strategies

CORRESPONDENCE
Email: isaac.ndlovu@up.ac.za

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for articulating the contradictions of the hyper-capitalist climate of contemporary urban South Africa as it manifests through the vexed blesser-blessee relationships.

My argument relies on Robert R. Provine's (1996, p. 41) discussion of laughter and humour, and deploys the concept of aesthetic play as presented by the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Martine Prange (2023) aesthetic play "explains the artist's creativity and the artwork in contrast to moral and pathological explanations" (44). Johan Huizinga (1949, p. 158) claims that play and art have an indissoluble bond. These, together with other German thinkers' insights, help me identify and explore the nature of Makholwa's use of humour and play as requisite rhetorical narrative strategies for her story. I conclude by observing that Makholwa's use of humour and play illustrate complex authorial control which grants ambivalent agency to the protagonist and intensify the reader's feelings of being implicated in what Prange calls the "agony of living" (52). After Provine, I understand humour as a "[m]utual playfulness, in-group feeling and positive emotional tone" (41) that the reader senses in *The Blessed Girl* despite its painful episodes, tragic outcome and moralistic ending.

Provine's view of humour is related to Nietzsche's use of the word play where human activity and existence in general are characterised as play when he writes about "the play of creating" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1966: 25). Nietzsche used the word play to mean a range of things. I focus on Nietzsche's use of the word as "a life-giving and joyful inner or outer activity carried out for its own sake" (Martine Prange 023: 34). In handling what she considers as the social and cultural degeneracy of South African society through humour and play, it is as if Makholwa is saying, "I do not know any other way of associating with great tasks than play" (*Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (1967: 471) "Why I Am So Clever 10). Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer observes: "Play has a special relation to what is serious. […] More important, play itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness" (2004[1960], p. 102). Gadamer adds: "Play fulfil its purpose only if the player loses himself in play" (103). Kim (2024, p. 144) points out: "In German-speaking philosophical discussion, play (in German: Spiel) as a concept has been beloved for its versatile role in the harmonization and mediation of opposites". Evidently, play and humour are complex philosophical concepts. However, in my analysis, I largely focus on how Makholwa effectively deploys the positive aspects of these concepts to achieve her literary goals.

Brian Boyd points out that "humor can be used … to laugh *at* as well as laugh *with*, to *be* funny by making fun *of* people" (2004: 14; emphasis in the original). Notably, Makholwa's story suggests that humour is not limited to laughing *at* and *with* but can combine these two elements to produce what I call magical laughter as captured in the framing quotation of this article. These are Bontle's words reflecting on her son's laughter. He had been estranged to her mother but he was warming up to her again. Although Golokile is laughing at Bontle, he is not ridiculing or making fun of her. His laughter affirms or justifies life (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, (2008[1872]: 7, 83). This laughter can be called *with-at*, because it is genial mocking that comes from a space of goodwill. This is the same in-between laughter, that makes Bontle address the reader as "Dear Confidante" (225). It invites the reader to simultaneously laugh *at* her and laugh *with* her. It is magical laughter that functions as the novel's subtext. Consequently, due to her deep self-reflexivity in her playing with non-normative possibilities through her protagonist's memoir, Makholwa signals that both her humour and play are not just add-ons but are constitutive of the story. The inseparability of humour and play with Makholwa's thematic concerns helps us reconcile the co-existence of contradictory states where humour and play serve not only as "balm and barb" (Boyd, 2004, p. 14), but also possess more ambiguous functions where laughing *at* is not malicious ridicule, and playing *against* is not a mark of hostility. Makholwa wants the reader to laugh at Bontle and be against her actions and choices, and yet be able to magically laugh with her and enjoy her infectious self-deprecating playfulness.

Thus, analysing Makholwa's novel requires a double exercise of acknowledging and moving away from traditional theories of humour. Nietzsche understood the ideal of human activity as play, arguing that an "ideal runs on before us … the ideal of a spirit who plays naively … with everything that has hitherto been called holy, good, inviolable, divine" (*The Joyful Wisdom* 1960: 352). This description fits Makholwa's protagonist's self-depiction as a brave new woman set on playfully and humorously overturning normative values about beauty, education, sex and success. Boyd (2004) explicitly associates humour with play when he argues: "Humor … like play, is fundamentally social … subject … to the competitive as well as the cooperative" (15). Makholwa's humour is animated by the paradoxical malaise of contemporary urban South African life that manifests itself in the enticingly playful and yet socially destructive blesser-blessee relationships. The author's humour and play emanate from her imagining of a subtext that at once renders the protagonist both a knowing player and a naïve plaything.

Magical or at-with and with-at Laughter

What I call magical or *at-with* and *with-at* laughter that characterises the novel is generated by the inconsistency between Bontle's alpha-player self-constructions and her victimhood that contribute to her making choices that lead to tragic outcomes. Bontle alternates between inviting the reader to laugh *at* her and *with* her. It is Makholwa's achieving a delicate balance between these states that imbues her novel with its unmistakable playful tone. For example, Bontle encourages the reader to laugh with her when she playfully confides in the reader that a psychologist diagnosed her as having "a borderline personality disorder and that [she] suffer[s] from extreme narcissism" (160). These choreographed self-revelations of vulnerability are emotional baits that structure the reader's feelings of empathy towards Bontle. The humour that is generated through this and other sly strategies lead to what Rebecca Fasselt (2018, p. 376) calls the portrayal of Bontle as a "trickster figure". Quoting Lucinda H. MacKethan, Fasselt points out that the trickster provides an avenue for female protagonists to break free from victimhood and objectification "through comedies of disguise and deceit" (379). For example, although Bontle declares that she does not care about being a likeable narrator, her comic deceits and disguises make her ambiguously likable. She says:

> I don't really want to jump on that train because if I try to impress you, I'll start self-censoring, which defeats the purpose. The reason I'm writing this memoir is because I want to be as honest and sincere as possible. My life is quite a ride and for me to make sense of it, I really want to throw everything out there – warts and all. (49)

Ironically, she invites and garners likeability by feigning not to care for it. Her playfulness comes through later when she admits that she cares, saying: "It's just that I like impressing you by trying to sound formal when I am talking about my business interests" (71). It is through somersaulting and changing direction that Bontle remains playful and maintains the humour in her memoir. Bontle indicates that her personality appeals to that South African self that wants to achieve a 'soft life' with minimum effort which she calls "the 80/20 principle in the way that [she] live[s] her life: 20% effort for 80% reward" (4). In her suicide note she scolds her South African reader: "You are the reason that girls like me exist … I got … hundreds of thousands of Instagram followers. Many likes on social media, and girls telling me I was 'Master' of the game" (277). However, even here, the player-played ambiguity creates humour as the reader realises that, all along, Bontle was playing her into this profound moment of implicatedness in the sense in which Michael Rothberg (2019) uses this concept. By implicatedness, Rothberg delineates the condition of being folded into "events that at first seem beyond our agency as individual subjects" (1). Makholwa's use of play and humour leads to the South African reader's realisation that when she laughs at Bontle, through implication, she is also laughing at herself.

It is Bontle's ability to maintain the laughing *with-at* and *at-with* binary that the story's humour remains consistent. Bontle candidly admits to having a "'bitchy'" sense of humour and provocatively asks the reader: "You're not getting used to my sense of humour, are you?". Through her playfully confrontational sense of humour, she confesses the sanctioned desires that most readers would be too ashamed to admit. She proudly declares: "I'm the poster child for instant gratification … I want it all and I want it right now. Life's too short" (57). Thus, Bontle's celebration of the so-called social abnormalities humorously lays bare the unconscious instant gratification logic that animates the national psyche. By laughing at and with Bontle, the South African reader realises that she herself is partly a plaything in Bontle's emotional rollercoaster memoir.

Evidently, Bontle's character is humorously and playfully developed and revealed through her own boastful declarations that she is a top player. She says: "Life is nothing but a game, so when're a major player like me, it's important to know the rules so that you're always a step ahead" (167). She approaches life as play in the Nietzschean sense of the word. Nietzsche advices, and then rhetorically asks, "one must play and mock! Do we not ever sit at a great table of mocking and playing?" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1905: 328). Bontle's self-description as a chief player approximates this desire of mocking and playing. She confesses: "When I realised how easy it was to convince people, especially boys, to do what I wanted, I decided that that was how I was going to cruise my way through life" (4). She calls this her "philosophy on life" which has ensured that she notched up "the kind of successes that most people [her] age only dream about" (4). She admits to never spending "a single day in a university lecture hall" (4), saying: "The only books in my house are motivational treasures by the likes of my hero Donald Trump, Richard Branson and books about how to manipulate men … he he he" (4). Later, she quotes Mr Snoop Doggy Dogg, the American rapper and singer, calling him "the great philosopher" (30). The sarcasm in Bontle's statements is an invitation to the reader to laugh at her but with an awareness that everyone is implicated in her negative self-revelations.

Bontle establishes the playful and humorous tone of her memoir very early in the narrative when she points out that her physical beauty gave her a pass in life, saying: "My name is Bontle Tau[1] … From a very young age, I knew that I was exceptionally beautiful" (3). Facetiously, she declares that "beauty [was her] passport to greatness" (96). Bontle playfully depicts herself as a top predator and the men she catches as helpless prey of their lustful desires. Recalling how she caught one of her blesser's attention, Papa Jeff, she says: "My skirt was short enough to give full exposure to my yellow, toned legs and my bum stuck out to amplify my earthly, genuine, African assets" (37). Bontle seems to instinctively subscribe to the following Nietzschean insight and admonition when it comes to her attitude towards men: "In the true man there is a child hidden: it wanteth to play. Up then, ye women, and discover the child in man!" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1905: 69). Bontle's diction is playful and the sexually provocative images show that she understands the power of her sexual appeal. About her ability to attract blessers, she exclaims: "Oh yes, I have a PhD in MENcology, baby!" (4). It is Bontle's assured self-awareness that invites the reader to laugh *at* and *with* her. She deliberately provokes the reader through her cheerful proposition of the possibility of living a flamboyant lifestyle solely by exploiting the lustful desires of rich men.

Bontle also invites the reader to laugh at her because of her condescending humour towards everyone she deals with claiming that she knows how to be a winner. For example, when she eventually gets the lucrative business deal, her blesser, Teddy, advises her to work with Mama Sophia who seemingly has a legitimate construction company. Despite being "completely clueless" (29) about business, she despises Mama Sophia because "she has the dress sense of a hobo" (21). Bontle thinks she is better than the project engineers because her connections make her a rainmaker who gets the actual contracts. About the seeming oddity of her, a girl who failed her high school final examinations but ends up paying the wages of engineers, she playfully muses: "We are not born equal. Some are given the brains and others are given the street smarts and the charisma" (22). This insistence that she is on top of her game is also seen in her Instagram post after her meeting with Mama Sophia: "'Hustling, baby … business meeting with my partner'" (22). Invoking the idea of being a shrewd player, Bontle refers to the way she makes money as "the hustling game" (96). She proves her hustling abilities, when R2 million is eventually paid into her account. Teddy, the mastermind behind the deal, had told her to keep only R500 000 for herself. However, she slyly keeps R800 000 and bribes Teddy with sex. Later, when this Teddy business tender goes sour, Bontle affects "conviction and moral rectitude" (117) as if she does not care for money. She tells the reader that at that moment, she elevated her status "from gold digger to girlfriend" (117) before Teddy. On another occasion when she is invited to celebrate with Iris's "court geeks" (135), she intentionally curates herself as "a corporate tart than a girl skilled in digging for gold" (135). The *with-at* laughter is achieved when Bontle makes the reader her confidant; as they laugh at those that Bontle is playing.

Further, Bontle invites being laughed at when she tries to establish herself as a better player than her friends. She tells the reader: "I am currently twenty-four years old; I own two businesses, a fully paid-up penthouse on Grayston Drive in Sandton … and I drive a luxury German vehicle – a convertible no less" (4). As it turns out, most of these claims are either outright lies or half-truths. When her life unravels, one of her friends, Iris, learns that Bontle has betrayed her, and angrily says: "The only business you do is lying on your back for whoever finances your lifestyle" (245). Ironically, it is Bontle herself who reports Iris' apt but bitter outburst. Later when she admits to lying about owning the penthouse, saying: "I said I'm renting. But Papa Jeff promised to pay it off for me by the end of next year, so technically I will be owning it" (7). Bontle makes the reader laugh with her because of her proclivity to laugh at herself. For example, she says that when she first met Papa Jeff who "owns various BEE companies that are invested in the mining, media and property sectors" (33), she thought "he was at least a 106 years old" (33). This is her self-mocking admission that her sexual relationships are only motivated by her addiction to an expensive lifestyle.

Clearly, Bontle generates humour by constructing herself as an agentive player while also inadvertently exposing her vulnerable playing position. For instance, one of her friends Iris, commends her for being "so good at playing the game" (134). Ironically, they later fight because Bontle plays so well that she steals Iris' rich boyfriend, Mr Emmanuel. Bontle attracts Mr Emmanuel by presenting herself as an independent and strong business woman.

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[1] She tells the reader that Bontle means "The Beautiful One [and that her] surname means lion" (De Montaigne, 1987). Incidentally, at one point the singer Snoop Dogg rebranded as Snoop Lion. This probably explains Bontle's liking of the singer.

She calculatedly tells Mr Emmanuel and his friends that she gets frustrated with men “because they see [her] as a plaything, or they try to test how ballsy and hard-arsed [she] can be” (70). Paradoxically, she constructs herself as a player by exposing herself to the appropriative male gaze.

The *with-at* laughter is also provoked by Bontle’s ability to undercut her flamboyant statements about her ‘blessed’ life with insightful comments that expose the social maladies responsible for her warped ideas about what constitutes a successful life. Simultaneously, Bontle is tantalizingly appealing and humorously repealing as she unsuccessfully refuses to be life’s plaything. She demonstrates a desire for a complete existential self-mastery advocated by Nietzsche who commanded: “We ought also to be able to stand above morality, and not only stand with the painful stiffness of one who every moment fears to slip and fall, but we should also be able to soar and *play* above it!” (*The Joyful Wisdom*, II: I47; my emphasis). Nietzsche is calling for an active creation rather than passive obedience when it comes to morality. Bontle offers glimpses of what one’s existence could be if one chooses to stand above morality in the Nietzschean sense. She unashamedly confesses to having sex with “Uncle Chino, Aunty Mabel’s husband” (9) and to having a long-term sexual relationship with Papa Jeff; the rich husband of one of her hair business clients. These are presented not as mere moral lapses but as bold lifestyle choices that distinguish Bontle from those who opt for stifling moral conformity.

Bontle is contemptuous of individuals that she regards as being out of tune with South African spirit and her philosophy of a glamorous life. Ironically, she benefits from the same individuals she despises when it is convenient for her. As already noted, she has transactional sex with Uncle Chino although she caricatures him as a “poor excuse for a human being” (9). She adds: “I’ve never really found him interesting, what with his thick glasses, boring dress code and beer boep” (9). She scornfully dismisses him: “Uncle Chino from Extension 5, Corner Loserville & Hopeless Street, SA” (10). The reader laughs *with* but also laughs *at* Bontle’s comically superiority as she does not only have sex with her loser uncle but also accepts money and later business advice from him. Later, when she snatches the rich Mr Emmanuel from Iris, she initially has moral pangs. However, she dismisses guilt with a joke, saying: “Maybe I should donate my brain to scientific research when I die because I seem to lack the hormone or emotion that produces empathy, especially when it comes to matters of the heart” (84). Later, she would confess that Golokile, whom she first introduced as her little brother, is in fact her son that she had when she was fourteen years old. Her insincere apology for deceiving the reader reveals her ability not only to play her lovers but also the reader: “I’m sorry to say this, but the truth is that I’ve told you a mountain of lies” (204). She also admits that her goal in life is “[b]eing pursued by men [and] [l]iving a life of luxury” (248). Even this accurate self-assessment participates in Bontle’s playing the reader into laughing *with* her. Paradoxically, Bontle also invites the reader to laugh *at* her by revealing her own vulnerabilities.

Bontle approaches life as a stage where she succeeds because of her strong playacting skills. For example, she adopts a convincing business woman persona when she persuades Mr Emmanuel to invest in Ntokozo’s Careway hospital project. She is self-deprecatingly aware of her abilities and weaknesses. She says:

> I listen to the person and I can deliver it all back verbatim when needed. By the time I deliver *my performance*, I can repeat everything word for word. I even mimic their mannerisms when they speak in these technical terms that I don’t understand. (145; my emphasis)

As a performer, Bontle becomes what her circumstances demand. This performance often results in the reader laughing with Bontle when she seems to have outplayed everyone. However, her performances also result in the reader laughing at her when she becomes a plaything in what she would have thought was her performance. For example, after sexually outperforming herself for Mr Emmanuel, she discovers that Iris is also still having a good time with the same man. In an ironic twist, Iris calls Bontle asking for advice about what she should do since she is besotted with Mr Emmanuel and her new lawyer boyfriend, Salaelo Maboa. This painfully funny scenario makes Bontle realise that her degree in MENcology has limitations. She admits: “I’d stupidly convinced myself that [Mr Emmanuel had] stopped seeing Iris, or at least was giving her the cold shoulder” (150). She bitterly regrets “cooking him expensive dinners, having unprotected sex with him, and ravaging [her] poor body with his gigantic penis” (150). Mr Emmanuel is the alpha-player and Bontle a mere plaything, and she admits that “he’s been juggling [them] like an expert all this time” (154). After this realisation, Bontle’s mind sinks “into a dark tunnel” and she declares that she is “[u]nloved and unlovable” (156). She then tries to commit suicide as she admits to being a “lost, an otherworldly being trying desperately to fit into a world that’s much larger than [her]” (159). For a while, she loses her leading player position when she is hospitalised and later spends three weeks in a "mental ward" (160). However, despite her ordeals, after her discharge from the mental ward Bontle declares that she "was still in the game" (163) and has sex with her 'husband' without condoms.

Bontle's performance is so playfully serious that she loses herself into it and also draws the reader into it. Towards the end of the narrative when she is HIV positive and paraplegic, she addresses the reader: "Thanks, by the way. For playing along" (268). Here, the humour is at the reader's expense for having been Bontle's plaything by tagging along with an unreliable narrator. Bontle plays so seriously that she oftentimes forgets she is playing. To illustrate, although she despises Ntokozo for not making the pursuit of wealth his goal, she nevertheless wants to keep him close as some kind of insurance. When Ntokozo finally signs the divorce papers and personally delivers them to her, Bontle falls apart. She feels "tears running down her face" (176). Ntokozo joins her in crying and they "cry and cry, until they laugh" (176). This mixture of emotions, or what Michel Eyquem De Montaigne (274) calls humans' ability to "weep and laugh at the same thing", mirrors the play-structure of Bontle's life and how her memoir evokes both pity and laughter. Addressing the reader, she says: "You're just reading and thinking: this one is stupid, though, hey?". Bontle deliberately exposes herself to the reader and allows herself to be pitied and laughed at.

Doubled form of being, play and self-reflexivity

Bontle's humour also depends on what Lasse Juel Larsen (2015, p. 11) calls "a doubled form of being, consisting of actual being and absence of being". This captures Larsen's understanding of make-believe play. Bontle generates play and humour by existing in the tension between what she really is and how she imagines herself and how she wants others to perceive her. Her perception of her existence as play results in this doubling of her being as she self-consciously constructs herself as something she is not to attract rich men. She is always on the lookout for potential male prey. On one occasion when she is dining with potential blessers, she muses:

> One thing that you can't afford if you're in this *game* is to drink too much. Aside from losing your looks, men will make a fool of you and take advantage of you, so always keep your eyes wide open … so you can keep your legs open at your own discretion. (20); my emphasis)

Bontle playfully suggests that the doubled form of being is the life of a successful blessee. The image of wide-open eyes signals vigilance, and that of open legs is a euphemism for a sexual encounter. Throughout her memoir, Bontle presents the blessee as a perpetual alert player. For example, when her estranged husband, Ntokozo, offers her partnership in the private hospital business, she tells herself: "I have to *play* this one very carefully" (83; my emphasis). Previously, when she offended Iris while plotting to have Iris' lover, she observes: "I try to *play my game* differently" (51; my emphasis). When Mr Emmanuel has invested millions into the Careway hospital project, and Bontle seems to have disappeared, "he thinks he's been played" (233). In all these instances, Bontle cunningly doubles her being in order to achieve her objectives. There are always two Bontles at any given time, the one she thinks she really is and the one she projects to catch potential blessers.

This double form of being accounts for most of the humour and play in Bontle's memoir. In other instances, Bontle attempts to balance her boisterous arrogance as a blessee player by depicting herself as a "pure, and innocent" (28) girl who struggled and conquered "clinical depression" (28), "a simple girl from Mamelodi, raised by an alcoholic single mother" (35). To keep the reader laughing with her, Bontle presents herself as having been played by life due to being "the shebeen queen's daughter" (32) which resulted in her teen pregnancy and her growing "into a mass of insecurities" (45). Later, Bontle portrays herself as a victim when Papa Jeff falls into hard times and can no longer sponsor her expensive lifestyle. She elicits mixed humour when she reports that Papa Jeff's changed financial situation agitated her so much that she vomits because she was "worried about the entire South African economy" (113). She falls into episodes of depression, even spending "a month and a half" in a "psych ward" or "Funny Farm" (182) on "anti-depressants and meditation" (124). Fortunately, she has the "ability to pull [her]self up by the bootstraps" (28). She recovers from the shock and finds a "role to play" (108) in Papa Jeff's financial woes in order to stall the loss of the Merc that was still on instalments. Bontle generates humour by casting her entire existence as a performance; a play that helps her achieve her objectives.

On other occasions, Bontle creates humour by using the word play to refer to having multiple sexual partners. For example, Bontle predicts that Tsholo, who is admirably faithful to her boyfriend Tim, "will be the biggest player of them all" (52) if Tim were to cheat on her. To Bontle, Tsholo is smart, "so if she could shelve the love-struck teenager demeanour, she'd be the world's greatest player" (52). Bontle is cynical about Tsholo's insistence on living as a unified being without the constant need to double herself to attract blessers. She is dismissive of Tsholo for sticking with “a boy she’s been with since first year university [who] drives a Polo Playa” (19-20). Her words of ‘wisdom’ to Tsholo are: “‘All men are dogs and I’d rather be crying in a Ferrari than a Polo Playa’” (20). Despite the predominance of aesthetic play, the novel paradoxically closes by passing moral judgment suggesting that Tsholo’s choices are better suited for confronting the harsh realities of contemporary urban South African life.

However, the bulk of the story achieves humour because Makholwa creates a convincing playful character who consciously dismisses society’s morals. Due to her mastery of a doubled form of being, Tim sarcastically calls Bontle “‘The Queen of Bling!’” (57) and Tsholo jokingly reprimands her for her “crude tendencies” (58) that may corrupt Tim. Bontle revels in being the queen of bling and in her crude tendencies. For example, Bontle imagines how she would be in control of her relationship with Mr Emmanuel, bragging: “Once I give him some of my hot sexy loving, then I’ll stop *acting like* a nervous virgin. He’ll be eating out of my hands in no time” (73; my emphasis). When Mr Emmanuel eventually arranges an elaborate dinner for her at a restaurant, Bontle imagines her victory, thinking: “This one … I’m having him for dinner. He’s mine. End of story” (74). The irony is that after having sex with Mr Emmanuel, Bontle phones her surgeon, Dr Heinz, in a panic claiming that she has lost her vagina because “Mr Emmanuel almost paralys[ed] [her] insides” (81) during what she calls “The Great Sex Attack” that almost “split [her] in half” (84). In a humorous twist, Mr Emmanuel has Bontle for dinner. Despite these painful setbacks, Bontle says: “I am a fighter. Always was and always will be” (78). Bontle’s memoir has an unmistakable humorous flare because she plays with all earnestness even when she is aware that she is playing.

Bontle playfully presents herself as a keen observer of human behaviour, saying: “No matter how intelligent a man purports to be, he instantly turns to mush at the sight of a beauty queen” (101). About love, she has this insight: “I think love, or whatever people believe is love, is just like that. There’s the crazy chemistry of New Love, where you can’t bear to be without each other, but over time it mellows out” (106). She presents her brief marriage to Ntokozo as a moment of craziness where one is a plaything of uncontrollable emotions of physical attraction. She views that part of her life as “a bygone era when life was real and clean and held this bright, untainted promise” (31). Now as a self-conscious player, she believes that notwithstanding her “background, in spite of all those barriers, she knew [she] could break through them” (35). However, most of the humour comes from Bontle’s subdued understanding that “all playing is a being-played” (Gadamer 2004[1960], p. 106). For example, she unabashedly confesses that money is her main motivation for dating older men, saying: “Sex is not such an aphrodisiac to me as much as money is” (38). Using rhetorical questions, she reveals this self-awareness: “Is money an addiction of mine. Men or, rather, male attention? What about beauty?” (95). She admits to experiencing an orgasm after receiving a notification of R2 million payment from her construction company dealings with Teddy, saying:

> When I saw the message from my bank service pinging on my phone, I felt something wild and uncontrollable in my pants. Yes. I actually had a real, live, orgasm … first time ever in my life … an orgasm without anyone touching my nether regions. (24)

It is Bontle’s playful admission of her weaknesses that generates most of the memoir’s humour.

Humour is also produced by Bontle’s sarcastic self-reflexive playfulness as she addresses her audience, saying: “By now, you’ve decided I’m a whore anyway, so let me introduce you to Papa Jeff” (33). Earlier, she mockingly addresses her readers: “South Africans … [y]ou can’t think beyond the confines of your borders” (8). Later she says that “all South Africans need to spend at least three days in a mental ward … [and that] between apartheid, corruption and crime, every South African should have a social grant for anti-depressants” (160). Bontle is aware that the reader is judging her harshly for her liberal sexual life. She anticipates and counters the reader’s objections by claiming to be mischievous but not reckless, saying: “Oh, the way I see you rolling your eyes about my sex life. I’m not stupid. I condomise” (43). Through these direct addresses, Bontle directs the readers’ emotional responses by establishing rapport with them. Her humorous social media posts also allow her to set the terms of engagement by carefully managing the information that her followers access. She admits that when she goes through a dry spell, she recycles old happy photos pretending they are current. She reasons: “You can’t be posting depressing stuff on your social media pages. I feel it’s part of my patriotic duty to always reflect an upbeat lifestyle and outlook” (97). This exposes the founding tragi-comic structure of influencers’ logic; the cynical striving for an elusive curated presence on social media platforms.

Bontle also generates humour through knowingly posturing as an accomplished and knowledgeable blessee who altruistically guides novice blessees. In "How to Travel Well with your Borrowed Lover: A Mistress's Guide" (184), she offers unsolicited tongue in cheek advice to would-be blessees. The irony is that the rules for a successful blessee are mastered through the same disciplined repetitive process that Bontle tries to escape by eschewing academic rigour. Adorno observes: "Playful forms are without exception forms of repetition" (2002[1970]: 317). In Bontle's playful guide, the mistress is advised: "Bring your brightest, shiniest disposition. No moaning, groaning (unless in bed) or any disagreeable behaviour. No moodiness, please. If it's your period, suppress it" (184). The final point tells the mistress to "be Always On. Yes, like the wi-fi signal. Be always On, No headaches, no dryness, no excuses" (184). In her advice, Bontle inadvertently reveals that what she chooses as an easy option for making money is not dissimilar to the academic diligence of her friends Tsholo and Iris. Both processes are repetitive; the player must understand and play by the rules or risk being a plaything.

Bontle's memoir can be read as a series of playful confessions that she has been lying to the reader. About the businesses she claimed to own, she says: "Earlier, when I told you about my two businesses, I was referring to the two businesses that I registered last month on the advice of Teddy Bear. I'm not really trading yet, but as you can tell, I am very bright" (11). She admits that she is an unreliable narrator, playfully challenging the reader: "[P]lease don't keep highlighting inconsistencies. You are not the police of my life" (13). Although she masquerades as a 24-year-old unmarried girl, she later discloses that she is actually 28 years old, had a child at 14 and is still married to Ntokozo, a man who "has the patience of pope" (29). Hilariously explaining why her marriage subsequently failed, she says despite being "a young married woman with big dreams, she discovered that she was "actually married to the Dalai Lama" (30). She says that it is great on paper to have people who want to save the world "but in real life we need hustlers" (35). Making a side remark about her age, she says: "Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I told you I was twenty-four at the beginning of the story. So what? It's not like I'm the first woman to lie about her age" (61). Reflecting on her made-up life story, she advises the reader: "For your own sanity, do not try to do the maths. *I'm* the only one who understands the unorthodox chronology of *my life*" (29; my emphasis). The insistence on being in control of the game allows Bontle to wiggle out of the inconsistencies and deliberate lies with a straight face. By reinterpreting and creatively retelling her life story, Bontle suggests that the past is not an intimidating closed event but can be opened up through the unending entertaining play of re/interpretation by those who are willing to be major players.

Often, the novel's humour is the outcome of unexpected turn of events that render humans as life's playthings. Bontle's life seems to be back on course after the emotional episode of divorce papers with Ntokozo. After losing her Papa Jeff given Mercedes Benz, Mr Emmanuel gives her a BMW and buys her shares worth millions of rands in the Careway hospital project. Bontle is ecstatic: "You are now looking at the official shareholder in a multibillion rand project. Ka-ching. My future is set and I'm not looking back … I'm so happy" (181). Similarly, after her discharge from the psychiatric hospital Papa Jeff arranges to take her for a holiday in Mozambique and Cape Town, and she excitedly exclaims: "I'm back! Bontle Tau's back in the game, baby!" (183). However, after the happy Mozambique-Cape Town holiday, Papa Jeff's wife comes to dump suitcases with Papa Jeff's belongings telling Bontle to keep him for good. Later, in a heated exchange, Papa Jeff angrily calls Bontle "a brainless moron who quotes stupid American books" (192). Likewise, when she decides to sniff cocaine before her would-be great date with Mr Emmanuel, she tells herself: "I want Fun Bontle to come out to play tonight!" (264). After dressing up, she exclaims: "I'm perfect. I'm a goddess" (264). A short while later, she is involved in a near fatal car accident and is in "a coma for almost a month" (266) with a damaged spinal cord that turns her into "a paraplegic" (267). She is "also HIV positive" (268). Bontle's life motto from *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne: "Life is not happening to you. You create it" (192) proves true for her but in a tragic ironic way. Bontle learns that the game of life has no astute players because of its countermoves that reduce top players into playthings.

In other instances, humour is only possible because the reader is aware that although all too realistic, Bontle's story is fiction; a space for playing with ideas; an artistic provocation and an invitation to the reader to rethink the blesser-blessee situation. This is in line with Nietzsche's conception that play is "an activity of artists and a vital source of life for the public" (Prange, 33). Similarly, Theodor W. Adorno (2002[1970]) claims that in "the concept of art, play … is a crucial element" (p. 317). Alluding to Nietzsche, Hinman (1974) adds that "art is a game, a form of playing, which makes it possible to live on despite the fundamental pain, terror, and contradiction of existence" (108). *The Blessed Girl* playfully depicts the terror and contradiction that is constitutive of contemporary South African urban life for vulnerable young women who desire a perceived good life. For example, the first lesson that Gladys, Bontle's mother, teaches her fourteen-year-old daughter is that she should always play with men at her own terms, saying she “should never allow a man to sleep with [her] if he was not going to spend money on [her]. Lots of money”. Gladys firmly believes that is “the only way to ‘play the game’” (200). Ironically, Bontle exposes that she becomes a plaything to the lustful men whose money she desires. Gladys hints at this paradox when she constructs herself as both a player and plaything. She presents herself as having been a plaything when she appeals for her daughter’s empathy, saying: “Sweetie … I raised myself in this wicked town. All I had was my head and my body; nothing else” (201). Bontle talks of an emptiness that results from “running around with old men, chasing nothing – money, clothes, cars. Material things” (203). Despite the painful realism of the depicted situations, Makholwa’s fiction predominantly demands what after Nietzsche, we can call an aesthetic reader, “someone who responds *affectively* and *affirmatively* to what they perceive” (Prange, 40; emphasis in the original). This is because Makholwa’s fiction foregrounds play and humour as subtexts over the moral judgment with which the novel concludes.

Conclusion

Makholwa’s achievement lies in her consistent use of humour and play to delicately balance satirising her heroine while using the same protagonist to create satire through her indefatigable, perceptive and self-critical sense of humour and playful actions. To use Nietzsche’s formulation, in Bontle, Makholwa creates a protagonist neither a heroine nor a villain but a character who “has enough of tragedy and comedy in [herself]” (*The Joyful Wisdom*, II: 122). Bontle consistently recognises the playfulness of her existence and those around her. She therefore cannot be a heroine in the traditional sense of this word because “[a]round the hero everything turns into a tragedy” (*Basic Writings of Nietzsche* “Epigrams and Interludes” 150, p. 191). Bontle, the vivacious and convivial protagonist, who, to use her own words, is often “delirious with excitement” (72), is Makholwa’s affable satirical butt, an object of genuine empathy and a figure of the unconscious aspirations of the majority of South Africa’s urbanites. This aporetic state of affairs is captured in Bontle’s sarcastic address to the reader: “Welcome to my world. Drama central” (205). This is an invitation to read the memoir as both playful and humorous. Ultimately, Angela Makholwa’s *The Blessed Girl* is more than a cautionary tale or a straightforward moral indictment of the blesser-blessee phenomenon. By refusing to subordinate her narrative craft to a prescriptive moralising tale, Makholwa masterfully employs humour and play not as mere ornamental devices, but as the essential, subversive subtext that allows her satire to have provocative depth. This sustained, playful perspective is what transforms the novel’s critique of unbridled lust and material greed into an experience of aesthetic delight, rather than one of moral discomfort or didactic reprimand. In the figures of the discontented blesser and blessee, Makholwa thus holds up a sophisticated, laughing mirror to the toxic consumerism and sexualised transactional relationships of contemporary urban South Africa, ensuring that the novel’s examination of societal malaise is delivered with compelling narrative wit and an enduring artistic accomplishment.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study offers a focused, close reading of a single South African novel, utilizing theories of humour and play as its central analytical framework. While rooted in literary scholarship, the research provides interdisciplinary insights into the social and psychological functions of these concepts, demonstrating their relevance across disciplines, including sociology and psychology.

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