

# ***Mother to Mother* – plausible readings**

**MABASA ALEN ZIMUNYA**

**Subject Head: Carter High School**

This paper seeks to proffer different ways of reading Sindiwe Magona's **Mother to Mother**. It is intended to be a treatise on possible approaches that may be taken in trying to unpack the novel. In this regard, it is prudent to hastily add that this paper does not seek to be a commentary on the novel. The paper does not aim at being a study guide. It does not try to masquerade as a pedagogical tool for handling the text. This paper merely aims at suggesting ways by which the reading of **Mother to Mother** may be more fulfilling.

The structure of the novel makes it easy for a reader to regard it as a series of diary entries. This reading, while sounding simplistic, may help a lot of readers. The private nature of the diary in real life affords the writer an opportunity to use intense earnestness and no holds barred self-expression. Mandisa is portrayed as a distressed mother who turns to what can be construed as a diary to pour her heart out. This effectively captures and portrays her desperation to be 'heard' and 'understood' and goes further to denote the fact that she is fully aware that the world finds it difficult to understand her and her story. The story lends itself to this reading as Mxolisi is supposed to have committed a despicable crime as coldly acknowledged by the first statement of Mandisa's lament. As if to add insult to injury, the reader soon realises that it is Mxolisi's mother who seems to be condoning her son's action. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mandisa can only 'talk' to herself about this as all 'normal' human beings should find her story too abhorrent to entertain.

The novel may be placed within the corpus of the nebulous category that is generally entitled "feminism". The title of the novel seems to make this reading almost instinctive right from the beginning. Feminism may be regarded as nebulous in today's world considering the manner in which it has evolved over the years and the general perception of gender that the evolution of feminism has necessitated. However, the title of the novel seems to have connotations of exclusive femininity. It does not seem to have any room for males. Taken from this perspective, reading **Mother to Mother** seems possible from a purely feministic stand point.

The title of the novel creates visions of two mothers involved in a confidential whispered dialogue to which the masculine ear is only permitted an eavesdropping presence. The novel entrenches this reading when the reader realises the polemical nature of the mothers in the dialogue – not only are they of different races, they should be enemies considering that one of the mothers' children plays a pivotal role in making the other mother lose the essence of her motherhood. These differences between the mothers should drive them apart but the image of the confidential dialogue that the title evokes forces the reader to realise that there is common ground for the women in the dialogue. The common ground between the two women, motherhood, is exclusive to women even in this day when scientific advancement spews mind boggling inventions. While motherhood may be regarded as biological, its portrayal in the novel snugly fits into the treatment of the woman as a social artefact through what Judith Butler (1990) regards as the repetitive stylisation of the body which sees the two women from two different continents suffering the same fate.

This is made even more poignant by the 'absence' of men, let alone husbands, from the story. Mxolisi may be regarded as central to the main event of the story but it is not his story – this is Mandisa's story which she shares with Amy's mother. China, too, is given much the same treatment. Amy's father is virtually non-existent. The world of **Mother to Mother** seems to be a world of women in which men play cameo roles that are designed to foreground the plight of the women. The (inter)weaving of generations in the story firmly places the woman at the epicentre of the story with men featuring now and again to enhance the role of the woman by, for instance, facilitating the marriage between Mandisa and China. In patriarchal circumstances, the placing of **Mother to Mother** within the feminism corpus imbues the novel with a degree of pathos that tints the tone of the whole novel. The opening chapter of the novel is quite telling as two mothers engage in an emotive exchange concerning the loss of their children.

This may lead to another reading that is closely tied to feminism. That the feministic nature of the novel lends it a lot of pathos is very difficult to refute. This pathos, together with the nature of the crime (or offence – as another reading may suggest), make the reading of the novel as a moral text highly plausible. In her review of the novel, Lorelle Royeppen (2000) argues that there is a moral ambivalence in the novel as the reader is torn between condemnation and

condonation of Amy's tragic assault. Royeppen (ibid) argues that Amy's killing "is fraught with political, emotional and moral ambiguities, and cannot be justified or understood in neat, absolute binary categories of right or wrong, good or evil, or guilty or innocent." The novel takes the reader through many moral twists and turns from Mxolisi's inadvertent childhood selling out of his friends to his involvement in Amy's tragic end. That Mxolisi's childhood innocence in the former incident is easier to accept than his innocence in the latter is hardly arguable. However, the two incidents have interesting similarities that make them reflections of each other. When Mandisa seeks to absolve herself of any guilt in Amy's killing, she places the blame elsewhere but that does not stop the reader from contemplating the question. Royeppen (ibid) notes that the reader's "moral sensibilities" are tested as "Magona avoids direct confrontation with the abhorrence of the action, and focuses instead on the mother's acute and overwhelming sense of grief." The moral reading of the novel is pervasive. It is noticeable in other issues like the way in which Mandisa conceives Mxolisi and its patriarchal ramifications. The formative stages of the Mandisa-China relationship are not spared from moral scrutiny. The moral ambivalence that the novel evokes is premised on the extenuating circumstances that Mxolisi and those of his kind find themselves in.

This lends the novel to another reading. **Mother to Mother** may be regarded as an indictment of the political dispensation that created circumstances that bred characters such as Mxolisi. In this regard, the novel may be read as a political text. It may be difficult to read the novel in a purely Marxist manner but the connotations of the radical Malcolm X and Steve Biko are difficult to miss. The historical circumstances from which the novel is derived are impossible to overlook. In 1993 Amy Biel, an American exchange student, was killed in Gugulethu. The racial motivations associated with the incident provoked widespread reactions. The national agitations for change and the associated student activism of that time in South African history are well known. The black township students in **Mother to Mother** clearly associate themselves with the popular political sentiments of their time though their perception and understanding of the political ideologies behind the sentiments may be questionable as revealed by Mandisa who regards the school children as "tyrants". The racial divide that the political regime of that period of South African history sought to create and uphold manufactured circumstances conducive

for political strife. These circumstances were ubiquitous. Mxolisi may then be regarded as a product of his time making the killing of Amy an offence – not a crime.

This attracts another reading of the novel. Political critique easily lends itself to the victim-victimiser dichotomy. In most cases it creates subjectivity that colours people's perception of issues to an extent where whole societies end up polarised. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that was established to heal the wounds of South Africa's apartheid past was caught up in circumstances that could easily lead to the opposite of its desired ends. In a classic case of this, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela conducted a series of interviews with Eugene de Kock. At one time she touched de Kock's hand and he said to her, "that's the hand that pulled the trigger" (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2006). Her reaction to this is interesting. Her instinctive revulsion gave way to a contemplation that culminated in a humane connection establishing what the TRC intended to achieve. This may be instructive in reading **Mother to Mother**. The novel may be regarded as a reflection of the intentions of the TRC. Mandisa's conclusion of her appeal to Amy's mother sums this aptly when she says, "But for the chance of a day, the difference of one sun's rise, she would be alive today. My son, perhaps not a murderer." While Mandisa focuses on the fact that Amy is killed a day before she was scheduled to leave South Africa, the argument here may be extended to cover the whole apartheid era as an unfortunately bad day that brought the worst in those involved.

Anne Whitehead (2012) regards this as "reading with empathy". This reading of the novel blends well with the reading of the novel as a cross-cultural discourse. Cross-cultural writing may be regarded as literature that seeks to translate different cultural experiences in order to overcome differences. While regarding apartheid as a culture may sound derogative, it is clear that in **Mother to Mother** Mandisa sets out to make Amy's mother understand the circumstances that created Mxolisi and those like him. It is also interesting that in the actual historical event, Amy's parents condone the granting of amnesty to those who played a part in the killing of their daughter. This adds an interesting element to the cross-cultural reading of **Mother to Mother**. One of the most frequent criticism of literature as a field of study is its perceived 'theoretical' nature that is regarded as serving no 'practical' purpose to humanity. Cross-cultural literary theories have embraced other fields of study to make literature more 'practical'. One of such fields is trauma theory which seeks to study the depiction of human reacting to traumatising circumstances. Stef Craps

(2010) regards trauma theory as “an essential apparatus for understanding ‘the real world’ and even as a potential means for changing it for the better.” From perhaps a cynical perspective, history may be regarded as a record of that which hurt humanity. If taken this way, history becomes a study of the trauma that mankind has lived through. **Mother to Mother**, as a record of the historical event of the killing of Amy Biehl, becomes an effective tool to study that traumatic event in order to change the world for the better. In keeping with trauma studies, the novel invites the reader to make some psychological analysis of not only Mxolisi as the perpetrator of what some may regard as a crime, but other characters as well.

This paper has attempted to offer possible approaches to the reading of Sindiwe Magona’s **Mother to Mother**. The paper did not seek to analyse the text nor offer pedagogical navigation. It is hoped that the broad overviews offered here may be helpful in unpacking the text and preparing the teacher for meaningful and enjoyable engagement with both the text and the learner in the classroom.

## References

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