

# Hegemony and Autobiographical Self-Representation: The Case of Sindiwe Magona

Thengani Ngwenya

Sindiwe Magona's two-volumed autobiography, *To My Children's Children* (1990); *Forced to Grow* (1992) is a compelling narrative of a black woman's struggle for self-reliance and dignity in a socio-cultural environment fraught with numerous obstacles to personal fulfilment. Born in the Transkei in the early forties, Magona now lives and works in New York as a press officer for the United Nations. Like most black South African autobiographers, Magona writes of her struggle to create an 'authentic self-identity' by challenging those roles and identities imposed on her by dominant cultural and political discourses and ideologies. In its portrayal of Magona's challenges to both patriarchy and racism, the autobiography suggests alternative and inherently counter-hegemonic modes of self-representation available to South African black women in the 1990s.

This paper examines Magona's attempts, through inherently subversive modes of self-definition, to challenge hegemonic views about gender, race and ethnicity in her autobiography.

The paper's central argument revolves around the notion hegemony elaborated by Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s. Tim O'Sullivan *et al's* (1994:133) definition of hegemony alerts us to the usefulness of this concept as an analytical tool in studies of self-representation:

The crucial aspect of the notion of hegemony is not that it operates by forcing people against their conscious will or better judgement to concede power to the already-powerful, but that it describes a

situation whereby our consent is actively sought for those ways of making sense of the world which 'happen' to fit in with the interests of the hegemonic alliances of *classes*, or *power bloc*. Hence our active participation in understanding ourselves, our social relations and the world at large results in our complicity in our own subordination (e.i.o.).

Taking this conception of hegemony as a starting point, this essay examines the ways in which Magona's self-portrayal in her autobiography consciously challenges assumptions underpinning her community's cultural values and the political ideology of racial segregation.

Feminist critics of autobiography have long recognised the inherently subversive nature of personal histories written by women caught up in the double bondage of patriarchy and racism. Mainly because of the historical or referential status of this mode of writing, women autobiographers are in a position to create a counter-hegemonic discourse by re-defining their roles and identities to oppose cultural and political institutions from which they are excluded. It is hardly surprising therefore that most South African women's autobiographies of the pre-1994 era deal, almost exclusively, with the theme of constructing an identity and finding a voice within the constraints of the dominant ideology underpinned by patriarchy and racism. In a largely theoretical study of women's autobiography, Leigh Gilmore (1994:79f) comments on the political implications of autobiographical writing in relation to hegemonic discursive practices:

If subjectivity, figured by the autobiographical 'I', is produced in relation to discourses and institutions, then autobiography, the 'genre' most explicitly identified with self-representation, can be taken as a participant in that production. If we then also regard autobiography more broadly as part of a historically and formally changing discourse of self-representation, it is possible to interpret it as a *political site* on which human agency is negotiated within and against institutions on the grounds of truth. If this is so, then autobiography may also be a site of resistance, especially as it engages the politics of looking back and challenges the politics of

how the past and the present may be known in relation to a particular version of history (e.a.).

As Gilmore's astute comments suggest, autobiography is a powerful tool which may be used by women and other minority groups to 'write themselves into history'. The concepts of history, subjectivity, individuality, gender and race are all contestable and open to re-configuration within the mode of autobiography.

Magona's autobiography merits critical attention mainly because of the revealing and self-conscious ways in which it explores the convergence of class, race and gender in the creation and legitimation of certain social roles and subject positions within the South African social formation. She describes her development from being a daughter of an urbanised working-class family, a wife and a mother, a single parent, an 'unskilled worker' and ultimately, a professional woman who enjoys the hard-won respect and admiration of her community. As Margaret Daymond (1995:570) rightly points out, Magona's autobiography accounts for 'the transition from Xhosa cultural traditions and peasant economy to the current realities of black, urban, professional lives in a racially-based capitalist society'.

### **Feminist Theory and Autobiography**

Feminist studies of autobiography, especially those published during the 1960s and 1970s, display a marked tendency to present women in essentialist terms as a monolithic group. The common aim of these studies seems to be to expose and challenge male domination of women in its various manifestations. As Nancy Miller (1991:125) explains, for feminists in the 1970s, 'challenging the universality of the male autobiographical subject—the universal, but as it turned out Western, European, heterosexual, in a word canonical "I"—seemed an all-consuming task'. The oppression of women was often taken to display some characteristic features which transcend cultural and political ideologies.

Perhaps a more pragmatic approach would be to examine female subjectivity and identity not as totalizable and universal phenomena, but as products of a subtle interplay of a variety of factors relating to racial, material and socio-political considerations. Anne McClintock's (1991:220f)

comments on the assumptions underlying the idea of 'the Feminist Woman' alert us to the dangers inherent in essentialist approaches to gender:

Some feminists have been justly sceptical of the idea of a universal, female 'gynesis', fearful that it runs the risk of being fatally essentialist, formalist, and utopian. There is a very real danger in baptizing certain texts with the holy water of a new female privilege, erasing historical and cultural variations, and subsuming the multiplicity of women's lives into a single, privileged, and, as it happens, white middle class vision.

Bearing these prudent words of warning in mind, I shall attempt to avoid reductive feminist theory in my discussion of Magona's autobiography. A socio-historical and not exclusively 'feminist' analysis of Magona's life story will reveal the pivotal roles played by race, class, culture and history (in the broadest sense of that term), in the shaping of social consciousness and the allocation of domestic and public roles to women. As I hope to show in my analysis, Magona consciously critiques these predetermined roles and succeeds in creating her own 'authentic' identity which accords with her desires and aspirations. In an important sense therefore, Magona's autobiography demonstrates that hegemonic discursive practices which underpin both cultural and political ideologies can be effectively challenged both in the contested terrain of social action and in the arena of life writing.

Theorists who have written on the subject of women's autobiography tend to grapple with the demanding task of formulating a coherent poetics of this burgeoning sub-genre (Smith 1987; Stanley 1992; Stanton & Lionnet; Smith & Watson 1992; Smith 1993). For the purposes of this essay, the issue of gender and the network of social relations influenced and determined are seen as ideological constructs which assume different forms in different societies and historical epochs. The crucial role played by hegemonic discourses about identity and gender roles in autobiographical self-representation cannot be over-emphasised. Needless to say, these discourses form part of the ideology or a set of ideologies which determine self-conception in any given society. My discussion of Magona's strategies of self-portrayal takes as its point of departure the relationship between ideology and consciousness as described by Catherine Belsey (1991:596) in

her essay aptly entitled 'Constructing the Subject' in which she writes:

The subject is constructed in language and in discourse and, since the symbolic order in its discursive use is closely related to ideology, in ideology. It is in this sense that ideology has the effect, as Althusser argues, of constituting individuals as subjects, and it is also in this sense that their subjectivity appears 'obvious'.

Without granting ideology an all-determining role in the creation of subject positions, I shall argue that social roles prescribed by society for women are contingent on historical, cultural and political conditions. Consequently, autobiographical self-definition always takes place within the context of dominant 'languages'. As Sidonie Smith (1987:47) explains, 'the autobiographer situates herself and her story in relation to cultural ideologies and figures of selfhood'. Smith amplifies her argument as follows:

As she examines her unique life and then attempts to constitute herself discursively as female subject, the autobiographer brings to the recollection of her past and to the reflection on her identity interpretative figures (tropes, myths, metaphors, to suggest alternative phrasings). Those figures are always cast in language and are always motivated by cultural expectations, habits, and systems of interpretation pressing on her at the scene of writing.

Magona has chosen the discourses (what Smith accurately describes as 'languages') of culture, race and gender within which to situate the story of her personal growth and development. For Magona these major determinants of self-identity are far more important than her current status as a member of the professional class of the petty bourgeoisie. She has also chosen the conventional chronological narrative mode to depict her gradual development from a state of being a helpless victim of political conditions and repressive cultural values to a condition of an articulate, self-reliant and assertive professional woman. Obviously, the structure of Magona's story is at variance with the commonly held view that women autobiographers write anecdotal, fragmented or discontinuous autobiographies (Jelinek 1980:19). However, in Magona's case the deceptive smoothness of chronology

conceals ruptures and disjunctures in the narrator's stages of development: She was saddled with the responsibility of motherhood and marriage at the age of nineteen, became a single parent at the age of twenty-three, and had to go back to the life of a student from the age of twenty-eight to up to her early forties. This could hardly be described as a smooth sequential pattern of growth and development commonly associated with 'classical male autobiography'. As Magona (1992:174) herself remarks, '... I am the one who had hardly any carefree, young adulthood: I was middle-aged by twenty-three'.

What emerges from the structural organisation of Magona's autobiography is that narrative structure does not always conform to pre-determined rules of composition but often reflects the writer's peculiar circumstances and her attempts to give meaning to those circumstances. Besides dividing both volumes into distinct chapters with appropriate subtitles, Magona has chosen the theme of physical and intellectual growth as an organising motif in her autobiography. Thus, the metaphor of growth with its literal and symbolic connotations is central to Magona's autobiography as a whole. For Magona, growing up does not merely denote the process of physical development and life-cycle changes this entails but has a deeper connotation of intellectual and emotional maturation linked to an awareness of the interplay between socio-political factors and personal choices, desires and interests. It is therefore not fortuitous that she chose to use the phrase 'Forced To Grow' as a sub-title for the last chapter of *To My Children's Children* in which she recounts her first decisive steps towards achieving the goal of self-reliance and independence. The theme of self-reliance, introduced in the final chapter of the first volume, constitutes the thematic focus of the second volume, also aptly entitled *Forced to Grow*.

### **The Hegemony of Traditional Culture**

*To My Children's Children* deals with the first phase in Magona's 'growth', the phase which culminated in her ill-fated marriage at the age of nineteen and her subsequent suffering as a single parent. The book is divided into five sections corresponding with the writer's stages of physical and intellectual development. The first part deals with the period of childhood at Gungululu and various townships and shantytowns around Cape Town; the second part

focuses on the author's education. The third and fourth sections deal with the author's premature marriage and its subsequent breakdown. The fifth and final section examines the most difficult period in Magona's life when she had been left to fend for herself and her three children by her husband.

A large section of the first volume is devoted to the period of childhood in the rural district of Gungululu in the Transkei in the early forties. As shown in Magona's account of her childhood, the contention that childhood feminine subjectivity is relational, with the mother acting as a role model for the young girl may not apply to Magona's situation. In Magona's depiction of her childhood there is no obvious attempt to highlight the significance of her closeness to her mother. Instead, she draws the reader's attention to her closeness with her **grandmothers**.

It would seem that for Magona, being close to her grandmothers has less to do with being a woman than with the sociological reality of the migrant labour system. Similarly, the communalistic ethos which characterises the peasant community of Gungululu is shown to be the consequence of the clan system as well as the value attached to extended families and has very little to do with 'feminist consciousness' on the part of the author:

The intricate ways in which relationships are drawn among us make it almost impossible for an individual to be destitute in the sense of having connections with no living soul. One could conceivably, be minus parent, or issue; have neither spouse nor sibling; but to be alone, with no relative, no one to care for or lean on, is virtually unheard of ... (Magona 1990:3).

This is one instance in which cultural values coincide with common attitudes engendered by oppressive political policies. However, traditional communalism must be distinguished from solidarity brought about by the shared condition of being oppressed or discriminated against on the basis of race or gender. As shown in those sections of *Forced to Grow* dealing with this topic, Magona apparently understands the difference between feminist solidarity which may cut across racial barriers and cultural solidarity which is often confined to the members of a particular ethnic group. Her understanding of the former is evident in her account of her participation in

various non-racial women's organisation.

As suggested in the title *To My Children's Children*, Magona's story of her 'womanhood, wifehood and motherhood' (preface) is meant for her grandchildren who are supposed to learn something useful from their grandmother's resilience and determination to succeed. In this light, the autobiography assumes the status of a modern written *iintsomi* (Xhosa oral tale). Though ostensibly narrated within the traditional mode of the oral storytelling, Magona's *iintsomi* is not the story of myth, legend and folklore, but an account of the harsh realities of fighting for independence and respect in a patriarchal and racist society. As indicated in the opening paragraph of the first volume, it is not only the content of the *iintsomi* that has had to be modified to accommodate changed socio-political circumstances but also the story's mode of presentation: written autobiography has replaced the fireside oral tales. The way in which Magona begins and ends her autobiography suggests an organic sense of ethnic identity which links her to her ancestors as well as to her as yet unborn great grandchildren: 'By now I understood also that I was part of the stream of life—a continuous flow of those who are still alive, and the spirits, our ancestors'. (1990:183). It is clear therefore that she sees the task of telling the story of her life as her duty to posterity. Thus her autobiography has as its intended primary audience the younger generations of Xhosa 'children'. Magona has ensured that the book reaches the majority of her Xhosa speaking readers by publishing a Xhosa translation of *To My Children's Children* in 1995.

That Magona's presentation of lifestyles and habits of Xhosa rural communities is not mere romantic idealism is confirmed by similar accounts in the autobiographies of Noni Jabavu and Phyllis Ntantala both of whom grew up in the Transkei. Although these writers come from educated black middle class families, they both emphasise the virtues of the extended family and the strong sense of community displayed by rural people. However, Magona challenges those Xhosa cultural values and practices which she sees as oppressive, at least from the point of view of women. By adopting a critical stance towards her own culture, Magona encourages her grandchildren – the readers identified in the title – to be suspicious of all apparently innocuous cultural values and practices that often take the form of self-evident truths.

Like most things in the young Magona's life, her choice of career



was determined by her gender. After passing standard eight (Junior Certificate), she went on to train as a teacher, because among other reasons she did not think that as a woman, she was intelligent enough to attempt matric. As she puts it in *Forced to Grow*:

... to me at that time, all men were infinitely brighter than women. ... Therefore I condemned myself to never doing matric in the firm belief that if gentlemen of such superior age and intellect could not pass it, it was way, way above my own nothing-to-write-home-about mind (Magona 1992:15).

This is an obvious example of what could be described as Magona's own complicity in her own subordination which, in Gramscian terms, is traceable to the effect of hegemony. However, from the vantage point of hindsight, the enlightened writing self is in a position to uncover the assumptions underpinning the attitudes and behaviour of the younger and relatively naïve self. Clearly, autobiographical self-representation is an essentially emancipatory interpretive and analytical exercise.

Having qualified as a teacher at St Matthews Teacher Training College in 1961, Magona (1990:91) felt adequately empowered to free herself 'from the grinding poverty that is the status of the African in South Africa'. Besides the anticipated material benefits that would accrue from this achievement, her success would enhance the image of the Magona family and demonstrate to the sceptics that educating a girl had its value. As Magona explains, her entry into the male dominated arena of professionals had important implications for the family as a whole:

In the history of my family, going back three or four generations, except for one of Father's uncles, a forester, I was breaking virgin ground. Although Jongi had passed his Junior Certificate before me and was now grappling with matric, I had not only passed JC, I had a professional certificate: I was a qualified teacher (Magona 1990:91f).

Magona's belief in what she saw as an inherent value of education reflects the values of her parents who had accepted the teachings of the Christian

religion stressing individual responsibility and self-improvement. Although Magona's parents had no ambition themselves, they apparently wished their children to escape from the poverty of the unskilled working class people. Perhaps it was an illusion to think that a black person could ever escape from his or her class of birth because by law black people belonged either to the working class or the nondescript group of the petty bourgeoisie whose status was never clearly defined. It is therefore hardly surprising that Magona generally presents her racial identity as a black *person* as taking precedence over her gender and class identities. Magona's apparent over-emphasis of her racial identity over her newly acquired class membership is perhaps the predictable consequence of her situation in a country where racial identity determined almost every aspect of a person's life. The complex relationship between gender, class and race in social contexts such as Magona's is accurately explained by Evelyn Higginbotham (1992:254):

... in societies where racial demarcation is endemic to their socio-cultural fabric and heritage—to their laws and economy, to their institutionalized structures and discourses, and to their epistemologies and everyday customs—gender identity is inextricably linked to and even determined by racial identity. We are talking about the racialization of gender and class.

The harsh realities of the Bantu Education system Magona experienced as a newly qualified teacher opened her eyes to the intractable socio-political problems of her society. As she puts it, 'I thought I knew so much of my world; yet I was almost unaware of the injustices' (Magona 1990:90). During this period she had no conception of the possibility of her own involvement in attempts to change the political situation in her country. 1962, the year in which Magona began teaching was also the year when she accidentally fell pregnant. Like her educational achievements which had been shared by the whole family, her misfortune was a family disaster (Magona 1990:106).

To safeguard what was left of the family's dignity, Magona (1990:107) who was now regarded as 'spoiled goods', had to marry Luthando, the father of her child. Her pregnancy had another and more devastating consequence: she lost her new job as a primary school teacher.

Thus less than a year after leaving St. Matthews with determination and eager anticipation, she had become a housewife. Nothing could have been further from her childhood ambitions:

No feminist, I had nonetheless often joked with colleagues at St Matthew's: 'I was born for better things than washing shirts and mending socks'. In my clear eyes, I had fallen. Fallen far short of the what I had dreamt of becoming. But, I could see no way out of the quagmire in which ... I sank deeper and ever deeper, with each passing day (Magona 1990:110).

Whereas marriage had been seen as a solution to the problem of unplanned pregnancy, it soon became a hindrance to Magona's personal development. Although Luthando failed to support his family, in the eyes of the law and custom he had absolute authority over his wife. Besides blaming the legal system which privileges men over women, Magona (1990:153) also blames herself for having married Luthando:

I have never hated anyone more than I hated Luthando at that time. But I hated myself even more. I could not believe I had, with no coercion from anybody, while of sane mind, voluntarily, nay, eagerly, placed myself in the custody of such a man.

It is obvious that the marriage was a *misalliance* and was, consequently, doomed to failure even before it started: Luthando was a migrant worker from some remote area in the Transkei whereas Magona had recently qualified as a teacher.

At the age of 23 the now unemployed mother of three children became a *de facto* divorcee. Soon after the departure of her husband for Johannesburg to look for work (a pretext he used to forsake his family), Magona started selling sheep heads to support her children. Prior to this she had worked for four different white families as a domestic worker. Luthando's irresponsible conduct strengthened Magona's resolve to assume full responsibility for her own life. In her opinion, she was lucky to have been deserted by her inconsiderate husband at her age:

My husband had left me young enough still to be optimistic: I

believed I was equal to the task at hand. But above all, I came to see I was not just alone; I was free. Free of him. Free to be. So many women's lives are hindered, hampered, and ruined by husbands who will not leave long after they have ceased to be husbands or fathers to their families (Magona 1990:182).

In *To My Children's Children* Magona records the impressions of a relatively young and inexperienced Xhosa girl growing up in a social environment characterised by an on-going contest between tradition and modernity. In contrast, *Forced to Grow* explores the implications and consequences of the freedom she acquired when her husband left her. For women, the institution of marriage especially in its 'traditional' (pre-colonial) form, is particularly repressive. In a male-dominated society 'married mothers' have to put up with all sorts repressive circumstances especially associated with the condition of 'motherhood'. Being deserted by her husband at a young age was therefore a blessing in disguise for Magona. She was not only free to develop herself as she wished but she was also free of the cultural stereotypes attached to the institution of marriage. She was now in a position to turn a deaf ear to society's condemnatory comments about her status as a single mother, although she could not ignore the emotional hurt they caused. Although she did not think of herself as a feminist during this stage her actions and opinions suggest a strong though dormant, feminist consciousness.

*To My Children's Children* ends with Magona's resolution to assume responsibility for her own life. In her determination to pull herself out of the mire of poverty she instinctively knew she would be sustained by the exemplary conduct of the members of the family as well as by the spiritual power of her ancestors:

I did what they did. Father worked: I worked. Mother had done business at home: I did that too. Jongi had studied: I embarked on a correspondence course. I became them. By now I understood also that I was part of the stream of life—a continuous flow of those who are still alive, and the spirits, our ancestors (Magona 1990:182f).

If the first volume is about the largely unreflective period of growth in

Magona's life, the second is about devising self-conscious strategies of coping with personal problems arising out sexual and racial discrimination. *Forced to Grow* is the story of a new phase in Magona's long journey towards self-reliance; this journey is marked by the author's enhanced self-confidence and a steadily increasing socio-political awareness. The author's changed mood is evident in the contrasting tones of the two volumes: whereas the first volume is largely factual and descriptive, the second volume is characterised by ironic humour and a more self-conscious and analytical presentation of events and impressions. It is mainly in the second volume that Magona consciously exploits the emancipatory possibilities of the autobiographical form.

### **Self-definition as Subversion**

*Forced to Grow* opens with an account of a crucial episode in Magona's life in which she underwent a dramatic process of conversion from being an indifferent participant in the cultural and political institutions which restricted her freedom to being an assertive person determined to make something worthwhile out of her brutalized life. This radical change of consciousness or being 'born anew' (Magona 1992:13) as Magona puts it, is dramatised in her decision—partly spontaneous and partly deliberate—to throw her ring into the sea: she was swimming with friends on New Year's day in 1967 when she felt her ring slipping off her finger and, instead of making an effort to retrieve it, she picked it up and threw it away. In retrospect, this symbolic act has clear implications for the mature narrator:

Looking back, I know that I had begun to 'let go'. I had embarked on the long journey that was to be the rest of my life, travelling light, sans husband. The act of letting the ring go was deliberate, but it was prompted, suggested if you will, by the workings of the waves (Magona 1992:13).

The obvious symbolism of this decisive act and its strategic placement at the beginning of the second volume may suggest that it has been manipulated for 'dramatic effect' by the author. However, this does not detract from its thematic significance: Magona was no longer willing to be governed by the narrow expectations and patterns of behaviour associated with the institution

of marriage. Like a phoenix rising from its ashes, she was bent on initiating a new phase of regeneration in her life. As she strikingly puts it: 'My life was under rigorous reconstruction' (Magona 1992:47).

Like the first volume, *Forced to Grow* is arranged chronologically and covers the three major periods in Magona's adult life namely, the period of academic development, the period of her growing political and feminist consciousness and her gradual shrinking into the cocoon of individualism after her first visit to the United States in 1978. Whereas the younger Magona had either acquiesced or tacitly accepted the culturally defined roles of women in her society, the enlightened protagonist of *Forced to Grow* began to question and challenge the assumptions on which these roles and attitudes were based. According to the values and norms of her society, the failure of her marriage was somehow her fault. While she earned the opprobrious name of *idikazi* (a Xhosa term for a spinster), the real culprit escaped the censure of society.

The narrator-protagonist of *Forced to Grow* is aware of the sexism inherent in the traditional values of her own community. The critical and sometimes downright condemnatory voice of a woman who has seen through the hegemonic discourses of gender begins to emerge in the early chapters of *Forced to Grow*. Her awareness of her situation as 'unfair' in comparison to that of the man who had ruined her life must have alerted her to the way in which her society rewarded men for having fathered so-called illegitimate children while punishing the mothers of these children:

It was common practice for women to hide the fact of their motherhood. They were stamped as damaged goods in the pure minds of men whose reputations remained untarnished despite their fathering offspring. Indeed, rather than detracting from it, a man's stature grew in direct proportion to the number of women he had impregnated (Magona 1992:79).

As if to demonstrate the subtle functioning of ideology in the creation and legitimation of gender roles and expectations attached to them, Magona (1992:79) refers to the unsympathetic attitudes of other women who were obviously unsuspecting victims of patriarchal ideology masquerading as 'collective wisdom':

The censure came from women as well as from men. Their agreement about the correct behaviour for women with children chilled me to the marrow. Married, divorced, widowed and single mothers were lumped together. Mothers, it was clear in the minds of the vast majority, had no business being anything else. But I had dreams yet.

The more enlightened Magona had begun to appreciate the underlying assumptions and underlying principles of patriarchy comprehensively described by Adrienne Rich (1977:57):

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: A familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.

In her fight for basic survival and self-affirmation Magona faced two major obstacles: on the one hand she had to contend with the ideology of culture which often took the form of 'common knowledge' and, on the other hand she faced, like all black people, the repressive policies of the apartheid government. In the former case it was 'common knowledge' that women with children should not aspire to careers that would interfere with their domestic roles as mothers, whereas in the latter the myriad apartheid laws affected every aspect of a black person's life irrespective of gender or class position. Having no power to fight these oppressive conditions on her own she chose instead to pursue her childhood dream of freeing herself from the Blakean 'mind forged manacles' by acquiring higher educational qualifications.

Evidently what Magona hoped to achieve through education was not only financial self-sufficiency but also self-respect which society had denied her as an *idikazi*. When she finally got a job as a teacher in 1967 after four bleak years of unemployment, she soon enrolled for matric at Damelin College. After passing matric she registered for the General Certificate of Education with SACHED hoping to qualify for admission to any British

University. It was a student of SACHED that Magona began consciously to widen her intellectual horizons as she came into contact with mature students from different cultural and racial backgrounds. The SACHED experience prepared her for her future role as an active participant in multiracial women's organisations. During the period beginning in the late 1960s to the late seventies Magona became increasingly involved in the political, social and cultural campaigns of various women's groups including the National Council of African Women which she joined in 1969. She writes as follows on her initial impressions of this group:

This organisation opened my eyes to prevailing social ills. Not to anything I had not seen or known existed, but now for the first time, through discussion and action by members, I began to see myself as someone who could do something out there—away from family, job, neighbour or friend (Magona 1992:80).

This was a period of enthusiastic political activity for Magona (1992:82) who 'had woken up to [her] social duty'. Having been deprived of opportunities to make her family life worthwhile as a mother and a wife, she hoped to find personal fulfilment through involvement in public activities. In the domestic sphere she became both a father and a mother to her children while gaining popularity and recognition as a speaker and organiser in women's organisations of which she was a member. It was as a member of Church Women Concerned (CWC) that Magona really began to show an interest and to be actively involved in politics. In 1976 she was chosen as one of the South African delegates to a women's conference in Brussels where she spoke eloquently about the 'simultaneity of oppression' facing South African black women:

The point I attempted to convey was that the African woman was the worst oppressed of all South Africans. Race and sex combined to put her at the bottom of the dung heap, and only her child was more pitiable (Magona 1992:141).

In her involvement in the various politically inclined groups which included SACHED study groups and the Cape Town based Women's Movement,



Magona became more and more adept in the task of 'bridge building'.

Thus Magona's activities combined the tasks of fighting for political rights for black people as well the rights of women in general. She soon discovered that the predominantly white women's organisations had no clear understanding of the enormity of the problem of racial oppression. Moreover, she found herself trapped between ignorant but well-meaning white compatriots and suspicious or openly hostile black friends. Whereas some people in Gugulethu were accusing her of being an informer because she had white friends, those white friends were accusing her of being too elitist and sophisticated to understand the nature and extent of the suffering of black people. For instance, white women's responses to her stand on sanctions were less than favourable. She was asked questions like: 'But, Sindi, how representative are you of the black people?' (Magona 1992:169) and 'Sindi you are educated. You are sophisticated. How do you know what black people, the ordinary black person in the street, want?' (Magona 1992:170). The almost unbridgeable gulf between women of different races brought together by their common outrage against the excesses of apartheid became increasingly evident to Magona: 'White women could not escape the privilege which their colour bestowed on them. Black women could not escape the discrimination theirs made them heir to' (Magona 1992:129).

Magona's realisation that race was the main factor governing social relations in South Africa is shown in what seems to be a deliberate decision on her part to privilege race over gender and class in her autobiography. As she explains in *Forced to Grow*, genuine attempts had been made on both sides of the racial divide to bring about mutual understanding, but the inescapable reality of differing political rights, lifestyles made this increasingly difficult. Black women had first-hand experience of what white women could only experience vicariously. This explains why Magona saw her racial identity as a black person as taking precedence over her gender status as a woman. Daymond (1995:567) has argued that Magona does not succeed in her autobiography to problematize the implications of her class status:

When she speaks of her own position, she declares no profound affinity with or loyalty to either the urbanised peasantry from which she comes or to the professional class to which she aspires. Instead

she speaks as a determinedly mobile individualist and, in so doing, again plays right into the habit, in the dominant discourses of South Africa, of hiding class issues behind the 'totalising languages of racism'.

As mentioned earlier, social mobility is the overarching theme in Magona's autobiography. There is nothing inherently wrong with what seems to be a healthy desire for self-improvement. It becomes a problem, however, when it results in a deliberate masking of self-identity as Daymond seems to suggest. In a society where government legislation determines class position it is somehow delusional to think of oneself as belonging to any other class other than the one legally prescribed for one by law.

What emerges with striking clarity in Magona's autobiography as in the life histories of other black South Africans is that the idea of a black professional class in South Africa has always been riddled with irreconcilable contradictions. It was therefore safer and pragmatic for black professionals of Magona's time to foreground their racial identities as their 'new' class identity did not afford them any practical changes in terms of political rights and material benefits. Largely because of her temperament and liberal education, Magona found it difficult to identify with revolutionary politics of the 1976 era. It is not entirely accurate to regard this as failure to identify with the 'urbanised peasantry' as Magona makes it abundantly clear that she agreed with the aims of the mass-based resistance movement but objected to the use violent methods which often harmed black communities instead of advancing their cause. Having played her role in liberal politics as a bridge-builder, she found herself caught between the impotence of South African liberalism and the radical political strategies of the black youth in the township. Perhaps this accounts for her decision to leave politics and to become a 'determinedly mobile individualist', a choice imposed on her by circumstances.

The autobiographer's 'displayed self' in both volumes of Magona's autobiography is an identity shaped largely by factors of race and gender. As I have tried to show, Magona sees the factors of race as well as ethnicity as the major determinants of her identity. Her decision to present herself as a Xhosa grandmother narrating the story of her life to her as yet unborn grand children affirms her belief in the continuity of life and of the centrality of her

culture in her own self-identity. She regards her life as exemplary and thus worth preserving as a valuable record of cultural history. This is implied in her final words to the imaginary reader in *Forced to Grow*:

So, my child that is the story of your great-grandmother. That is the story of where you come from. Here I am, thousands of miles from home, for the ancestors have seen fit that as of now I dwell among strangers. Perhaps, for now, that is the only way I can fulfil my duty to you, my child. The only way I can tell you: This is how it was, in the days of your forebears (Magona 1992:231f).

The young and relatively naive protagonist of *To My Children's Children* accepts the values of her tribe without any major reservations. In contrast to this, the educated and sophisticated Magona of *Forced to Grow* is sceptical of a cultural and value system which assigns women inferior roles. As an urbanised and politically aware professional woman Magona questions the assumptions on which the repressive patriarchal system is based. The dilemma she faces is that she apparently values the sustaining beliefs and the sense of solidarity provided by the tribal belief system yet at the same time she is opposed to the sexism inherent in the system.

This essay has attempted to show the evolution of Magona's feminist consciousness as reflected in her autobiography. She uses the autobiographical form to elaborate her own version of African feminism which is simultaneously critical and supportive of certain aspects of the African world-view. Magona is successful in doing this because she sets out to challenge hegemonic cultural and political practices which have assumed the apparently innocuous label of 'common sense'.

## References

- Belsey, Catherine 1991. Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text. In Warhol, Robyn R & Diane Price Herndl (eds): *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Daymond, Margaret 1995. Class in the Discourses of Sindiwe Magona's Autobiography and Fiction. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21,4: 561-572.

- Fraser, Nancy 1996. Multiculturalism and Gender Equity: The U.S. 'Difference' Debates Revisited. *Constellations* 3,1:61-73.
- Gilmore, Leigh 1994. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn B 1992. African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 17,2:253-4.
- Jabavu, Noni 1982. *The Ochre People*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Jelinek, Estelle C (ed) 1980. *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Magona, Sindiwe 1990. *To My Children's Children*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Magona, Sindiwe 1992. *Forced to Grow*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Magona, Sindiwe 1995. *Kubantwana Babantwana Bam*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- McClintock, Anne 1991. 'The Very House of Difference': Race, Gender, and the Politics of South African Women's Narrative in *Poppie Nongena*. In La Capra, Dominick (ed.): *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Miller, Nancy 1991. *Getting Personal*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Ntantala, Phyllis 1992. *A Life's Mosaic*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Rich, Adrienne 1977. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. London: Virago Press.
- Smith, Sidonie 1987. *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Smith, Sidonie 1993. *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

School of Education  
University of KwaZulu-Natal