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## “I” and “we”: writing the black female self in Kuzwayo’s *Call me woman* and Morrison’s *Beloved*

### Summary

In the last two decades of the twentieth century there has been an upsurge of interest in self and identity studies. Through the bifocal lens of consciousness studies and black feminisms this article sets out to explore how the self is textually represented by the South African writer Ellen Kuzwayo, in her autobiography *Call me woman*, and the African-American author Toni Morrison, in her fictional *Beloved*. The aim is to show that although both writers are black and may represent commonalities there are also many differences in their depictions of the female consciousness that ultimately takes its shape from interactions within its own social milieu.

### ‘Ek’ en ‘ons’: die skryf van die swart vroulike ego in Kuzwayo se *Call me woman* en Morrison se *Beloved*

Tydens die laaste twee dekades van die twintigste eeu was daar ’n toenemende belangstelling in self- en identiteitsnavorsing. Deur die bifokale lens van bewussynstudies en swart feminismes poog hierdie artikel om die eie-ek soos tekstueel deur die Suid-Afrikaanse skryfster Ellen Kuzwayo in haar outobiografie, *Call me woman*, en deur die Afro-Amerikaanse outeur Toni Morrison in die roman *Beloved* neerslag te gee, te ontleed. Daar sal aangetoon word dat, alhoewel beide skrywers swart is en daar dus raakpunte tussen hulle ervarings mag wees, daar beslis ook verskille is in hulle voorstelling van vroulike bewuswording wat uiteindelik vorm aanneem binne die betrokke sosiale milieu.

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The intention in this article is to examine the textual delineations of the self in Kuzwayo's autobiographical, factual *Call me woman* and Morrison's third-person, fictional *Beloved*, two genres of writing broadly taken to be quite different in approach, expression and effect. The literature based on the real (autobiograph) will be shown to overlap with imaginative literature just as the slave narrative, to an extent, coincides with the autobiographical in the way the self is made to emerge. The sense of the self under scrutiny is not a reflection of the writers' characters or personalities, although that immediately comes to mind in relation to Kuzwayo's autobiography. Rather by "self" is meant, notwithstanding Kuzwayo's autobiographical obligations, interpretation from the perspective of an identity and its effect as textuality. The concern with the inscribed self is in terms, further, of accountability — of identity and woman narratives.

The playing out of the textual self in texts by women who operate in different milieux will also be related to black feminist theory to show that, like white feminisms, it is pluralistic and very much part of the pervasive textual politics, that is, the connection between the texts' grammatical, figurative and structural patterns and their assembly of subtexts (Jones 1989). The suitability of the selected texts to reflect on, illuminate, comment on and also differ from each other in the representations of the black woman's self, particularly in its re-visioning through motherhood, will become evident in this process.

## 1 Reading paradigms

Of direct relevance is the self emanating from consciousness studies as reported by Keith Sutherland (2001: 18-9) in his retrospective overview, "Mind, matter and the search for the 'self'", wherein he traces the revival of interest and major hypotheses from the 1980s to the 1990s. An almost century-long embargo had been imposed by the insistence of behaviourism on confining investigations to observable phenomena rather than subjective mental states. Not always clearly understood, this complicated area of study (which began in the misty past with pre-eminent philosophers and scientists such as Aristotle, John Locke and David Hume, through to Sir Anthony Kenny, James Austen, Andy Newberg, Chalmers, Searly, Dennett

and Freeman, to name those most frequently connected with unravelling its mysteries) continues to be marked by a divergence of views.

While the 1990s may have been most aptly labelled the “Decade of the brain” in light of the primacy of interest, research during this period still did not lead to much conceptual clarification. The theories that have emerged nonetheless offer other possibilities: that is, while they may remind us that the “final frontier” of knowledge of the self still stretches bafflingly before us, they do offer interesting insights towards an improved understanding of the textualisation of the self, or, as behaviourism would have it, the observable phenomena. Of particular relevance to the two texts selected for examination are, for example, “memory as the mechanism responsible for continuity of the self”, identity over time and the notion of the self as a “product of reflection” or interpretation (Sutherland 2001: 19). Of pertinence, as well, is the work by Michael Gazzaniga of Dartmouth College on split-brain patients, showing how “the concept of the self is constructed by the ‘interpreter’ mechanism located in the left cerebral hemisphere” (Sutherland 2001: 19). The “interpreter” devises “an imaginary narrative consistent enough to maintain a stable concept of self” (Sutherland 2001: 19). Sutherland goes on to report how social psychologists and anthropologists have also shown how the self that is constructed in social interaction varies from culture to culture.

Although black feminist theory, which emerged as a reaction to white feminisms, is not directly referred to in the texts in question it does make its presence felt as will become evident during the course of this discussion. Like consciousness studies and white feminist theory, it too is marked by divergencies. For our current purposes a thumbnail sketch of the major strands of this body of formulations about the experiences of women should suffice to give an idea of their affinities and dissonances with one another as well as with the two focal texts. In the discussion that follows on the selected texts certain connections that are brought to the fore will be developed.

To begin with, Hendricks & Lewis (1994) distinguish three major strands in black feminist theory: black feminism, womanism and African feminism. Black feminism, an African-American initiative, emerged in reaction to the masculinism of anti-racist struggles and the dominance of white women in feminist politics; it dealt with

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strategies and subject-matter not catered for in white women's literary traditions. The local counterpart, as articulated by Dabi Nkululeko (1987: 91, 104), reiterates the need for liberation from male influence and from the dominance of white women in the feminist movement as well as the development of "new theories, constructs and concepts which [...] capture what is real in Africa".

The second strand, womanism, besides bifurcating into African-American and African strands, as a whole also mutates into a South African version. For the African-American Alice Walker it is about the spirituality of black women, a pre-requisite for creativity. To the Nigerian Ogunyemi 'womanism' incorporates the racial, cultural, national, economic and political, leading inevitably to the subordination of gender hierarchies to racial solidarity. The aim of the mandalic core at the heart of womanism, according to Ogunyemi (1985: 78), "is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels".

The mysticism and romanticism of womanism, as conceived above, take us back to essentialising, that is the fixing and freezing of the attributes of women and blacks, yet in the 1980s it was locally reproduced as racial solidarity over and above the gender struggle. It manifested in subordinate, nurturing positions in the national liberation movement. As a direct consequence of this, ambiguity continues to inhere in mothering and particularly motherhood in as it loops right back into essentialism. bell hooks (1984) complicates this aspect of womanism even more by explicating the role of the family as the site of resistance in the face of racism. Adding further to the ambiguity is the mainstream re-assessment of mothering that followed (McNeil 1992).

African feminism, the third strand, is very much like the essentialising and romanticising of womanism in depictions of a paradisiacal pre-colonial Africa and matrilineal social, economic and political power. Locally it has manifested in prioritising the anti-apartheid struggle at the expense of class and gender concerns. There is a nostalgic tendency among African feminist adherents, such as Christine Qunta (1987) for instance, to affirm a matrilineage by idealistically reclaiming African heroines. In contrast there are also those like

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Christine Obbo (1981) who are more critically aware of pre-colonial, colonial and neo-colonial gender oppression.

The commonalities and differences of the black feminisms sketched above as well as specificity, situatedness and positionality are taken into account in the examination of the experiences of the self recorded in the texts in question. Furthermore, besides reflecting and perhaps inflecting understanding of the major strands of black feminist theory as a whole, the diversities, nuances and finer shades of meaning in the experience and understanding of oppression of the central female consciousness in textual representations will also serve to reveal the constrictions of black woman-centredness, for instance in the way patriarchy is envisioned and its effect on the textual production of the self.

## 2 Broad overview

Before investigating the representations of the self it will be useful first to see how the texts compare broadly. For a start Kuzwayo's text is, as Coullie (1996: 132) writes, about both a "generalized black woman and a particular woman" in "neither western nor traditional black autobiographical discourse [while relying on both], by finding a space between these frames". Kuzwayo represents how she understands herself and the conditions of her life by use of the first person, "I", "my", "we" and "us". It is clearly more than her individual power to mean since she also draws on cultural sources. In this way the text is unlike conventional autobiographies since there is less focus on the personal self. The "I" is also the "we" of voiceless, disadvantaged black South African women at a time of particularly harsh oppression and discrimination. While this may also hold for the third-person fictionalised story of black slaves in *Beloved* in terms of authorship, given what happens to the self in slavery, there is decidedly more emphasis placed on the unceasing struggle to reconstruct an identity that has been systematically destroyed.

In addition, both Kuzwayo and Morrison use the oppressor's language, English, which threatens as it imposes even while it provides spaces in-between for writing back against stereotypical approaches and representations of black women. In Showalter's (1985: 263)

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terms, it is a "double-voiced discourse' that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and [the] dominated". Further, Morrison, for example, uses a circular narrative, in black speech patterns that evoke oral performance, to contest representations of black women by white and black American male writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. And Kuzwayo's *Call me woman* is a controlled first person, a specifically focused response to Matshoba's *Call me not a man*, in which the main story begins with, "For neither am I a man in the eyes of the law,/ Nor am I a man in the eyes of my fellow-man" (Matshoba 1979: 18). Matshoba concentrates on the emasculation and debasement of the African male under apartheid atrocities and laws. In contrast, in *Call me woman* Kuzwayo presents women as either defying gun-toting policeman (Kuzwayo 1985: 49-50) or taking "the whole responsibility" for the family and life, notably in rural areas (Kuzwayo 1985: 12). However, while Kuzwayo (1985: 51) may say "Women somehow seem to cope with the pressures more successfully than men" her textual rendition of woman requires further scrutiny, particularly in relation to representations in *Beloved*.

In Morrison's novel the community of the mid-1800s is in multiple exiles; it is descended from slaves forcibly uprooted from their homeland and deliberately mixed with other slaves from various regions of Africa to disorientate and confuse; and it has nothing to fall back on except memories and slave experiences. Kuzwayo, as textual configuration, is in another way in a sort of exile in the apartheid townships; the exile of othering and forced removals backed by legislation is recorded by Kuzwayo along with resistance by various community groups before part one of her text. She writes "Blacks are sojourners" (Kuzwayo 1985: 7); they are named and renamed "natives", "Bantu" and "plurals" (Kuzwayo 1985: 5); similarly Paul D in *Beloved* says that the schoolteacher beat him "to show him that definitions belonged to the definers — not the defined" (Morrison 1987: 190).

It is against this background of homelessness and exile, physical and of the psyche, more so in *Beloved*, that the representation of the self is examined to show how physical alienation is reflected in self-alienation. The discussion will alternate between Kuzwayo and Mor-

ri-son in order to juxtapose similarities and differences as the othered self struggles to reclaim and refashion itself.

### 3 The struggle to maintain the communal self

To start with “in the eyes of the law”, as Matshoba says, the initial image of the black woman in the first section of *Call me woman* is as a prisoner who writes a letter to her mother and mentions other names, Sis Gladys, Lindy, Buti Ntshwene, Babone, Tembu Bobo, Ousi Mantantase, T J and K (Kuzwayo 1985: 3-4). In spite of her prisoner status, the individual self, “I”, remains connected to the communal self, the symbolic base and home. Debra Nkiwe Matshoba, the writer of the letter, who is imprisoned under Section 10 of the Terrorism Act, considers the outside contact it allows her as being “at home”, a phrase bristling with ironies. In this opening section where Kuzwayo describes the various oppressions of apartheid life, she as writer is a part of the generalised black suffering which includes that of black leaders such as the traditional “Kgosi, Morena and Nkosi [all meaning king]”, who are levelled down to “chief, an inferior status commanding far less dignity and respect” (Kuzwayo 1985: 13).

The sentiment “Motho ke motho ka motho yo mongoe” (No man is an island) in the Setswana language is lived out by the self represented in spite of the erosion of much of the traditional moral code and values that followed the displacement of “communities, separated families, estranged siblings”, leaving the community “landless, homeless, stateless and dispossessed of all its heritage” (Kuzwayo 1985: 17). Legislation, “the eyes of the law”, has reduced human beings not only to prisoners, like Debra Nkiwe Matshoba (and Kuzwayo herself who at the age of 63 was imprisoned under Section 10 for being a member of the Committee of Ten, in 1977), but also to “villains”, “scoundrels”, “underdogs”, “outlaws”, and “criminals”, in mass demonisation (Kuzwayo 1985: 17).

### 4 Socialising of the communal self

But certain aspects of the self that are ideologically overwritten continue in their own way and as they did before the formalisation of apartheid othering. The “I” of Kuzwayo says in the beginning of the

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second section, the autobiography proper, for instance, that when she became aware of herself at the age of six or seven years it was as "one of four grandchildren" (all girls significantly) of a middle-class, professional, propertied extended family; Granny was "mother" and Grandpa "Papa" (Kuzwayo 1985: 63). The sense of "we" is encouraged by the wearing of dresses made from the same material. There is some awakening of the individual in the children's lack of enthusiasm for the uniform dress but with grandmother "there was no nonsense about clothes"; at the same time they ["we"] were "different from the neighbourhood children" ["them"] (Kuzwayo 1985 63).

The writer seems to present an idealised seamless *ubuntu* front, often as desire when it threatens to disintegrate, and at the same time to undercut it with the real. For instance, there are moments when the 'I' felt 'alone' as 'one Merafe' or as the child of divorced parents, but these are few and far between; they are not allowed to overshadow the forefronting of the communal self even when the extended family dominates the regional communal hierarchy: clearly they were the landlords, marked by the different dress of the grandchildren, their education and their Christianity (Kuzwayo 1985: 157). Moreover, "as a child from a Christian home" Kuzwayo (1985: 72) "was strictly forbidden to associate in any way with the girls who had accepted Lebollo as part of their lives", that is, traditional lives. Apart from these disruptions subverting the overall impression the writer wishes to convey of a communal self, at school away from home the self shrinks from being singled out, for instance in the dress length incident at St Francis's College; instead it is eager to join senior students, mentors and role-models for "at the hands of some of the nuns" the young Kuzwayo (1985: 83) self felt bitter and frustrated.

The extended family and its surrogates at school and in later life form the matrix for the training of the ideal communal self, particularly the female as will become clearer below. Kuzwayo (1985: 99) defensively explains as follows: "Other racial groups may deride the extended family as being backward and outdated, but it is a pillar of strength to black people". It is this communal self which is foregrounded, also in a sense de-gendered, de-classed and de-tribalised (all to create the illusion of sameness) to depict not only the *ubuntu* self but also the black solidarity of brothers, sisters, fathers and



mothers, in the face of inroads made by destructive apartheid. The framing sections of the text, parts one and three, as generalising documentaries, serve to reinforce this impression.

Even when differentiated, like Miss Minah Tembeka Soga, “who was outstanding in her contribution when the constitution and policy of the Convention were drafted”, it is to enhance the togetherness of women and men “for the advancement and liberation of the African nation in South Africa” (Kuzwayo 1985: 101). To offset individual contrariness and privileging, Charlotte Maxeke, the first national president of the National Council of African Women, exhorts in her presidential address at the second conference in Bloemfontein on 8 December 1938: “This work is not for yourselves — kill that spirit of ‘self’ and do not live above your people, but live with them. If you can rise, bring someone with you” (Kuzwayo 1985: 103). The Black Consciousness movement is part and parcel of this communality, “a concept which has created awareness among blacks about who they are and were, and helped to build up the determination to regain their strength and personality as a nation — for young and old alike” (Kuzwayo 1985: 47).

But from what Derrida says it is a deliberate deviation; the self as he conceives it is constructed in dialectic with projections from others in the world around one. The “I” is determined by those outside who say “me” to me and help constitute the self, the “I” striven for (Derrida 1985: 51). Kuzwayo’s insistence on the opposite is elucidated by Nhlapo below especially in the case of women.

## 5 The annihilation of the self

In more extreme circumstances the slave community in *Beloved* operates in a way that differs somewhat from Kuzwayo’s community. To begin with, men and women slaves do not even belong to themselves but, in a manner much worse than apartheid displacements, are “moved around like checkers”, never “loved”, but “bought”, “loaned out”, “stored up”, “mortgaged”, “won” or “stolen” or “seized” (Morrison 1987: 23). If they run off they are “brought back” or “hanged” (Morrison 1987: 23). In the everyday slave life of test and trial where the suffering of men and women is in almost every way the same,

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slaves have to watch out for themselves and for one another if they can, as the men, Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner, Halle Suggs and Sixo of *Sweet home* do (Morrison 1987: 11).

## 6 The simultaneous socialising and re-claiming of the individual self

Those who are seen to rise above the group are frowned upon, as Baby Suggs discovers after providing a feast for ninety people (Morrison 1987: 136). She feels the "free-floating repulsion" from her "friends and neighbours" (Morrison 1987: 138). Because she gets above herself no one even bothers to warn her about the approaching slave-catchers pursuing Sethe (Morrison 1987: 157). Sethe, too, incurs their wrath for killing her child, for her self-isolation and her self-sufficiency. She pays with "eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life" (Morrison 1987: 173).

But while behaviour with others is more or less homogenised and controlled by disapproval and ostracism the individual self is not overtly suppressed or downplayed as in Kuzwayo's text. While the communal self is centred in *Call me woman*, the focus in *Beloved* is on the recovery of Sethe's individual self in damning circumstances and exile from the African identity base, some sense of which may be gathered from the Kuzwayo text. The impulse to integrate and conform with the community is superseded by the greater need to recuperate some sense of self after prolonged, unceasing dehumanization. Sethe needs first to claim "herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Morrison 1987: 95). She once had "iron eyes and backbone to match" which a schoolteacher had punched out (Morrison 1987: 9). Her experiences are embodied in her flesh; milked, raped and beaten, her body writes itself into recovery with its body fluids in the text. Sethe is given voice in the text and her body is also accepted as "legitimate text which can be used to inscribe itself out of multiple conscriptions" (Busia 1990: 103).

Moreover, to go on living Sethe has to "keep the past at bay" (Morrison 1987: 42). But when Paul D tells her Halle, who could not help her, had seen her being milked and raped by the schoolteacher's two nephews while he (the schoolteacher) stood by, she just manages

not to “break, fall or cry each time a hateful picture drifted in front of her face” (Morrison 1987: 97). His own sense of self has taken such a pounding that Paul D “shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing” (Morrison 1987: 41).

The othering which causes the emptiness within is for Baby Suggs “the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home” (Morrison 1987: 140). Sethe circles around the empty and dreaded spaces within herself even as she struggles to take control of her own life. After the flight from *Sweet home* she says, “I did it. I got us all out me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before” (Morrison 1987: 162). Her greatest act of love, into which, paradoxically, she is driven as a slave-on-the-run is to kill her toddler to save her from being dragged back into slavery. As she says “She my daughter. She mine [...] She had to be safe and I put her where she would be” (Morrison 1987: 200).

Counteracting slave definitions in simultaneously enslaving-exilic (empty) space is a constant battle which has to be tackled day by day, fending off the bad and feeding on the good. When Beloved, the embodiment of her own self-destructive consciousness, arrives, Sethe loses the precarious hold she has on some sense of self and “sat around like a rag doll, broke down, finally” (Morrison 1987: 243). “She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it” (Morrison 1987: 250). Sethe “yielded” because of her guilt, her need to expiate even though “what she had done was right because it came from true love” (Morrison 1987: 251). Torn up within by the apparent senselessness of the killing, “it was as though Sethe didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out” (Morrison 1987: 252). When Beloved is eventually driven away by thirty of the community’s women summoned by Denver, their singing “broke over Sethe [...] she trembled like the baptised in its wash” (Morrison 1987: 261).

There is an antidote to the dehumanising effects of the “‘Look’ every negro learned to recognise along with his ma’am’s tit” (Morrison 1987: 157); it is, as Baby Suggs, the “unchurched preacher”

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(Morrison 1987: 87), teaches Sethe and the other ex-slaves, to love and heal themselves continuously and in the face of multiple ongoing otherings, “looks”. This is essential because in spite of judgemental, objectifying, othering “looks” from slave-owners and even one’s own kind the self — dynamic, complex and resilient — has the capacity if given the chance to react, oppose, and negotiate in the continual re-arranging of itself, as it forms and reforms constantly under internal and external pressures and influences.

### 7. The emerging but conflicted individual self

Like the Sethe self, the Kuzwayo self is not unified, complete and whole, all the more because of the importance given to the communal self. The individual self, the “I”, which is for the most part of her youth and schooling underplayed/deferred, is forced to the forefront when Aunt Blanche shatters the sense of family and communal motherhood by casting her out into the world with the words, “There is no home for you any more here” (Kuzwayo 1985: 105). The sense of home that is equated with the wholeness of self fragments as the protagonist is othered into “a stranger, an intruder”, losing “all sense of personal direction and identity” (Kuzwayo 1985: 107). Kuzwayo (1985: 107) writes “I felt so rejected by the people and surroundings I had once cherished as part of my very being”. Nhlapo (1991: 120) explains:

[The] African value system does not perceive women as separate entities but always as adjuncts to the family. A woman’s personhood is lost in the group much more than a man’s is subsumed under [the] so-called community principle.

Nhlapo (1991: 113) writes, moreover, of the “non-individual nature” of African marriage and that “group interests are framed in favour of men”. In light of Nhlapo and Derrida, Kuzwayo’s representation of self needs to be adjusted to clarify that the woman-self is trained to be more “we” than the man-self, which is more “I”. The explanation given by Nhlapo helps to understand why Kuzwayo subsequently blames herself and tries to appease her aunt in her “own child-like way but all that failed” (Kuzwayo 1985: 105). With no other way out within the cultural framework she has internalised, she

goes to the father whom she barely knows to salvage some sense of her fragmented self.

At this point, however, Kuzwayo begins to write transgressively, in a sense against herself and her deepest convictions, to interrogate the “we” though still in an indirect way. It is analogous in a way to the African-American subversive rhetorical device of “signifying”, where rebellious meanings are obscured in multiple, conflicting messages.

“Signifying” alternates with a rarer, more open moment when she writes, “Thinking always of others can be a burden when one grows older because it becomes second nature or second self” (Kuzwayo 1985: 114). For the first time, although in terms of the impersonal “one”, there is recognition of a “first self”, the “I”, *à la* Derrida, which has been trained to submerge itself in the “we” of the communal self. Hereafter, as represented in the text, there is a continual, more discernible though tension-filled interplay between the individual and the communal self, first and second selves, as the textual “I” take as much control as she can over her life, her decisions and her way in the world; but it is always in association with a couple, a family, a group, for reasons explicated by Nhlapo above. And, significantly, the time spent at Aunt Elizabeth’s in Heilbron is characterised as “a really helpful transitional period of weaning [...] away from [her] almost dependent situation in Pimville” with her father (Kuzwayo 1985: 116). But the weaning is only from the immediate family, towards other members of the extended family and other groups — women’s singing, dancing, and debating groups where she “learned the basis of decision-making in personal and group matters” (Kuzwayo 1985: 116).

Bearing Nhlapo and Maboreke (below) in mind this period is only a hiatus till she makes her own home with “a life partner” with whom she will “live happily ever after” (Kuzwayo 1985: 122). This hope and expectation are fuelled by the traditional construction of the female that Maboreke (1991: 228-9) describes. It is worth quoting at length because of its ramifications:

Africans in general and African women in particular identify themselves through a maze of relationships, namely, mother to so-and-so, daughter of so-and-so, wife of so-and-so, etcetera, in which “so-and-so” is always a man. African women are never viewed as separate individuals but rather as appendages of a man [...] African women feel

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this powerlessness when removed from the family wheel, and so attach themselves to the family organism even more tightly. The obligation this family membership generates is the price women pay for membership of their family.

Societies such as ours are tightly structured, stratified, hedged in by prescriptions, by the primacy of the communal good over individual rights and interest (Maboreke 1991: 228-9).

These definitions, structures and limited choices are transmuted into a romantic dream; it dissipates when the Kuzwayo self suffers another blow but she "either pretended [she] did not see them or [she] refused to believe what [she] saw in her marriage and husband" (Kuzwayo 1985: 124). She undergoes

both physical and mental suffering. Day by day [she] realised [she] was being humiliated and degraded, an experience [she has] in recent years come to realise is suffered by many wives the world over, within different races, cultures and religions (Kuzwayo 1985: 124).

It does not however strike her as a fundamentally gender/power issue, a stance she maintains throughout the text, where apartheid oppression takes precedence over black male oppression. For example, her husband's behaviour towards her is seen as the result of her being "a stranger and foreigner in the community", the Aunt Blanche episode notwithstanding. When she is more forthcoming about her husband's cruelty it is to abstract the negative — "the violence, arrogance, meanness and downright selfishness, which prevailed in [her] home" and personalise the positive — "his intelligence, his well-built stature and handsome appearance, his financial acumen — even if this was at the expense of his family" (Kuzwayo 1985: 127).

To keep a grip on herself during this traumatic period, like the ex-slaves in *Beloved*, she blocks the memories from her mind; they may not be dwelt on in the text either, perhaps because they are considered domestic and not public concerns; Boyce-Davies (1986: 126) attributes the silences and gaps about the personal and the private to the limits of propriety. Black male gender power is not a priority either, although Kuzwayo does connect her experience with a much wider gender oppression than she expresses awareness of above. Whatever her reasons she says, "Even now, I find I cannot write in detail about it" (Kuzwayo 1985: 124). With that she "decided to save

[her]self for [her]self, and for [her] two sons" (Kuzwayo 1985: 125). She reminds herself that her mother and teachers had taught her that "unlike a beast, a human being is responsible for her action at all times" (Kuzwayo 1985: 125).

But since what she decides constitutes a defiance of fundamental cultural precepts she gives it careful thought and, after having assessed her marriage "with a minimum of subjectivity" during a short respite at her mother-in-law's home, she leaves her husband and two sons in order to save her life, at once violating the roles of mother and obedient wife (Kuzwayo 1985: 130). It is a triumph of "I" and, like Sethe's escape in *Beloved*, it is her decision. As agent she writes, "This time, I was not being forced out of my 'home'; on the contrary the decision was mine" (Kuzwayo 1985: 131). At the same time the blow to the psyche is acknowledged, though somewhat tentatively: "All the same, and perhaps I am wrong, I was pushed out psychologically" (Kuzwayo 1985: 131). In a way similar to Sethe's guilt over a more violent act, the "I", still in an insecure and uncertain double-bind in *Call me woman*, is wracked with "challenging moments of guilt, charged with endless questions [she] could not find adequate replies to" (Kuzwayo 1985: 132).

On her return to her father, with "no more castles in the air but a more realistic day-to-day approach to life" (Kuzwayo 1985: 132) and though "brow-beaten, helpless and lost" (Kuzwayo 1985: 134), she makes new contacts and becomes active in community groups. Her growing confidence in herself is demonstrated in her discreet handling of her divorce, which however still leaves her feeling emotionally empty. She is nevertheless determined "to blot out [her] past experience" (Kuzwayo 1985: 142). In spite of the stigma of divorce she throws herself into the "freedom" that she begins to appreciate, works in a film of *Cry, the beloved country*, and does community work for both "[her]self and the community" (Kuzwayo 1985: 148). Besides her work with the youth and women, after much thought and persuasion she agrees to a second marriage. At the Transvaal YWCA she grows in stature to become General Secretary although she is scared of the "over-powering" women in the association (Kuzwayo 1985: 161). Within the parameters laid down for black women she is "Ellen all the time" and not a clone of her predecessor and mentor, Phyllis Nolu-

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thando Mzaidume (Kuzwayo 1985: 164). In her second marriage and community work she is intent on proving herself; it is to overcome the experience of "a disintegrating home and the unsettling divorce proceedings" and doubts about her "integrity", her "self-image" and her "worth" (Kuzwayo 1985: 181).

## 8. The self as mother

Kuzwayo's need to overcome what she sees as failures, the result of her early engendering, is intimately bound up with her acceptance of the notion of black womanhood/motherhood. Her childhood has prepared her for this as it has for woman-jobs such as domestic chores, the making of a "home" for a family, and the caring professions. She complains that this role is often undermined by "cultural influences from other racial groups, and some of the harsh legislation which has often disrupted family life in black rural communities, as well as the hideous migrant labour system" (Kuzwayo 1985: 73). But none of this has "succeeded in destroying the commitment of women to fulfil their role as wives and mothers" (Kuzwayo 1985: 73). Further, motherhood is referred to as an "instinct", which she is prevented from expressing, first by her husband, who has custody of their two sons, and then by the influx control of apartheid law (Kuzwayo 1985: 185). Her second marriage, which makes her Mrs Kuzwayo, along with other forms of recognition, restores her status especially in her "new home; all these built [her] psychologically, emotionally and physically" (Kuzwayo 1985: 180). And the call of motherhood which was thwarted for so long is fulfilled by the birth of her third son, Godfrey Ndabezibha Kuzwayo.

Her work outside the home is still within female boundaries, for instance, child-care, cooking, sewing, knitting, first-aid and self-help. In her text, which celebrates the strength, courage and achievements of black women, Kuzwayo writes to subvert negative stereotypes of one kind (mainly attributed to the white apartheid state) and in the process maintains and reinforces stereotypes of another (the tradition of woman as generalised mother and care-giver). She writes against the image of



The black woman, who through the centuries had been viewed by the white state as unproductive in industry, as totally dependent on her male counterpart, as helpless, unintelligent to the point of being useless and stupid — the woman who much against her will resigned herself to being labelled a 'minor' by the state (Kuzwayo 1985: 12-3).

At the same time she disrupts what she herself sets up, as she did earlier with the *ubuntu* concept. She quotes examples of women who do break out of traditional female occupations, like Mrs Esther Seokelo, who drives a taxi. But this too is immediately overturned when she evokes the mother in the woman taxi-driver who is called to play a conciliatory role at times of crisis when the men in the business "need to settle differences amongst themselves" (Kuzwayo 1985: 51). The ambivalence recurs in the case of Mrs Magdalene Sesedi who "became director of a general dealer's business" yet "was a perfect model of womanhood, full of charm, beauty and dignity" (all in contiguous sentences) (Kuzwayo 1985: 103). She also mentions black women in political movements who work with the menfolk, and yet she puzzles over "why there seemed to be no outstanding women in the ranks of the ANC movement at that time" (Kuzwayo 1985: 139).

Desiree Lewis, writing in 1999, has remarked as well on the gender ideology, "the restrictive conventions about motherhood that shape Kuzwayo's experience and her interpretation of experience". She further argues that Kuzwayo constructs a "womanhood that stresses woman's self-denial and inferiority" and "equates womanhood with motherhood" (Lewis 1999: 40).

As part of this stance Kuzwayo's relationships with men, aside from those with her first husband and some wayward men mentioned in the text, are represented as cordial, respectful, encouraging and supportive. Her stepfather and second husband encourage her to continue her education, for example. At the same time she has misgivings about her sister Maria's husband, Thari Pilane, and the restrictions and taboos that her sister will have to endure. She finally derives comfort from the thought that Pilane's "education had liberated him from some of the most restrictive taboos and practices"; obviously her own first husband, an educated lecturer, slips her mind when she translates the situation into terms of traditional culture versus western education (Kuzwayo 1985: 117). She again ignores the gen-

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der dimension and the complicity between male domination and national oppression when she has to get her son's signature for her passport; to her it is another apartheid atrocity (Kuzwayo 1985: 240). Yet it is a manifestation of the same male power, left unchallenged to grow into violence, to which women are subjected in the *timiti* sessions in Pimville. Although Kuzwayo is sympathetic towards women who break apartheid laws and traditional *mores* to survive it is a compassion that glosses over abuse by husbands or lovers who beat them.

In comparison to *Beloved* the sexuality and the sense of body of the generalised mother is elided and eluded. Nonetheless the extension of the mother role and function outside the home "has become a threat to some men" because it "brings women a new kind of equality with their menfolk" (Kuzwayo 1985: 261). Driver (1990: 231) associates this kind of female empowerment and female separation with "Western feminism at a certain stage of its history" raising invidious questions about womanism as against feminism.

Given the male reactions above and Nhlapo and Maboreke's comments quoted earlier, the reception of Kuzwayo's speech in defence of youths on trial becomes explicable. A man in court says to her, "You are not an ordinary woman, you pleaded like a man, only a man could speak the way you did" (Kuzwayo 1985: 227). Women are not permitted to transgress boundaries set down for them; when they do they threaten and frighten men, as related above, who fall back on customary gender paradigms. In this sense the man in court first places Kuzwayo, as she herself does with Mrs Seokelo and Mrs Sesedi, outside the familiar — "not an ordinary woman", but since there is no such category at hand and she does break bounds he places her in one more familiar — "like a man, only a man could speak the way you did". In the words of Sidonie Smith (1980: 52-3) she "becomes essentially a 'phallic woman', an artificial or man-made product" who deserves "the cultural recognition that flows to her as a person who embodies male-identified ideals".

The need to categorise is ever-present, but the masculinising is temporary, honorary, a "sojourn", to echo an apartheid gatekeeping term used by Kuzwayo earlier, and understood as such by both men and women; the male-biased compliment ensures that women keep to their proper place. The mechanism in no way interferes with the

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man's own definition and sense of self which is, however, damaged by apartheid practices of othering. Matshoba (1979: 18) writes:

[T]hat component of me which is man died countless times in one lifetime. Only a shell of me remains to tell you of the other man's plight, which is in fact my own [...] To the same chain-gang do we belong ...

but he only tells part of the story of the male self under apartheid and omits the effects of that and perhaps earlier male conditioning which play themselves out in abuse of women, as in the *timiti* sessions and Kuzwayo's marriage. At any rate he probably explains why Kuzwayo does not at any point openly protest the truncated definition of black women; she reinforces it in a way, as do most of the women celebrated, by merely expanding the pre-set roles within the traditional patriarchal framework. Her writing is mainly against the negative stereotype that she sees predominantly as an apartheid construction. In addition, there is in her revisioning and own transgressions, quite far-reaching at times, often a sense of ambivalence and reluctance, as if she is in battle with herself. For the most part her revisioning still functions within old constrictions so that "mama-Africa" becomes "super-mama" or "suffering-mama", and remains confined within the role-range of woman as mother/wife/sister, destined, to some extent, by instinct, by biology, by nature. Lewis (1999: 40) connects Kuzwayo's eulogising of women as mothers to the mother-icon in nationalist myth-making where "women are ennobled yet simultaneously depoliticised and dehumanised".

## 9. Reconstructing the self as mother and sexual being

While both Kuzwayo and Morrison re-situate their central textual creations in a dynamic context rather than the fixed world which has buried and distorted them, the effects achieved differ somewhat. Kuzwayo, for example, carries herself through an idea of expanded motherhood even as she transgresses (within the limits described above) major patriarchal structures. Morrison, on the other hand, and in the absence of an African identity base within her textual reconfigurations, is more challenging and probing as she renames the complications of mothering, sexuality, bodies and male-female relationships in slavery and its aftermath. For instance, black women in

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American literature have been depicted as "either sexually loose and therefore tempters of men, or obedient and subservient mammies" (McKay 1997: 152). But the truth about Ella, for example, is that she had been locked up "for more than a year" by "two men — a father and son". "You couldn't think up", Ella had said, "what them two done to me" (Morrison 1987: 119). The whore is also forced into becoming a "breeder", further distorting the image of black women and motherhood. The result in Baby Suggs's case is "eight children with different men" (Morrison 1987: 209). Sethe's mother had thrown her white-begotten children away, raising questions about the maternal instinct in the face of forced motherhood and slave-rape.

In a more wholesome sense of motherhood, but in the most trying circumstances, Sethe struggles to keep her children. As a mother she faces an extreme test when in an almost inexplicable act of love she kills one of them to prevent its being taken back into slavery. Her two sons run away from 124 and all she is left with is Denver, her last born. After a time she stops expecting the boys' return "and their thirteen-year-old faces faded completely into their baby ones, which came to her only in sleep" (Morrison 1987: 39).

Sethe, unlike the Kuzwayo self, confronts the men who threaten her motherhood. Besides the paradoxical infanticide, she quarrels with Paul D over Denver because to her "Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that supposed to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing" (Morrison 1987: 45).

Her intense love is described by Paul D as "too thick", presumptuous for a slave women who does not even own herself. But in her view that is the only type worth feeling: "Love is or it aint. Thin love aint love at all" (Morrison 1987: 164). Sethe may have loved too much but she is not a crazy murderer. Stamp Paid explains this to Paul D when he has trouble reconciling the girl he knew at *Sweet home* with the fiercely protective mother: "She love those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter" (Morrison 1987: 234).

Her hope, like Kuzwayo's, is to have a family again: Paul D, Denver and herself, where she could feel again, "count on something" and not be afraid that it will be taken away (Morrison 1987: 38). But she also has doubts about Paul D, recalling Kuzwayo's reservations about

her brother-in-law. She remembers Baby Suggs saying, “A man ain’t nothing but a man” (Morrison 1987: 23). A son, however, is another matter, as the mother-son bond is more reliable. And she should know, as her son, Halle, bought her freedom by working “five years of Sundays” (Morrison 1987: 11).

Like the apartheid experiences recorded by Matshoba, slavery has, but to a much greater extent, debased Paul D; he tells Sethe that the farmyard rooster, Mister, is “free. Better than me [...] Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was [...] Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (Morrison 1987: 72). At the same time Sethe “knew Paul D was adding something to her life — something she wanted to count on but was scared to” (Morrison 1987: 95). And “she wanted him in her life” (Morrison 1987: 99).

But to be really free she needs to get to “a place where [she] could love anything [she] chose — not to need permission for desire — well now, that was freedom” (Morrison 1987: 162). Baby Suggs is condemned for her sexuality, which is automatically associated with the stereotype of the loose black woman; “slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them” (Morrison 1987: 209). As part of her project to reclaim the self she advises Sethe “to listen to [her] body and love it” (Morrison 1987: 209). After the departure of Beloved Paul D helps Sethe recover by washing her all over, as Baby Suggs had done once before. The Paul D-Sethe relationship harks back to Kuzwayo’s relationship with her second husband, but with more openness and detail.

Morrison has probed the motherhood role to offset the whore /mammie binary and reveal its more complex aspects. For instance she shows Sethe to be capable of caring for and loving her children even to the point of killing one because of slavery; Sethe and Baby Suggs are also portrayed as sexual beings who are still able to take joy from bodies that have been severely damaged in enslavement. Morrison also depicts the complications in the relationships of damaged males and females and women confronting the problems caused by gender power. For instance, she uncovers the connections between patriarchy (white men) and the racism of slavery (as Kuzwayo does

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with white patriarchy and apartheid) and between patriarchy (white and black men) and abuse of women. Paul D, apparently an exceptio, who shared Sethe's slave life and had never ill-treated a woman, comes across as being her equal, with the potential to develop their relationship into friendship. He says to Sethe: "It's good you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind", which takes us back to Kuzwayo's relationship with her second husband, about which not much is said (Morrison 1987: 273).

What Kuzwayo does, however, is to provide details about African identity in Africa which are conspicuously (and with good reason) absent from *Beloved*. It turns out, however, that the absence and the gender-levelling of the slave experience open a space within which to make greater gender leaps. It is also the *locus* for the gaps and evasions of Kuzwayo to be made up for or transformed, in a sense, by Morrison, who provides significant details about, for example, woman's sexuality, the damaged manhood of the black male and, hence, the need for restraining criticism. Driver (1990: 236) writes that in South African terms woman as mother to the male "must (instead of humiliating men further) restore to them their masculinity". And Miriam Tlali says that African women have power, a maternal power which African men acknowledge and at the same time try to counteract in order to define their masculinity. It works thus: to find himself the male has to separate himself from his mother's strength; the mother/wife then has to ensure that she helps him define his masculinity; it is by stroking the male ego that the mother/wife defines herself (Tlali 1989: 74-5). The pains taken to elaborate and sentimentalise the mother concept, harking back to the second half of the whore/mammie binary mentioned in relation to Morrison and Tlali, somehow smack of a whole range of cultural devices to bamboozle and keep women shackled. More gravely it is subordination in pseudo-elevation which provides a hospitable environment for instances of female abuse such as those recorded by Kuzwayo in her first marriage and the *timiti* sessions.

## 10. Conclusion

While both writers write to correct, revise and open up the overdetermined self to other possibilities, this occurs in the midst of ongoing and often rigid predetermining. The point of the comparative critical reading of the texts was to point out connections with and differences from each other in terms of black feminisms and, where necessary, white feminisms, but principally to underline the plurality of difference and ontology. The self was found in the text to be not a clear-cut unified single entity but problematised in a complex and often unpredictable network of overlapping and criss-crossing elements. Caught up in words, identity appears to be not so much a thing as an occurrence made possible in “political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice” so that “relations of the subject in social reality” may “be re-articulated from [...] historical experience” (De Lauretis 1981: 197).

Such a process is continuous, tentative and recursive because of its own dynamics, which come into play and are mirrored in the writing process which is fuelled by memory and interpretation as referred to by Sutherland (2001). The writer selects reflections to portray identity in narrative form so that the self finally defined is either enabled or constrained. Both Kuzwayo and Morrison present versions that reflect certain notions of the self and aspects of black feminist theory. The result, the self meant to be known in a certain way, calls into question Kuzwayo’s use of “I” and even more of “we”. And the tangled ambiguities of motherhood and black solidarity against racism in Kuzwayo become in Morrison the generative source for a more nuanced, relativised way of tackling power issues in gender relations.

To elaborate: in this transversal reading process of the two texts the self is first shown taking its measure from the structural principles of “exile”, denoting alienation, and “home”, denoting security and identity. The texts read into each other also help to bring to light a reversal of the “home” principle, the rigid, unchanging space of gender-binaries — that is gender-specific characteristics, roles and functions, exacerbated to an extent by apartheid definitions. So, too, the “exile” graphically and painfully dramatised in Morrison transmutes into potential, free-floating space for the disintegration of male/female characteristics and roles, as Paul D begins to exemplify, and the creation of another kind of self. Gender specifics, qualities

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and categories, over and above biological imperatives, begin to come apart in the space that opens up in Morrison, despite the predeterminations of slavery. In open transversal space, in contrast to Kuzwayo's culturally-embedded closed hierarchical space, there is constant movement between gender-specific characteristics so that the tenderness and compassion of Paul D is not female but human. In this sense the space of exile brought on by slavery is transformed from utter alienation to possibility for the ex-slaves, providing room for the development not of gender-specific attributes but of human qualities, roles and functions.



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