

Re-reading Matsemela Manaka's *eGoli*, *Domba*, and *Goree*: Foregrounding Black Womanhood and Feminism in Black Consciousness Theatre Discourse

Andile Xaba

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9628-9643>

University of South Africa

xabaa@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

The influence of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) was profound in politics and cultural expression in South Africa during apartheid. Although there were only a handful of playwrights aligned to the Black Consciousness (BC) ideology, including Matsemela Manaka, Maishe Maponya, and Zakes Mda, their plays have become part of the South African canon. Ever since he wrote *eGoli* in 1978, Manaka's plays have received much scholarly attention for embodying the ideas of BCM to resist apartheid. However, the way in which his plays dealt with issues of gender has not received much attention, which presents an opportunity for re-reading a selection of his plays. The focus of this article is to explore how aspects of womanism and Black feminism influenced Manaka as a playwright and, specifically, how these were a feature in his plays. Considering the critique of sexist practices within organisations aligned to BC ideology (for example, the South African Students' Organisation), the article reflects on Manaka's plays from the perspective of womanism, Black feminism, and Bosadi theoretical approaches, to discuss whether BC sexist tendencies permeated his plays or whether these plays represent an emerging discourse on Black women's contribution to BC.

Keywords: Matsemela Manaka; *eGoli*; *Domba: The Last Dance*; *Goree*; womanism; Black feminism; Black Consciousness

UNISA 

Journal of Literary Studies

Volume 40 | 2024 | #17132 | 19 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/17132>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

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Introduction

The influence of Black Consciousness ideology was profound in politics and cultural expression during apartheid, and there are signs that the ideology is being rediscovered by South African youth.¹ The banning of political organisations (the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress) and the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 are some of the occurrences indicating increased state repression on anti-apartheid political opposition in South Africa at that time. Historians argue that the jailing of leaders from these established organisations created a vacuum in oppositional politics, which paved the way for the Black Consciousness Movement to flourish in the 1970s. For the purposes of my discussion on Matsemela Manaka, it is important to note that in Soweto, a substantial youth movement emerged in the mid-1970s which sought to articulate its resistance to apartheid from the perspective of an assertive, unified Black voice to counter white hegemony.² Relating to theatre, Peterson (1990, 203–204) attributes the “burgeoning nationalism” during the 1960s as inspiring young theatre playwrights to adopt the prescripts of Black Consciousness in the 1970s.³ Associating with the idea of Black self-reliance and asserting the claim that the African continent should prioritise Black-orientated philosophies, Manaka co-founded the Creative Youth Association (CYA) in 1977. This was an amalgamation of young poets, writers, and instrumentalists (mainly singers and percussionists) who sought to subvert the dehumanisation of Black people by the oppressive state. The act of conscientising (to inspire a psychological revolution) the Black community was key to the Black Consciousness Movement in order to reclaim dignity and pride, which they saw as being undermined by apartheid legislation. These laws collectively assigned Black people to an inferior social position, denying them land ownership, including an attempt to suppress Black artistic expression by denying facilities, education, and opportunities to Black people. Thus, the CYA provided the youth with a platform for themselves to be conscientised through the arts and also to conscientise other members of the Soweto community. In the article, I refer to BC to discuss Black Consciousness ideology and to BCM to emphasise how the Black Consciousness took form in society (for example via youth organisations) as a social or political movement.

Although there were a handful of playwrights aligned to BC ideology, the plays of Matsemela Manaka, Maishe Maponya, and Zakes Mda, as representative of a BC cohort, have become part of the South African canon and continue to inspire a younger generation of arts practitioners. Manaka (1956–1998) wrote 14 plays from Funda Centre, his artistic base in Soweto. A marked aspect of BC-aligned political organisations was its ambiguous and even sexist positioning of the role of Black women

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- 1 As argued by Lewis and Baderoon (2021, 5), the “return of political blackness” has gained momentum with the rise of #FeesMustFall and RhodesMustFall movements since 2015.
 - 2 See *The Soweto Uprisings* (2017) by Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, who discusses the resistance spearheaded by political formations (including the Black Consciousness Movement) in Soweto during apartheid.
 - 3 Noor Nieftagodien in *The Soweto Uprising* (2017) provides a comprehensive discussion on the youth participation in the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s.

in BCM organisational structures and in the way the women's role was articulated within BC political rhetoric.

In this article, I explore whether this fractured way of relating to women was carried into BC theatre. Both Manaka and Maponya were ardent proponents of BC ideology, and in their plays a discourse on women was apparent to various degrees. As far as BC and the exploration of feminism are concerned, Manaka's plays *eGoli* (1978), *Domba: The Last Dance* (1986), and *Goree* (1989) are the most striking works. *Egoli* presents a scenario where the major concern of Black society during apartheid, namely, the resistance of white socio-political domination, is explored primarily from the vantage point of male characters. On the other hand, *Domba* and *Goree* are centred on women's cultural and political experiences in a temporal period that predates and exceeds apartheid. Maishe Maponya's *Umongikazi: The Nurse* (1979) as well as *Dity Work* and *Gangsters* (both 1984) can be analysed from a perspective of Black feminism. *Umongikazi* dramatises the experiences of Black nurses working in the health system during apartheid, and the protagonist in *Gangsters* is a political activist whom Maponya constructed in alternative versions of the play as a man or a woman. As far as exploration of BC ideology in theatre is concerned, Zakes Mda's *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* is most prominent, but the play does not address feminist issues. Scholarship on prominent Black playwrights tends to focus primarily on politics and other socio-economic relations and neglects the role of women in theatre and how they may have been (mis-)represented in plays. This article contributes to scholarship on Manaka by exploring the layer of womanism and feminism in his works, aspects which he did not talk about extensively, but which were nevertheless present in his plays. I analyse *eGoli*, *Domba*, and *Goree* to explore how these plays were covertly and overtly entangled in a discourse of womanism and Black feminism.

Foregrounding Marginal Voices of Black Women in Black Consciousness Theatre

A womanist approach in the representation of women in literature has been associated with the African American novelist Alice Walker and the author and academic Clenora Hudson Weems, among others. Walker is said to have coined the term, and it has come to refer to a discourse that centres on the experiences and contributions of women. It is used to articulate Black women's social activism to resist patriarchy and social and economic discrimination. "Womanists speak to the injustices faced by Black women, men, children and families, and frequently fight against these injustices by leading, participating in or supporting social justice movements" (Walker-Williams, n.d.). Thus, a womanist analysis and interpretation of a literary text takes into account the impact of race on women's lives, their social reality, and how social interaction may be a factor in the stories that are told about Black women. The theory can be applied to the way in which male domination and bias influence the construction and reading of literary texts and, where applicable, serve to advocate for women's liberation. In identifying limitations of feminist discourse advanced by white women, Jacquelyn Grant argues

that Black women “navigate threefold oppression, racism/sexism/classism” (1989, 2). Elaborating on this idea is Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “intersectional framework” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 785), which may be used as a method to analyse Black women’s marginalisation in society by aggregating the manifold ways in which race, gender, and class interact to inform or construct discourses on women in literary texts or in their lived experience. The argument by Black feminists is that white women define their concerns from a privileged, middle-class social position and, therefore, white feminism could not attend to the issues of race and class. Although womanism and Black feminism highlight the historically unequal social positions between Black and white women, my discussion on Manaka’s plays centres on the way in which they foregrounded womanism and Black feminism as integral to a positive Black identity.

The Bosadi theorisations in South Africa are aligned to the American womanist approach to studying literary texts, but they are rooted in the Pedi culture. Bosadi, loosely translated to mean “motherhood,” involves an analysis that considers how texts construct women characters in the context of African social and cultural relations, as well as economic status. This may incorporate the way in which texts represent or construct African social practices (for example initiation practices to induct girls into womanhood), spirituality and ethics (for example Ubuntu as a guiding value in social interaction). As proposed by Madipoane Masenya (ngwan’a Mphahlele) (1996),⁴ the Bosadi theoretical approach includes the way in which texts may “argue for a critical promotion of the African family and the community spirit of ubuntu to transform the whole of society” (Amadiume as quoted by Molobi and Mzondi 2022, 7). The Bosadi theory also considers how texts may frame the values of “love, harmony, peace and cooperation, [as well as] self-sacrifice” (7). Other significant tropes in the Bosadi theory are the way in which African women can be seen to express agency and autonomy via their “control of religion and culture” (7); their “control of the subsistence economy or the market” (7) forms an aspect of their social interaction and being represented in literary texts.

Lastly, the issue of “autonomy/self-government” receives special attention in Bosadi theorisations (Amadiume 1997 as quoted by Molobi and Mzondi 2022, 2). This article discusses some of these aspects from the perspective of BC ideological belief as represented in Manaka’s plays. Manaka built the play around the ceremonial Domba dance, which marks a journey from girlhood to womanhood in Tshivenda culture. Applying the Bosadi theoretical analysis in *Domba* will hopefully yield fresh understanding of Manaka’s work, diverging from some contemporary media commentary, which exoticised Domba as a “snake dance,” without paying sufficient importance of the spiritual connection between the women (the elders and their apprentices) during the initiation, as Manaka had intended in this work.

4 Masenya outlined the theory in her unpublished thesis, “Proverbs 31:10–31 in a South African Context: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Perspective” (1996).

Surmising from the analyses of Black feminism by Kogila Moodley (1991), Busisiwe Deyi, Rozena Maart, and Pumla Gqola (all 2013), Corrine Knowles (2019), Desiree Lewis (2002), and Barbra Boswell (2021), another point of divergence between Black and white feminisms is that the former finds aspects of congruence with Black men, while the latter is concerned with articulating the struggles of white women as individuals. To explain, womanists and Black feminists may form solidarity as racialised and oppressed members of society, which then prompts them to form alliances, although these may be transitory. The authors argue that white feminists tend to have an individualist approach (looking at the single issue of the oppression of women—and not, for example, taking into consideration the extreme Otherisation of Black women due to their race, as is the case with Black feminism) to opposing patriarchy, in contrast to Black women who are bound by history to formulate a singular message with men to confront prejudice, as was apparent in BC discussions during apartheid.

I propose that the womanist and Bosadi approaches are useful for analysis because they help readers to see how Manaka foregrounded the role of Black women within the context of BC ideological discourse and culture, which was an unusually progressive stance. On the other hand, the Bosadi approach venerates “self-sacrifice” as a positive aspect in which communal, societal Black culture can develop and thrive. Additionally, the Bosadi theory does not fully account that gender may be a social construct and, instead, sees the construction of the term “woman” as a given in Black society. Black feminism discourse differs in that it situates a critique of sexism within BCM organisational structures, and, by extension, similar tendencies as represented in plays written by playwrights aligned to BC ideology. There is also an emphasis on women expressing themselves in their individual and personal voices, rather than through the benevolent discourses that may be crafted by men (for example, the reading of the masculine and heteronormative voice of “he”/God as written when analysing the Christian Bible in Bosadi theorisations). Black feminists recognise that race, gender, identity, and class are interconnected in discourses that create oppression towards women and in the lived experience of women in society. The convergence of ideas between womanism, Black feminism, and Bosadi theorisations (for example, these theories propose that Black men can play a positive role in Black feminism) suggests that there is an ongoing transnational conversation amongst Black women. Thus, we can see Basadi theorisations (which is a theory developed on the African continent) as integrated to its North American counterpart. Lastly, although Black feminism is usually employed as a response to the masculinist BCM literary traditions,⁵ in this article, I explore how the theory helps to uncover the way in which Manaka adopted elements of feminism in his plays.

5 As an example, see Pumla Gqola’s (2013) argument in *Black Women and the Discourse of the Black Consciousness Movement* and Barbra Boswell’s (2021) “Echoes of Miriam Tlali.”

Discourses on *eGoli*, *Domba*, and *Goree*

Having been established at Black universities in the 1960s, such as Turfloop, Zululand (Ngoye), and Fort Hare, BCM has always involved intellectual engagement with society and recognised the importance of culture. BC ideology was spearheaded by the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), through which Black students expressed solidarity and created the organisation enabling them to articulate their opinions and aspirations (Gqola 2013, 11). The arts were seen as ideal mediums for Black people to reclaim and assert a positive identity and self-worth to confront the false thesis of inferiority and powerlessness fostered by colonialism and apartheid hegemony. Manaka was influenced by Steve Biko's proclamation that culture was essential to restructure society under apartheid and that African heritage, theatre, dance, poetry, and music were ideal mediums to rediscover indigenous practices whose value bestows dignity to Black people. Biko's belief that BC was constituted by a person's positive self-awareness rather than skin colour resonated with Manaka.⁶ Hence, Manaka's formulation of Black womanhood and feminism was not only represented in the bodies of the female characters in *Domba* and *Goree*, but was also presented in cerebral concepts to engage the intellect of audiences. This is because self-definition was a crucial step for mental emancipation (Gqola 2013, 12).

Egoli received positive media reviews when it was performed in South Africa, as well as in Europe and North America in the early to mid-1980s. The play has received scholarly attention, mostly recognising its contribution to BC ideology's discourse in the arts. For example, Philemon T. Wakashe (1986) and Dennis Schaffer (2003) write about the play to illustrate Manaka's collaborative approach to working in theatre. Manaka initially workshopped the play *eGoli* with the actors John Ledwaba and Hamilton Silwane to tell the tale of the exploitation of Black workers and their families in South African mines. Ian Steadman (1988, 25) notes that the play is about "the conditions of employment of, and the social and psychological pressures on, two gold miners." In his survey of the Black anti-apartheid writers' movement, Njabulo Ndebele (1989, 413–414) notes that one of the characteristics of BC ideology was to advocate for the arts, and Manaka's *eGoli* was incorporated in group cultural activities that were organised by an arts collective called Medupe. Bhekizizwe Peterson (1990, 324) sees the play as "typical of black theatre which attempted to foreground the struggles of black workers." Peterson locates his discussion of the play in contemporary struggles of the working class where they were victims of "political oppression" and "racist violence" when punished by supervisors in the goldmine.

6 In his last play, *Song for Biko* (1997), Manaka consolidated his political beliefs in a tribute to Steve Biko. The project was also envisaged as a television documentary.

In the mid-1980s, there was much media critique of *Domba* and *Goree*, although, subsequently, scholarship on the plays has been muted, if not altogether silent.⁷ This may be because there is no script available for *Domba* that scholars may analyse. Another reason may be that commentary on indigenous ceremonial practices requires special cultural sensitivities that may present a danger of misrepresenting Tshivenda culture in print. As for *Goree*, although the play contained a weighty pan-Africanist message, it did not have a singular, immediate, and forceful anti-apartheid message; but it explored themes of anticolonialism and anti-apartheid, gender, feminism, and pan-Africanism in a subtle and abstract way, thus not making it an obvious candidate for analysis along the lines of BC ideology. Geoffrey Davis edited *eGoli* and *Goree* in a collection of plays titled *Beyond the Echoes of Soweto: Five Plays by Matsemela Manaka* (1997). Additionally, Davis (2003) analysed *Goree* in terms of Manaka's incorporation of pan-Africanism as part of BC ideology's expression of continental solidarity among Africans. Having seen the original staging of the play, Davis also makes acute observations of Manaka's aesthetics, particularly Manaka's "synthesis of the arts, to which the brilliantly painted backdrops, dance choreography, song, texts and musicianship all contribute" (2003, 231). Thus, scholarly writings on Manaka's plays did not give attention to aspects of gender/feminism. Considering this gap in our understanding of Manaka's plays, it might be informative to re-read this selection of these plays, as they provide a starting point to consider how Manaka's plays offered an alternative voice in discourse circulating in BCM organisations.

Strong Political Messages Masking Ambiguous Representation of Women in Black Consciousness Theatre

In attempting to answer the question of whether Matsemela Manaka's plays offered a contemporary representation of Black feminism in South Africa, it is prudent to acknowledge that concerns about feminism and gender were not on the radar of playwrights aligned to BC ideology. One of the missions of BC theatre aligned to BC ideology in this period was to offer "a means of assisting blacks to reassert their pride, human dignity and group identity and solidarity" (The People's Experimental Theatre group quoted in Kerr 1995, 223). Incipient BC plays, for example the People's Experimental Theatre group, which staged Credo Mutwa's *uNosilimela*, Mthuli Shezi's *Shanti*⁸ (1973) and Workshop 71's *Survival* (1976), represented the struggle for Black liberation from a male perspective. Additionally, in looking back at the scripts of these plays as well as theatre archives and scholarly articles, the voices of women playwrights

7 Manaka's plays are also discussed in an unpublished thesis by Andile Xaba (2021), "Recovered Plays: Collective Memory and Construction of a Historical Narrative, Analysis and Interpretation of Selected Soweto-Based Community Theatre Plays (1984–1994)."

8 Written by Mthuli Shezi, *Shanti* explores the notion of Black solidarity by problematising a love affair between an Indian woman and a Black man. BC arts groups subverted apartheid era racial categorisations (between so-called Coloureds, Indians and Blacks), which they asserted was a strategy to undermine their efforts for Black liberation.

and actors are not visible in the discourse, and where the women appear, they fulfil a secondary role.

Although *uNosilimela* does not share typical attributes of other plays aligned to BC ideology (for example agitprop and experimental theatre techniques), it nevertheless adopts an indigenous mode of theatre (for example oral storytelling as well as incorporating African myth and religion) by asserting the value of pre-colonial African culture.⁹ The titular Nosilimela is introduced in a Zulu traditional setting where her life journey is relayed by a praise poet, dancers, and a chorus. Taking place in the natural world as well as on a cosmic plane, the character is on a journey to rediscover authentic African values and spiritual practices, thus presenting a way for Black audiences in the townships to reconnect with their indigenous cultures. However, masculinity is pronounced in the discourse of the play, particularly in the way that authority figures are inscribed in the text as “great gods of our fathers,” or when the narrator/s defer/s to the hierarchically superior figure of “the Man” (Mutwa 1991, 6–7). In *Shanti*, a prominent trope is a demand that Black men, as active agents in the struggle for liberation, ought to display aggression, and in the play, this is signified as “an item of manhood” (Shezi 1991, 84). Lastly, while *Survival* (1976) invokes on the stage the degradation that four Black men suffer while imprisoned, it also has a subordinate theme that builds satire out of the sexual assault of a woman and represents the character in a way that diminishes her humanity. There is a social and philosophical context in this regard. Critics of BCM point out that SASO was initially based on an all-male organisational committee and in their texts referenced “the generic ‘man’” when formulating arguments to describe how the “consciousness of the self” may be subsumed as inferior in colonialist discourse (Maart 2013, 9).¹⁰ Additionally, in portrayals involving women in Mutwa’s, Shezi’s, and the Workshop 71’s plays, the agency to deconstruct, resist, and subvert apartheid is entirely the function of men. Indeed, this reflected a shortcoming of the BC movement in that it aligned organisations; therefore, there was a general failure to advance gender equality.

Initially, Manaka did not question the sexism in BC ideology as, in its formative years, there was little critique of its biases. In fact, in the 1970s, the extent of chauvinism was severe to the extent that there were reports of Black women being assaulted after being accused of trying to “copy white images of beauty” by straightening their hair or using skin-lighting creams (Moodley 1991, 243). The accusers justified their actions by saying that this was an attempt to raise the women’s consciousness or expose the exploitation of Black women by “racial capitalism” (242). Furthermore, masculinist attitudes in the early days of BCM were said to be a mission to help restore the women’s “sense of self-appreciation and self-acceptance” (243). This attitude emanated from a prevailing belief that women “were for the most part relegated to traditional domestic roles, responsible

9 Robert Kavanagh (1981, xviii) makes the point that *uNosilimela* expresses the concerns of BC, namely the revaluation of Black history and culture.

10 Furthermore, “Black man, you are on your own” was a rallying cry for BC organisations in the 1960s and 1970s.

for child-care, moral education and the making of clothing,” as Moodley argues (1991, 244). Additionally, in terms of South African theatre, especially between the 1960s and 1990s, there has been a paucity of Black women playwrights and directors, which is pertinent to the marginalisation of women’s voices in BC theatre.

Manaka’s awareness of feminist issues grew over time. I argue that Manaka was atypical within this pervasive climate of sexism. In applying his creative process as a playwright and director, he was aware of broader problems facing BC theatre. In an interview, Manaka (*Sowetan* 1982) decried the absence of a women’s township-based theatre groups. He said:

We don’t have more than five dedicated black actresses. We need a lot of ladies dedicated to the theatre, such as Thoko Nthsinga and Nomsa Nene. A number of people often ask me why we never have female actors in our productions. It is a difficult question to answer. But without sounding like an expert on women’s issues, I would say there is a need for a female theatre group.

He added that female actors in BC theatre were marginalised by men. In an interview with the *Sowetan* (1982), Manaka mentioned that “various reasons,” perhaps originating in cultural expectations, were hampering the development of black female actors. He made an example that his play *Pula* (1982) called for a female character to give birth and look after her child. He said that in the end, he cast a male actor in the role when one of the actors unexpectedly left the production. He noted that BC plays “needed to reflect the plight of black women,” and casting men in women’s roles was not his preferred artistic choice. He said, as men, “who are we to talk about the pains of giving birth? We can only imagine them.”

Considering Manaka’s commitment to the development of women in the theatre, the fact that women had positions of authority at Funda Arts Centre,¹¹ and that Nomsa Manaka and Sibongile Khumalo had substantial input in *Domba* and *Goree*, Manaka challenged the structural, gendered oppression of women. When engaging in this critical reappraisal of his contributions to both literature and Black feminist discourse in South Africa, it is fair to point out that Manaka did not claim the mantle of being a feminist in his lifetime. However, considering his writing and actions collectively illustrates how he introduced feminist consciousness in his plays. His theatre language deconstructed established theatre forms by dissolving the boundaries between the written word (which predominates in drama) and the spiritual aspects of music, dance, and ritual.¹²

11 At different times, Soentjie Thapedi and Nomsa Manaka managed the dance programme at the Funda Arts Centre; Sibongile Khumalo managed operations at the arts centre.

12 Manaka experimented with different ideas in his approach to theatre to challenge norms of prevalent Western-centric theatre forms in South Africa. For example, he incorporated ritual in *Pula* (1982), which was enacted in dance and the ceremonial burning of *impepha*; In *Blues Afrika Cafe* (1990), food was served to foreground the importance of the African culinary experience. An integral part of *Ekhaya: Museum over Soweto* (1991) involved an art exhibition, the display of a melange of African

To illustrate, in *eGoli*, after the death of his son in a rockfall in the mine, the character Hamilton purges himself on stage as a form of ritual cleansing, to align the soul with the ancestors; in *Domba*, Manaka maintains that the maidens were not merely displaying the so-called “snake dance,” but that their bodies were moving in unison to commune with their ancestral mothers and cement a generational bond among them. In *Goree*, the relationship between the female characters is energised by the Baobab tree, a species that can live up to 3 000 years. Thus, Manaka’s plays offer a starting point for mapping out what Black feminist theatre might look like in the realm of BC playwrights.

Egoli: City of Gold: An Ambiguous Feminist Message

The play tells the story of two men who work as labourers in a mine in Johannesburg, the economic hub of South Africa. *Egoli* is the colloquial name for the city and, historically, migrant labourers worked under life-threatening conditions for poor pay and were housed in single-sex hostels. The original cast had two males and one female actor. However, when the play began to tour, the parents of the female actor refused to give her permission to leave Johannesburg, and the play was performed as a two-hander.

In the play, the characters Hamilton and John have wives and children in the Eastern Cape, but they make use of local sex workers, as they can only go home during the December holidays. In their focalisation, the men express vindictiveness and resentment towards these women, who are mostly nameless, except for Mandika, a prostitute whom John buys with two rands for Hamilton’s “pleasure”:

JOHN: Ya. We are going to try again tonight. I am going to organize another one for you.

HAMILTON: No.

JOHN: Tell me, what happened that day when I referred Mandika to you?

HAMILTON: Nothing special.

JOHN: Tell me what you did to my woman!

HAMILTON: Your woman? I thought she belongs to everyman with a pay packet.

(*Slapping his thigh pocket.*) (Davis 1997, 56)

This flat representation of women does not examine their social status, nor does it extend to them the play’s analysis that apartheid capitalism positioned Black people at the bottom of hierarchical racialised institutions (for example, limited access to education, work opportunities, and healthcare). Even after the establishment of the Black Women’s Federation in 1975, Mamphela Ramphele, one of the women leaders who resisted patriarchy in BC, reported that part of her fight against male domination involved confronting social pressure to be “available to men, because one was single” (as quoted

objects d’art and serving African beer. In this way, theatre was not a passive experience for the audience, but a heightened sensory experience as well as a socially and intellectually engaging endeavour to challenge expectations, thereby challenging audience expectations of what theatre should be.

by Gqola 2013, 15).¹³ Seemingly a common feature in the early days of BC, it follows then that the sexualisation of women and their denigration through sexual exploitation are unexamined in several BC plays of the era.¹⁴ This is not to say that women in BCM political structures passively accepted this situation, as Gqola's research illustrates.¹⁵

The play was highly lauded for its political content, and contemporary analysis ignored its uncritical representation of sexism and violence against women in the mines. On the other hand, in re-reading the play, I suggest that, even in this early stage of Manaka's writing, the play captures the complexity of gender relations in South African rural society.

HAMILTON: (After a pause) iNhlupheko wetu. Sufferings my brother.

JOHN: Egoli. We run. We escape. We go back to the women and the children. We watch them starve. We come back again to breathe the dust for them. (Davis 1997, 55)

Egoli attempts to capture the different roles that Black women occupied in society under apartheid. For example, Hamilton's wife, Suzanne, is represented sympathetically when she is on the receiving end of injustice. The character best illustrates the effects of the land tenure legislation, in that the family is evicted from their home by the white owners of the land on whose farm the family settled precariously. Apartheid laws did not allow land ownership by Black people; therefore, farm workers could be suddenly evicted. And while the men were away in city mines, women made life-altering decisions that impacted the family. Although this theme is underdeveloped in the play, *eGoli* still critiques the way in which apartheid laws placed a triple burden on women (gender, social, and economic discrimination). We can also see the character Suzanne in terms of class oppression, as she operates from a position of disadvantage, even among Black women. In this way, an integrated analysis of apartheid era social practice illustrates how major systems of oppression within apartheid were interlocking, and it is in this way that the play avoids a strictly *essentialist* construction of gender. Although the representation of women is somewhat ambiguous, I suggest that *eGoli* still introduced a Black feminist perspective in BC discourse.

Domba: The Last Dance: An Expression of Womanism

The act of re-reading *Domba: The Last Dance* is also a process of reconstructing it through the *collective memory* of Manaka's colleagues. This is necessary because there is no script for this play, nor is there a visual or audio recording in existence. This is

13 Oshadi Mangena (2008, 254) challenges the view that BC created a "hostile environment" for women by noting that "women could be at an equal footing with men as leaders in the public sphere [within BC organisations such as SASO]." Mamphela Ramphele countered this claim by noting that women in leadership positions were regarded as exceptions and that she cultivated an aggressive attitude to become "one of the boys" (see Gqola 2013, 15).

14 The character Hamilton also confesses to raping a woman in *eGoli*.

15 See Gqola (2013, 15).

unusual, since Manaka was a literary playwright who ensured the writing and publishing of his plays. Collective memory helps to foreground aspects of the play since it harmonises the experiences of the people involved in the play with archival material (newspaper articles, theatre programmes, and photographs).

Domba was the culmination of a six-year research project during which Manaka immersed himself in Tshivenda culture to understand the initiation practices that take place to inaugurate age-appropriate girls into womanhood. The play blended acting, dance, and music—particularly percussion, since drumming is associated with spiritual communion in African cultures. Therefore, *Domba* incorporated the three art forms to cement the Afrocentric philosophical idea that cultural expression enables a spiritual connection not only between actors participating in the play, but also between actors and the audience.¹⁶ In *Domba*, spirituality was in the service of the needs of women, as opposed to women accepting male-gendered divinity.

It is noteworthy that Manaka transformed the ritual of the Domba dance (which resembles the movements of a python) to emphasise selected aspects of African womanhood.¹⁷

Thabiso Leshoi (1986, 12) quotes Manaka as saying that:

Domba is a Venda¹⁸ word for the third and final stage in the initiation rites that symbolise the *liberation* [my emphasis] of a girl into womanhood. Because it is set in an initiation school the play is also concerned with giving new meaning and value to traditional African forms of schooling and socialisation, which include dance, music, and oral historical narrative.

Manaka (Leshoi 1986, 12) added, “*Domba* was conceived as a statement of the crises” in Black identity. Manaka believed that the South African arts environment was often hostile to or misinformed about African art forms. In reframing the Domba cultural experience, Manaka undermined the Western-centric view that the purpose of Domba was, in one example, to “teach” African women not to look men in the eye, thereby

16 Manaka’s method of devising plays was also his way of theorising about BC theatre. This aspect of his work was emphasised by his former colleague, Ali Hlongwane, in an interview I conducted with him on 14 March 2019 at Witwatersrand University. For additional information, see the unpublished thesis “Recovered Plays: Collective Memory and Construction of a Historical Narrative, Analysis and Interpretation of Selected Soweto-Based Community Theatre Plays (1984–1994)” (Xaba 2021). Manaka also published his theoretical proposal on theatre: “Theatre of the Disposed,” “The Babalaz People,” and “Theatre as a Physical World” in Davis (1997, 35–48).

17 In a social setting, the Domba ritual changes the social relationship between the inductees and their families and community, which does not happen in a performance (Turner 1987, 58).

18 The correct designation is “Tshivenda” as opposed to “Venda word.”

grooming them to be compliant.¹⁹ Manaka's play expunged patriarchal demands for women to be subservient to men.

In the programme, Manaka also stated that Africans "should get sustenance from African culture."²⁰ Structurally, the dance and music were structured into themes to render the story. Six themes were prominent, namely, "Nyungwe Pipe Song," "Namae 'Kgaotse," "Romance," "Fairness in Love," "Vukani," and "Mukolwedzi." These themes express certain emotional states that the young inductees undergo on their developmental path from girlhood to womanhood. Furthermore, as the programme notes, the purpose of initiation is not only to "prepare girls for marriage," but to also make them aware of "the role and status of women in society." In the play, African culture is also reframed by incorporating music—ranging from "a 15th century guitar piece" to a Xhosa song "Ntyilo Ntyilo," as well as songs from "central Africa" and Uganda. By reframing the women's transformative journey away from patriarchal concerns of inducing female servitude to their future husbands (through the Domba ceremony), the play emphasises the leading role that women play in religious and cultural ceremonies.

Analysing the play following Bosadi theorisations, we can say that the role of Domba may be construed as a conduit for women to contribute to social cohesion, and the ceremony carves a dedicated space for women to exercise agency and authority symbolically over men and women. Oyèrónké Oyěwùní (2003, 12–13) contrasts the concepts of motherhood, where in white feminism, motherhood is seen ambivalently because it may be seen to suppress women's autonomy in society. Conversely, within the Bosadi conceptualisation, motherhood (as an aspect of Domba rites of passage) promotes a "model [for] solidarity" and coalesces with Ubuntu, which promotes "the inclusive benefit for all members of the community" (Masenya as quoted by Molobi and Mzondi 2022, 10).

Womanism advocates for women to lead in their liberation, rather than being recipients of patriarchal dogma (Grant 1989, 1). According to Motsumi Makhene (whom I interviewed on 29 November 2016 at the Funda Centre), the reimaged version of *Domba* (and other traditional dances) was not presented as a reminder of an idealised pre-colonial cultural expression, but its performance gave rural women a platform to express themselves without the filter of the Western gaze. At the same time, since *Domba* locates women at the centre of a discourse challenging white hegemony, Manaka and his collaborators shifted masculinist notions in BC, which assigned women's contribution as being only within the domain of domesticity. In this production, women are not characterised as "mothers" whose role is to "nurture" children for the benefit of Black society, but are "strong in themselves" in cementing

19 For example, see "The Domba Dance or Python Dance in Venda Limpopo": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R29xw7h4Ye0>.

20 The programme is available from the Soweto History and Archives Project (shap!) at the Witwatersrand University: <https://shap.org.za/>

spiritual bonds that help them to navigate modern day, Western-centric society (Gqola 2013, 18).

Goree: Centring Womanism and Black Feminism

Goree is the story of two women, the characters Oba and Nomsa. The setting is Senegal, and the play particularly references its historical significance as a place from which slaves were shipped as part of the transatlantic slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. As the play begins, Nomsa, a Soweto-based dancer, has arrived at the island and is seeking directions to Dakar where she hopes to study African dance, a marginalised form of expression in her home country. Instead, Nomsa never makes it to the capital city, but coincidentally meets Oba, from whom she initially tries to escape. For the duration of the play, Nomsa gradually finds her place in communion with a strong Black woman, from whom she learns about a wider African community and shares values that extend beyond the physical divisions of African states on the continent.

On the surface of the story, Oba is “an African woman dancer” linked to the Mariama Bâ school for girls (Davis 1997, 181) in Dakar. At a deeper narrative level, the character Oba shares mystical powers with a Baobab tree in which she lives. The duality between the tree and Oba with Nomsa symbolises the convergence of the past and the present, thereby giving depth to the knowledge that women share across centuries. Through Oba’s vast knowledge of the continent, her alternating speaking turns with Nomsa’s story become a history lesson of the slave trade, which is intertwined with tragic episodes in South Africa’s history, for example, the Sharpeville Massacre of anti-pass protestors in 1960. The grand narrative scheme reflects Nomsa’s quest for an authentic pan-African Black identity. Oba observes that “South Africa is just another extension of America” (1997, 178). Therefore, Nomsa’s journey is not personal, but representative of the Black people as they reclaim cultural pride and which, when attained, enables a unifying Black identity.

In the play Nomsa gives some background about herself:

OBA: Where did you learn to dance?

NOMSA: I started as a village dancer
in Dinokana—
a small village next to Zeerust.
Dinokana is the place
where South African women
demonstrated in protest against the law
that forced women to carry pass-books.
(Davis 1997, 182)

The exchange between Oba and Nomsa links BC political activism to feminism, particularly to the historical leadership by women taking part in the Defiance Campaign

of the 1950s.²¹ Having left rural Zeerust, Nomsa recalls her life in which she thrives as a ballet dancer and poet in Johannesburg. As her knowledge of Western art forms advances, she becomes disillusioned with the Western perspective of what dance expression should be. And, living in Soweto during the 1970s, she encounters the toyi-toyi dance which leads her to seek information about other “traditional war dance[s]” (Davis 1997, 185). Nomsa’s inner struggle for personal change (as a dancer) is also directed outwards in that it is linked to social change in the play, that there should be more influence of African culture in South Africa to resist the influence of apartheid and colonialism.

Chronological time is diffused in the play and circles between an undefined spiritual universe in which African ancestors dwell (the time of the Baobab/Oba); Goree, during the time of the slave trade (18th and 19th centuries); Nomsa’s activism as part of the BCM student movement in the 1970s (the adoption of the toyi-toyi when youth activists confronted the police during the township violence in the mid-1980s); and, finally, as Oba and Nomsa’s “present time” when they meet in a port in Senegal during the later part of 1980s. The role of female forebears as embodied in the character of Oba is not backward-looking but emphasises that the ancestors are ever-present. Therefore, African wisdom and values from ancestral memory help then to restore humanity to Black people. The past and the present co-exist in present actions and events, since Oba acts dually as Nomsa’s spiritual guide and at the concrete level as her guide in Dakar. Additionally, the inclusion of Western cultural practices, represented by Oba playing the violin and Nomsa’s (re)enactment of her ballet sequences, is a way to explore how Western culture has eroded African forms of dance and music-making (1997, 185–188).

In re-reading the play, it is useful to consider Manaka’s collaborative method of working. Both the life stories of Sibongile Khumalo (who represented the character of Oba) and Nomsa Manaka (who represented the character Nomsa) as Black women living in Soweto are embedded in the text of *Goree*. Specifically, Khumalo has spoken about being subjected to police harassment while she was at Funda Centre during the 1980s; therefore, theatre was a way of fighting oppression.²² Khumalo trained as a classical singer and violinist, and Nomsa studied ballet. Later in their careers, both artists diverted to jazz and African music, as well as African dance. Thus, the play *Goree* foregrounds a Black female perspective on activism against apartheid, and the play also highlights how these women initiated their “conscientisation” as Black artists.

Another consideration, when attempting to *re-read* Manaka’s plays, is that there may be a danger of misrepresentation. There may be a fallacy where we ascribe current concerns and debates to plays that were produced in terms of aesthetics, philosophical and political concerns of the 1980s. I hereby argue that *Goree* (as well as Manaka’s

21 The Defiance Campaign was a civil movement to resist the introduction of reference books to Black women. For more information on the women’s role, see “History of Women’s Struggle in South Africa”: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-womens-struggle-south-africa>.

22 I conducted a telephonic interview with Khumalo on 16 April 2019.

plays discussed in this article) transcends the binary of apartheid and anti-apartheid debate, which has been one of the mainstays of scholarly research on him. Manaka was equally concerned with theatre aesthetics and with exploring BC (ideological) themes in his plays in a narrative continuum that predates and surpasses apartheid (as is apparent in *Goree*).²³ As is apparent in *Goree*, Black feminist discourse was integrated in that Oba and Nomsa were active participants both in opposing apartheid and colonialism and in formulating messages to engage the audience (for example on African history and spirituality), as opposed to following the lead as set by men.

Conclusion

From the perspective of womanism and Black feminism, it is useful to see how Manaka's plays engaged with so-called "women's issues" or the "women's point of view," especially so, considering the sometimes-wilful marginalisation of women's voices in BCM discourse and as practiced in society.

The re-reading of *eGoli*, *Domba*, and *Goree* hopefully uncovers another layer of Manaka's form of theatre. The plays were produced over a period of 11 years and reflect his growing maturity as a playwright, while also showing his versatility in the fact that each play does not repeat the format of the last. In *eGoli*, there was a strong influence of agitprop; *Domba* was rooted exclusively in an indigenous style of theatre, and *Goree*, in consolidating pan-Africanism, included not only the djembe drum, but also the kora as well as some dialogue in French, as it is one of the European languages that is spoken by Africans on the continent. In the performance of the play, Nomsa Manaka also infused her choreography with a pan-African dance idiom. As no recording of the play exists, it is not possible to give a full account of the dance.

In terms of Black feminism, *Goree* represents a turning point in Manaka's plays, as subsequent plays represented strong African women who share their experiences, and they tell their own story. Plays that may be analysed according to a womanist or feminist perspective include *Ekhaya: Museum over Soweto* (through a character named "Shoes") (1991) and *Yamina* (through the titular Yamina) (1994).

The contribution of Black women in South Africa (that is, where they occupy a more substantive role, rather than being actors in plays) requires more research to uncover the way in which Black women articulate their achievements and struggle with philosophical ideals, political beliefs, community involvement, and creativity in their own voices, and how they innovate theatre methods.

23 Although rooted in BC, Manaka's plays explored various conditions of the South African experience; for example, *Ekhaya: Museum over Soweto* (1991) explores the themes of artmaking, political exile, and problematised African brotherhood, and *Yamina* (1993) addressed Aids, multiculturalism, and social isolation.

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