

Sindiwe Magona: An African Woman Teacher's Agency for a Decolonised and Afrocentric Education

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Abstract

In 2015, the University of Cape Town's students who called themselves the Rhodes Must Fall movement, following their call for the removal of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes's statue, also demanded a decolonised and Afrocentric education, against a colonial and Eurocentric education still prevalent in institutions of higher learning 21 years after South Africa became a democracy. Cognisant that colonial and Eurocentric education in South Africa affected Africans both in *racist* and *sexist* ways, this article examines how Sindiwe Magona's writings, published since 1990, have *practically* contributed to realising the yet-elusive decolonised and Afrocentric education. The focus is on Magona as an African woman teacher and writer because she resisted and confronted colonial and Eurocentric education's racist and sexist manifestations, and advanced decolonised and Afrocentric education in those capacities.

Keywords: African culture; Afrocentricity; colonialism; decolonisation; education; Eurocentrism; patriarchy; racism; sexism



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Background and Introduction

Reflecting on the rise of Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) in 2015, Jansen (2019, 1) notes that the student movement's use of the term "decolonisation" was "new in education struggles in South Africa", was "[l]iterally overnight", thus adding "a new term to the lexicon of South African universities" because "decolonisation had never been a prominent or sustained component of the struggle discourse under or after apartheid" (8). Jansen further notes that the "discursive terminologies of the struggle included terms like anti-apartheid education, liberation pedagogy, reconstruction and development education, and of course the ubiquitous referent, transformation" (1). Jansen's contention, however, is not accurate. In 2004, 11 years before the rise of RMF, Makgoba and Seepe (2004, 19) argued that the central issue for South African universities was an "institutional transformation in higher education" that should "decolonize higher education and thus Africanize it", and that "much more needs to be done in the less tangible but critical area of decolonisation" (29). In the same year, Lebakeng (2004, 115) argued that "the foundation of decolonisation is the recognition and indeed the acceptance of the principle that the consequences of colonial conquest need to be reversed".

The RMF's call for "Afrocentric" education was not new either. In 1995, the then Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), William Malegapuru Makgoba (1997, 209), argued that central to the task of transformation and Africanisation of higher education was "the elimination of the present racist, dominant Eurocentric education and its total replacement by a new non-racial, equitable Afrocentric education". Afrocentricity is a theory that advances "paradigmatic approaches in which African values, thought, agency, and experiences are considered the means and end of all inquiry" in a quest to "improve the life chances of African persons and people in particular and humanity in general" (Poe 2003, 7). Afrocentricity advances education and scholarship that are "culturally rooted in the broad spectrum that is African culture" (Poe 2003, 8). African culture, in this article is defined as the "sum total of African philosophy, behavior, [and] ideas" (Asante 1990, 4).

The push for Afrocentric education in institutions of higher learning was driven by Makgoba's (1997, 205) conviction that as "products of colonial powers", institutions of higher learning in Africa were meant "to ensure White supremacy". Afrocentric education meant "the process or vehicle for defining, interpreting, promoting and transmitting African thought, philosophy, identity and culture" (Makgoba 1997, 203). Pointing out that the "transformation process at the university was not fundamental enough if it did not address the issue of the curriculum, the culture of the people whom this transformation is really about", Makgoba (1997, 86) argued that the Africanisation of institutions of higher learning meant "refocusing the curriculum to Africa".

Opposed to "Eurocentrism", defined by wa Thiong'o (1997, 117) as an idea that "Europe [is] the centre [and] the fountain head of universal values and civilization", Makgoba (1997, 74) argued that Wits University, being Eurocentric, was an alienating

environment for students who did not practise European culture. Eurocentric universities in Africa sought “to mould the African psyche along European lines, to ensure that the educated African is alienated from his roots”, thus reducing educated Africans to a “position of weakness” (Makgoba 1997, 205). In line with Makgoba’s foregoing observation, Max Price (2023, 77), the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town (UCT) when RMF rose, notes that

success at UCT ... appeared to require black students that they assimilate into the traditional white, English, liberal culture of the university. This culture is so entrenched and normalised that those of us who are part of it see it as the natural way of the world to the extent that many traditional African cultural practices were viewed as superstitious, such as placating the ancestors and visiting sangomas, or even taboo.

Centring African culture in institutions of higher learning should not only be meant for students, but also for the re-education of academics because “[a] teacher who does not understand or respect the culture of his pupils cannot reach their minds” (Makgoba 1997, 204). The theme “culture” was pervasive in Makgoba’s (1997, 97) arguments because he held an unequivocal view that education throughout the civilised world is “tightly linked to the culture of the majority population”, and that “[a]ll nations of the world ... are educated within a cultural context”.

The rise of RMF 21 years after South Africa became a democracy revealed that “decolonisation of the university is not an easy task” (Le Grange 2019, 30), that “decolonisation is a process, not an event” (31), and that the injustices of the past had “not been redressed in post-apartheid South Africa in any serious way” (34) in that “matters of curriculum in higher education [were] relegated to the margins” (35). It meant that one aspect of colonialism, the *cultural displacement* of the colonised by the colonisers, was more resilient than colonialism as a *physical dislocation* of one people by another. While on the one hand, physical dislocation refers to “physical violence of the battlefield ... effected through the sword and the bullet”, on the other hand, cultural displacement refers to “psychological violence of the classroom” effected through “the chalk and the blackboard” (wa Thiong’o 1986, 9).

I begin by firstly presenting a brief biographical note on Magona, followed by a rationale for focusing on her. Thereafter I present a contextualisation for my pan-African examination of colonised Africans’ perceptions and expectations of teachers’ roles in their communities, both in Africa and the diaspora, because Magona, in her works, demonstrates pan-African outlooks.

Next, I discuss colonial and Eurocentric education’s *psychological* and *physical* dislocation of Africans, focusing on both its racist and sexist practices. This is followed by how Magona was confronted and, in return, confronted colonial and Eurocentric education’s expressions. I then conclude.

Magona: A Biographical Note

Born in Gungululu, in Tsolo, in 1943, in the then Transkei Bantustan, after completing a two-year teacher-training course at St Matthew's Teacher Training College, in the then Ciskei bantustan, Magona (2013a, 19, 21, 22) began teaching in 1962, at the age of 19. Since 1990, Magona has published autobiographical works (*To My Children's Children* [1990] and *Forced to Grow* [2013a]), a collection of reflexive essays (*I Write the Yawning Void: Selected Essays of Sindiwe Magona* [2023]), novels, short stories, and children's stories.

Having experienced Bantu Education “as a student, as a teacher, as a parent”, Magona (2013a, 162) did “not hesitate to advocate its total eradication”, which, to her, “merited [not] the name of education”, but was simply “this thing that was paraded as education, when it had long been apparent that it was the farthest thing from an education and known to all as inferior, degrading, unworthy of the designation”. Being “wholly behind the students” in their resistance against Bantu Education in 1976, Magona (2013a, 171, 172) served on a committee of six, representing three African townships in Cape Town, namely, Langa, Gugulethu, and Nyanga (LAGUNYA), whose purpose was to manage the crisis, receiving and disbursing emergency funds. Magona's (2013a, 165) records of the events that took place in Cape Town in 1976 are important because they highlight the role played by people in the Western Cape, rectifying the misperception that the 1976 uprisings were confined to Soweto, and also show the hostility of the fighting African youths who, initially, wanted “to go it alone”, accusing their parents of having been acquiescent to their oppression. This hostility, on the students' part, was informed by their ignorance of the historic role played by African teachers when the National Party (NP) government sought to impose Bantu Education from 1953. As Magona (1990, 65–66) correctly observed, “Protesting against the Bantu Education Act of [1953], many African teachers were fired. Others were arrested. Some left the country, going to the newly independent African states, or to Britain.” As an African parent, and teacher of isiXhosa, in a white high school, Magona (2013a, 200) was pained when she found herself “busy teaching ... children who came from the crème de la crème of white South Africa” while her “own three were languishing at home”.

Focus on Magona: A Rationale

This article examines how Magona, through her books, *practically* contributes to decolonised and Afrocentric education, the emphasis being on practical because since 2015, interest has been expressed in practical aspects of “‘making decolonisation work’ on the ground” beyond theorisation (Jansen 2019, 7). I examine how her writings—autobiographies and novel—reflect decolonised and Afrocentric perspectives. Her autobiographies relate her active engagements against Bantu education. Her novel, *Mother to Mother* (2013b), is a decolonised and Afrocentric literary piece of work focusing on the killing of Amy Biehl, a white American student who was in South Africa on a Fulbright Scholarship, by members of the Pan Africanist Student Organisation of Azania (PASO), a student wing of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC).

Reference to Magona's gender is important because colonialism in Africa oppressed African women not only through racism, but, also, through sexism. Cognisant of this, in 1976, in Brussels, Magona (2013a, 153) told the International Women's Tribunal on Crimes against Women conference that "the African woman was the worst oppressed of all South Africans", and that "race" and sex "combined to put her at the bottom of the dung heap".

Locating Magona's works in a pan-African context is important because such exposes that colonial and Eurocentric education was systematic, deliberate, and meticulous in imposing itself not only on all Africans in Africa but, also, on Africans in the diaspora. The pan-African approach also demonstrates that not only did Africans—in Africa and abroad—share and continue to share the same frustrations, but, also, the same aspirations regarding education and teachers.

Teachers as Agents of Education, a "Communal Ideal and Success, a Communal Achievement": A Pan-African Context

Reflecting on the 1976 students' uprisings, Magona (2013a, 161) noted that

1976 was born of events near and far, in terms of both time and geography. With the independence of Ghana, some twenty years before, the seed of freedom had sprouted in the heart of the black man in South Africa and grown roots that would never shrivel again.

In the United States of America (USA), Magona (2013a, 229–230) observed that

Despite the great upheavals of the 1960s in American history, despite the sacrifices of the black people in the quest for real freedom, despite Supreme Court decisions enforcing and entrenching their civil rights, those civil rights continue to be elusive. They are still out of reach for the black man, woman and child in the United States of America. They continue to be not only violated but eroded In the sorry plight of Afro-America's today, I see my tomorrow.

Kenya's philosopher and novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1997, 142–143) observed that when he was growing up, "the teacher was a most important figure in the village", this being "not a matter of his being paid better than the surrounding population of labourers", but venerated because "[e]ducation became a communal ideal and success, a communal achievement" (143). Education as a "communal ideal and success" is echoed by Nigerian philosopher and novelist Chinua Achebe's (2012, 16) observation that it is "difficult to convey just how important teachers ... who were seriously committed to their work, were to the Igbo community". Achebe further pointed out that in Nigeria, education, "a white man's knowledge", was perceived as "the path to individual and family success" (16). In the USA, feminist philosopher and educationist bell hooks (1994, 2) noted that "teaching was about service, giving back to one's community". Associating education with "communal achievement" and "family

success” is significant when considering the meaning of “family” or “community” in traditional African philosophy, and the implications this has for the teaching of decolonised and Afrocentric Philosophy of Education in Teacher Education.

Recalling her experiences where “[a]ll our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women”, hooks (1994, 2), further noted that her teachers “were committed to nurturing intellect” so that the school children could be “scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers” who used their minds. As a result of her teachers’ approach to education, hooks learned early that their devotion “to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization” (2). Even though her teachers “did not define or articulate these practices in theoretical terms” (2), hooks recognised that her teachers were “enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial” (2). Such clearly meant that “[f]or black folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle” and that her “all-black grade schools” were places where she “experienced learning as revolution” (2).

In the USA, African-Americans who, in the 1960s, “on predominantly white colleges and universities ... were assaulted with ideologies of Black people’s cultural deprivation ... masquerading as objective scientific theory ... demanded the establishment of Black Studies programs” (King 2018, 177) would, in Magona’s works, recognise the “Black intellectual (liberation) tradition ... a tradition of marrying intellectual activism to the everyday experiences of the people whose interests ... education ought to serve” (178).

In South Africa, Chabani Manganyi (2016, 4), an academic and psychologist, attributes his success, both at high school and university, to “good teachers” who “made the classroom a very interesting place to be in”, where “learning became a challenge and adventure”. Manganyi not only admired his teachers’ “self-confidence, skill and the dedication with which they carried out their teaching”, but also admired how they enticed him “with their intellectual brilliance and confidence” (5) in him and what he was doing. The teachers caught Manganyi’s attention and imagination by engaging his “curiosity and interest in learning, encouraging [him] to learn even more by reading outside the classroom” (4). Manganyi’s teachers accomplished this task while, at the same time, “the vulgarity of Bantu Education was creeping” (12) into their classrooms in 1958 and 1959. Even then, he left with the “distinct feeling that the teachers knew what they were doing”, and that what he “needed to do was to take full advantage of what was on offer” (12).

Magona’s engagement as a teacher in her earlier life, and as a writer, later, reflects the aspirations articulated by the African intellectuals cited above about African teachers’ “communal” approach. As an author of children’s books, Magona (2023, 178) appreciated that stories were “an integral part of socialisation”, and that in Africa, stories “were used by our forebears, long before reading and writing came to these parts, as an integral part of the socialisation of the child” (179). Cognisant of this, European

colonisers attempted to destroy African traditional storytelling by imposing European children's literature on African children. Wangari Maathai observed,

When I went to school I was exposed to books, all of which told different stories from the one I heard around the fire. I read "Cinderella," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Sleeping Beauty,"—stories that Westerners told their children for their moral development but which did not mean as much to me as the stories I was told around the fire. The Kikuyu stories reflected my environment and the values of my people; they were preparing me for a life in my community. (Maathai 2008, 50)

While African children's stories, on the one hand, prepared Maathai (2008, 50–51) for life in her "community", on the other, European children's stories had a "completely different dimension", compelling her to memorise the words on examinations' pages.

Recognising the alienating injustice carried out by Eurocentric children's literature, Magona (2023, 177) pointed out that books, "especially children's books, should help us understand that we must cherish ourselves and cherish all of life too", and that "all children everywhere need to hear stories of who they are, and what that means", adding that such is the "surest way of demonstrating what it is like to be a human being". Magona's reference to "what it is like to be a human being" demonstrates her conviction that children's literature should link African children to the *philosophy of being human*, known in Africa as *Ubuntu*:

Children should grow up with the intrinsic knowledge that they have a reason for being. Just as children learn that flowers bloom and some produce fruit, each child should wonder: What is *my* fruit, my reason for being? What can I do with this precious gift that is my life? (Magona 2023, 177)

If a story arises from "a situation about the African child in a township or village", Magona (2023, 174) noted, "then the story will be in isiXhosa, since it will be directed at, or speak to, the child whose mother tongue that is", because such a story "will need the palette, idiom and other specificities with which that child is familiar" (175). Even when Magona writes in English, to accommodate "a national audience", she "will then proceed immediately to translate it in isiXhosa" (174).

Magona's determination to write stories for African children in isiXhosa is a *practical* decolonisation, not only because of her use of an African language, but also because her *content* re-links African children to African philosophy as pointed out earlier. In this respect, wa Thiong'o (1986, 29) noted that

writing in our languages per se—although a necessary first step in the correct direction—will not itself bring about the renaissance in African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our people's anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their reproductive forces from foreign control.

Magona's (2023, 177) determination to write children's literature in isiXhosa, for children whose mother tongue is isiXhosa, seeks to ensure that children "can enjoy the story without struggling with language" and so that African children "shouldn't be handicapped even before they get to the content of the story".

While all stories enrich, Magona (2023, 177) argued that "mother-tongue stories do a whole lot more", in that they "anchor the child into the specific realm of one's deepest, essential self, which is inalienable and eternal". Just as no child should ever be denied the citizenship of the country of their birth, Magona also argued that "no child should be denied the privilege of the mother tongue" (177–178). Mother tongue is "sacred", and, therefore, to "de-tongue a child, whether by neglect or design, should be considered a criminal act" (178).

The foregoing demonstrates Fanon's (1967, 169) accuracy in noting that "[c]olonial domination ... is total", that it is "not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content", and that by "a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it". Leaving "nothing ... to chance", Fanon further points out that the "total result looked for by colonial domination was to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness" (169), meaning that before colonialism, the colonised were, and had, nothing, and that "if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality" (169). Fanon's observations can best be appreciated through an examination of colonial and Eurocentric education's *psychological* and *physical* dislocation, carried out below, beginning with, firstly, its racist expressions, and, then, its sexist manifestations.

Colonial and Eurocentric Education's *Racist* Expressions

European Christian missionaries played a decisive colonial role in that the church in the colonies, being "the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church [did] not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor" (Fanon 1967, 32). In line with the foregoing, Amadiume (2015, 121) noted that when Christian missionaries first arrived on the African continent, "[c]hurch and school were synonymous.... Classes were in fact held in church buildings and no one was admitted into the school who had not been converted to Christianity". The first lessons and teachings focused on "condemnation of indigenous religion and beliefs" (121). The ultimate objective of colonial and Eurocentric education being to instil self-doubt and self-contempt in Africans, and to measure everything by European standards, colonial Christian missionaries treated African cultures "with contempt for being so unEuropean" (Blyden 2016, 63), thus seeking "to Europeanize [Africans] without reference to their race peculiarities or the climatic conditions" (64, 75, 76). That objective accomplished, the

same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and

crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (Woodson 2012, xiii)

Thus mis-educated, the African becomes “a hopeless liability” to her/his own people (Woodson 2012, xiii).

Just like Amadiume, Magona (1990, 160–161) learnt that “[s]chool and church went hand in hand”, in that the “families who sent their children to school also attended church”. A relative of Magona told her that when African children in the Eastern Cape wanted to attend traditional gatherings where cultural songs and cultural dances were performed, “parents would not allow it” because the ministers and the missionaries taught their parents that it was “wrong for girls and boys or young women and young men to be together overnight” and that traditional “dances were evil” (161). This made Magona realise that had missionaries not campaigned against Africans’ initiation schools, she might have been spared from the ignorance that landed her into an unplanned pregnancy when she had just started out on her teaching career:

In 1962 very little was known in my part of the world about contraception. Certainly, what little African women my age group knew was positively dangerous.... Previously, sex education for adolescents had been a fact of life. Both boys and girls were taught sex play that satisfied their urges with no risk of their being plunged into roles of parenthood prematurely. Then came the missionaries; and sex disappeared from the agenda of educating the young. All very well; except the natural urges refused to succumb to civilization or Christianity and go away. (1990, 106)

The missionaries were not content with condemning young Africans’ songs and dances, and their elders’ teachings about sex, but targeted even their dress codes and cosmetics (Magona 1990, 59). African Christian converts “were supposed to have left behind all things of darkness: nudity, *imibhaco* (the traditional skirt), red ochre used for cosmetic purposes” (59).

This colonial and Eurocentric tradition of *displacing* African dress codes, and *replacing* them with European codes, was not confined to South Africa. Blyden (2016, 49) noted,

At the European settlements established at various points along the coast from Senegal to Loanda, and at the purely native stations, occupied by the Niger (native) missionaries, the Scotch missionaries and the American missionaries, some thousands of natives, having been brought under the immediate influence of Christian teaching, have professed Christianity, and, at the European settlements, have adopted European dress and habits.

It must be pointed out that the adoption of European dress and habits by Christian African converts was not voluntary. The “African Christian ... from the pressure of circumstances [was] forced into European customs”, thus reduced to “an artificial and absurd appearance” (Blyden 2016, 20).

In Kenya, where Christian denominations, namely, the Catholics and the Presbyterians, were very active, those “who had not embraced Christianity, who still held on to and advocated for local customs, were called Kikuyus, while those who had converted were called *athomi*”, a word meaning “people who read” (Maathai 2008, 11). Maathai noted that “local Kenyans who converted to Christianity were given preference within the British colonial administration and were often appointed chiefs and subchiefs in villages and towns” (11). In addition to this preferential treatment, “the *athomi* culture was presented by those who embraced it as progressive, its members moving forward into a modern world while the others were presented as primitive and backward, living in the past”.

[The] *athomi* culture brought with it European ways and led to profound changes in the way the Kikuyus dressed and adorned themselves, the kinds of food they ate, the songs they sang, and the dances they performed. Everything that represented the local culture was enthusiastically replaced. (Maathai 2008, 11)

Not only were Africans who became Christians given European dresses, they were also given European names in the guise of “Christian” names (Maathai 2008, 15). In Magona’s (1990, 43) case, her “school name or Christian name” was “Cynthia”, a European name. On this score, wa Thiong’o (in Sander and Munro 2006, 48) observed that “the missionaries really started the fight by saying that denying one’s cultural roots is necessary before you can get a Western kind of education”. Colonised Africans were determined, on their part, “to get that education without having to accept the religion, without having to accept the colonial government” (Sander and Munro 2006, 48). Just as European colonialists saw “education as definitely a political weapon”, colonised Africans also saw education as “a weapon ... to wrench ... independence from the colonial regime” (48).

Becoming a teacher sensitised and conscientised Magona. To say she was “astounded at the pittance African teachers earned would be an understatement” (Magona 1990, 105). Teachers’ salaries “were so low as to elicit scorn from everybody, from lowly domestic workers to common criminals” (105). Her mind was “boggled at the sheer temerity” of her father, and she “marveled at the courage of sending two children to high school, and later to a teacher-training college”, considering that her father worked in a petrol-filling station (102). Just as Magona marvelled at her parents, she also admired her predecessor teachers:

My sheltered upbringing, the conspiracy of silence of those teachers who had qualified before me and never murmured a word about their being underpaid, the incomplete preparation which took place when I was supposedly being prepared for the role of teacher, all these myths shattered. (102)

A number of things struck Magona (1990, 97) when she started teaching, at the age of 19, at Hlengisa Higher Primary School in Nyanga, a black township on the outskirts of Cape Town. She noticed that her pupils ranged between the ages of 9 and 20, meaning

that some of her pupils were the same age as she was, and others were older (98, 101). She was confronted with the horrifying reality that some pupils “could not perform elementary arithmetic operations such as adding five and two” (98). Her school, like other African schools, was overcrowded, something that robbed both teachers and pupils because, while on the one hand overcrowding allowed only bright pupils to pass, and failed those who were struggling with school work, it also left a bad taste in the mouth (100). Magona placed the blame squarely on Bantu Education, calling the system a “big disgrace” because the apartheid government “subsidized education to the tune of R480 for a white child and R28 for an African child” (98–99). These injustices enabled Magona to anticipate that African children “were destined” for a future of “agony” in a project that also called upon African teachers who regarded themselves “as oppressed ... to help in that oppression and unwittingly become instruments of it” (101).

Needless to say, in a society marked by racism, there were differentiated salary scales where “White teachers earned the highest salaries, followed by Coloured and Indian teachers ... Africans brought up the rear” (Magona 2013a, 79).

When Magona (1990, 106) became pregnant before marriage, her father “suffered scorn and ridicule for educating a girl child”, as if there was something wrong with educating girl children. That this patriarchy was European, and not African, I discuss below.

Colonial and Eurocentric Education’s Sexist Expressions

An examination of the state of education among Africans subjected to white colonial domination—those in the continent, and those in the diaspora—reveals striking patterns of similarity. In the “apartheid South” in the USA, hooks (1994, 2) noted that “black girls from working-class backgrounds had three career choices”, namely, (a) getting married, (b) working as maids, or (c) becoming school teachers. In colonial Kenya, human rights’ activist and environmentalist Wangari Maathai (2008, 72) observed that [w]omen could become teachers or nurses while men could be teachers or clerks in an office”. By pointing out that being a clerk “was a well-paid and highly esteemed job [...] in the mainstream of British Kenyan civil life”, Maathai (72) helps us to appreciate that this patriarchy had a European face.

African women teachers were not only disadvantaged racially, but also suffered gender discrimination in that African female teachers earned less than African male teachers (Magona 2013, 80). The irony in this situation was that while, on the one hand, African male teachers were vociferous in their condemnation of *white racism*, on the other hand, they rationalised *white sexism* since it benefited them, thus exposing Magona’s African male colleagues to be as sexist as their racist *and* sexist white oppressors were. While, on the one hand, African male teachers expected white teachers to understand black teachers’ pain, and to “see the evil in differentiated salary scales ..., those who were discriminated against failed to see the inherent injustice in the system” (80).

Differentiated salaries were not the only form of sexist expression against African female teachers. Female teachers who became pregnant, like Magona (1990, 117), were barred from teaching, the “‘punishment’ meted out to fallen women teachers” (117). That she had married, before giving birth, in an African customary fashion, did not help because the “Department of Bantu Education, as it was then called, did not recognize traditional liaisons. In the eyes of officialdom, therefore, [she] was not married” (117). As if that was not enough, Magona (2013a, 41) learned, when she began job-hunting, that being married was another burden for African women teachers because “[u]nmarried women teachers enjoyed preferential hiring”, because husbands were regarded by the government as breadwinners, and married African women teachers as their husbands’ dependents. These conditions of employment meant that at the end of each year, married African female teachers became jobless and had to reapply for their positions amid stiff competition (63).

After losing her job, Magona (2013a, 23, 41) was compelled to work as a domestic servant for four “long years ... in white women’s homes”. What Magona (1990, 139) heard on the buses to and from work “where one hears and one learns—is as valid as any data based on scientific probings”, the difference, though, being that the bus experience was “much more exciting, much more alive”. Saying this is not the same as romanticising domestic work experience. The exploitation of domestic workers, especially those who were “sleep-ins”, who were forbidden by law to live with their spouses at the back of their employers’ houses, was brutal (124, 139). While, on the one hand, domestic workers were overworked, they were, on the other hand, underpaid, compelling them to find ways, “good or bad, legal or not, to redistribute some of the wealth locked in white hands” (121).

Domestic work did more *to* than *for* her, in that the experience introduced her to the “fundamentals of racism” (Magona 1990, 144). Each morning, as Magona prepared breakfast for her white employers, dressed their children, and walked them to school, in her body “beat the heart of a mother whose own were left untended” (146). The experience reminded her of a story of a mother wolf, who, in search of food for her cubs, left them unattended, succeeding in only having her children eaten by a jackal (146). Being in domestic service enabled Magona to observe “the cruel power white women can, if they allow themselves, wield over their darker sisters” (138). Cognisant of the foregoing, Magona further noted that the function of employment for Africans in colonial South Africa was to “keep the African alive; that is, available as a worker” (159). The usual rewards associated with employment, such as health, housing, education, a good life, came mostly with the pay envelope marked “whites only” (159). This, for Magona, was not surprising “in a country that differentiated education so that Africans could never aspire to things not meant for them” (159). African workers, Magona (2013a, 132) pointed out, received “crumbs”, which “white South Africa dared label wages”; African workers mended “broken bodies for a third of the salary of others doing the same” (132). Giving expression to African workers on the receiving end of racist white bosses, Magona (1990, 175) observed that

Most adults are away a good part of the day. They are smiling, uniformed servants of white homes and white businesses; coming home only long enough to replenish their spent bodies so that they may resume their chores the next day, and the next, smiling.

It was this insight that enabled Magona to empathise with the mother of one of Amy Biehl's killers in *Mother to Mother*. In this novel, Magona empathised with Mandisa (real name Nontuthuzelo, a friend she grew up with), one of Biehl's killers, and addressed herself to Amy's mother, Linda. In the book's Preface, Magona (2013b, 5) pointed out that while, on the one hand, usually, and rightly so, much is heard about the victims' worlds, as was with Biehl's case, there are also lessons, on the other hand, to be learnt about the world of the perpetrators, "whose environment failed to nurture them in the higher ideals of humanity and who, instead, became lost creatures of malice and destruction". While recognising that the boys arrested for the killing were physically responsible for the act, Magona (2023, 119–120) also argued that "Apartheid killed her", and that the killers were "mere instruments". Apartheid, the "real killer", was a system "loathed" by Africans because it promoted "race hate", which, on the one hand, benefitted whites, while, on the other hand, subjugating Africans, leading Africans to hate the system, and such hate led to Biehl's killing (120–121). That apartheid was responsible for killing Amy Biehl was the knowledge that Linda Biehl, Amy's mother, deserved to know, and through *Mother to Mother*, Magona (2023, 120) sought to create a platform for Nontuthuzelo to explain to the victim's mother the circumstances that led to her son killing her daughter. Magona was moved to write *Mother to Mother* as a gesture she knew Nontuthuzelo would want to make in order to observe a "humane manner of making amends, irrespective of what the court of law decided", to "eyeball the mother of the dead child, mother to mother, and speak words of apology, of consolation, to her" (120). Such a gesture, Magona believed, would put a "a human face, a human heart, before the aggrieved family; help that family see that the monster who had killed their loved one was, despite such a monstrous act, a human being. Yes, lost, but still a human being" (120). A "humane manner" of doing things is a concrete expression of the African philosophy *Ubuntu*:

In the tradition of my people, amaXhosa, when such a thing happens, when one family wrongs another in such a grievous manner, irrespective of what happens in the court of law, the family of the perpetrator is obligated to take itself to the other family, the people it has wronged or aggrieved. (120)

This act of the "family" of exercising accountability and responsibility, of making amends for the wrongs performed by an "individual", is not exclusively amaXhosa's tradition, but a pan-African cultural approach. As Kamalu (1990, 26; italics in original) noted that though in Africa individuals are morally responsible for their actions, "*moral responsibility is collective whereby our actions have consequences for the community—the community consisting of the living, the deceased and the unborn*". What this means, as Kamalu (1990, 27) further noted, is that "the individual [is] an integral part of his community and environment where the individual cannot be considered as solely

responsible since he is only a product of his society and environment". While, on the one hand, this form of "collectivism recognises individuality", on the other hand,

[t]he individual in African society, being aware of the African notion of collective moral responsibility takes his individual moral responsibility all the more seriously; for his actions will have consequences not only for himself but for his community. (27)

The foregoing observations indicate that Africans, traditionally, had, and continue to have, their own notion of what constitutes the concept "family" or "community", an aspect Magona addresses in her writings.

Magona Reclaiming the Notion of "Family" or "Community" in African Cultural Contexts

In African cultures, "family" or "community" is defined as (a) the Ancestors—those who have departed from earth, and have become guiding spirits, (b) earth-dwelling human beings, and (c) children-yet-to-be born (Mbiti 1990, 104–105). The Ancestors' good deeds performed on earth are highlighted to earth dwellers to serve as an *inspiration*. Guided by this inspiration, the earth dwellers are expected to be involved in *perspiration* (hard work), in order to prepare a better life for children-yet-to-be-born (*aspiration*) (wa Thiong'o 1997, 139). It is this philosophical outlook of "family" that gave birth to a culture among Africans known as "Ancestor-Reverence" or "Ancestor-Veneration", a cultural practice that European colonialists, particularly Christian missionaries, renamed and misnamed as "Ancestor-Worship", falsely implying that Africans worshipped their departed Ancestors (Mbiti 1990, 8–9).

But just as determined as European colonialists were in destroying Ancestor-Reverence, colonised Africans were just as determined to hold on to their cultural identity. Magona (1990, 59) noted,

The practice of ancestral worship was a different matter. The missionaries realized that, if they continued to condemn it, they would empty the Christian Church of its African adherents. We are not easily divorced from our ancestors.

Magona (1990, 12) appreciated that Ancestors in African communities played, and continue to play, a significant role of being intermediaries between the Creator-God and earth dwellers:

When we have a feast we spill beer on the ground before drinking that the ancestors may partake thereof, be pleased with us for remembering them and, thus pacified, intercede on our behalf, mediating for our welfare.

In *To My Children's Children's* Preface "From a Xhosa Grandmother", Magona (1990, ix) illuminated and affirmed her subscription to the notion of an unbreakable bond between the Ancestors, the earth dwellers, and children-yet-to-be-born thus: "How will

you know who you are if I do not or cannot tell you the story of your past?" This rhetorical question illustrates, firstly, that Magona holds the view that as a grandmother it is her responsibility to tell her grandchild what her/his identity is. Secondly, her question indicates that she believes that her own story, her own past, is part of her grandchild's present and future—in line with the definition of "family" in an African cultural context. To emphasise this point, Magona (1990, 1; italics in original) informed not just her grandchild, but her great-grandchild as well, that

As ours is an oral tradition I would like you to hear from my own lips what it was like living in the 1940s onwards. What it was like in the times of your great-grandmother, me.

When, once, she found herself stranded, without a bus fare to return home, and was assisted by her mother's friend, Magona (1990, 175) proclaimed: "The ancestors were with me that day." After recalling her hardships in her life, in the last paragraph of *To My Children's Children*, Magona (1990, 183) demonstrated her appreciation that the African notion of family gives its adherents (a) a sense of *belonging*, and (b) a sense of *reassuring psychological stability*, serving as an antidote to *loneliness* and *isolation*:

By now I understood also that I was part of the stream of life—a continuous flow of those who are still alive, and the spirit of our ancestors. I knew I would never be alone. Know this too, child of the child of my child ... *you* are not alone. (183)

Reserving the foregoing statement celebrating her Ancestors for the last paragraph in *To My Children's Children*, Magona deliberately achieves a particular outcome, namely to ensure that the Ancestors remain in her great-grandchildren's consciousness for all times. That this is the case is borne out by the fact that Magona (2013, 245–246) repeated the same performance in the last paragraph of her second last page and the last page of *Forced to Grow*:

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

If the two foregoing observations still leave any doubt about Magona's objectives, and her deliberate methods of achieving them, that is, reserving the last words to honour her Ancestors, such doubts should be swept aside by the fact that Magona (2023, 124), as she did in *To My Children's Children* and *Forced To Grow*, dedicated the last paragraph to her Ancestors in her book, *I Write the Yawning Void: Selected Essays of Sindiwe Magona*:

Having traced the footsteps of my honoured ancestors in my own little writer's world, it is necessary to emphasise that the acknowledgments here represent only a partial list of the many people who have influenced me.

In a dramatic fashion, Magona (2023, 124) puts a final stamp by using the word *Camagu!* as a salutation, and last word in her selected essays. *Camagu* is an isiXhosa word, meaning “pour water”, that is used at all times when isiXhosa-speaking Africans perform ceremonies and rituals honouring their Ancestors. In declaring *Camagu*—pour water—the participants are wishing “life” to everyone, for water is a source of life, reflecting ancient Africans’ belief that creation began with water!

The notion of “family” in African cultures is not only emphasised for “after-life”, but also for “this life”. Among the most central features of family among Africans is the clan system, which is based on “lineage ties”, these ties being based on descent from the “same ancestor or related ancestors”, who “might live in the same community or state ... but often scattered far and near in separate and independent societies” (Williams 1987, 163). In appreciation of this practice, Magona (1990, 3) observed that even though a person may meet today a person “completely unknown before”, such a person became “a relative one cannot even think of marrying if that person is of the same clan name” (3).

Families in African traditions were devised in such a way as to protect orphans, and to give them a sense of safe belonging. In traditional African societies “there were no orphans” because “children with no parents were given priority care and integrated into the community” (Bujo 2009, 396). In this respect, Magona (1990, 3) noted that “intricate ways in which relationships” are built among amaXhosa “make it impossible for an individual to be destitute in the sense of having connections with no living soul”. This means that a person may be parentless, without a spouse to support her/him, but it is “virtually unheard of except in the very rare case of an individual of such an unbearable and odious disposition that no one can stand him or her to be moved to pity at the plight of such a one” (3). Just as the notion of “orphan” was a misfit in traditional African culture, so was the notion of “unwanted babies”:

Unwanted babies are a foreign concept in African tradition. Unwanted pregnancies, yes, but not unwanted children. (Magona 1990, 114)

In the African tradition life is celebrated and children are treasured ... [N]othing is more valuable to us than the ability to bear children. Nothing is more cherished than a new person, as we call babies. Even the Xhosa word for child, *umntwana*, a little person, supports this. (Magona 2013a, 29, 40)

Magona’s foregoing observations underline not only the cherishing of children, but also mothers, who are the ones who have “the ability to bear children”. Mothers, among Africans, are celebrated not only as bearers of children, life-giving forces, but also as life-nurturing and life-sustaining forces. Reflecting on the celebration of African women as mothers, Mbiti (1990, 117) observed that “African women, as a rule, suckle their children anywhere taking out their breasts openly and without any feeling of embarrassment or shame”. Breasts, in African philosophical perspectives, “are the symbols of life, and the bigger they are, the more people appreciate them” (117). This

is because, “they are a sign that the woman has an ample supply of milk for her child” (117). Confronting “those who judge” African mothers who expose their breasts “as being indecent” and “naked”, Mbiti argued that such prejudiced people “must revise their understanding of [the] African concept of what constitutes ‘nakedness’” (117). African mothers’ breasts “are the pride of motherhood, announcing the message that ‘I am fertile’”. In line with the foregoing, in traditional African cultures, as Ntantala (cited in Jordan 1984, 6) noted, women are celebrated as the founts of life, adding that the “notion of unequivocal love/kindness is expressed, in Nguni, as *ububele*—literally, female-breastedness, which is evocative of a mother fondling a nursing child”.

In traditional African societies not only was/is it normal for children to grow up among their maternal families, but also, as Mbiti (1990, 104) pointed out, it is the “practice in some societies, to send children to live for some months or years, with relatives, and these children are counted as members of the families where they happen to live”. In line with the foregoing, Magona (1990, 3) also notes that it is “customary among amaXhosa ... for the eldest child or the elder children of a marriage to live with one or the other set of grandparents”.

Not only was it normal in African traditional culture for children to grow up among their maternal families, but women also played a leading role in introducing newly born children to the Ancestors, a point Magona (1990, 114), from her own personal experience, captured in a significantly detailed fashion:

The attendant had not reached the ambulance before the baby was given her very first African ceremony: made to enter her home (*ukungeniswa ekhaya*). The baby, swaddling and all, was placed at the threshold. Then Mother, all the time talking to her, picked her up and walked inside, the baby tenderly against her breast.

Not only was Magona’s mother talking to the baby—she was, simultaneously, talking to the baby’s Ancestors. The significance here is that contrary to the widespread idea that this important function is carried out by African men only, introducing children to the Ancestors has been, historically, carried out by African women, too. The false idea has been promoted by African males who have been co-opted into Eurocentric patriarchy. This rectification, on Magona’s part, is an important Afrocentric contribution to the decolonisation and re-Africanisation of education.

Inspired by the African cultural notion of “family”, through her writings, Magona (2023, 182) hoped to stir human beings “to action aimed at ending evil practices, thereby saving children who are yet to be born”. The reason for her involvement in struggles for justice was that Magona (2013a, 179) “wanted [her] children and their children after them to have a home in this country, a happy home, safe and nurturing”.

Concluding Remarks

The objective of colonial and Eurocentric education, in line with the mission of European colonialists in Africa, was to elevate European cultures and, simultaneously, to relegate African cultures. The intended outcome was to instil in African children a sense of shame about African cultures so that African children would aspire to shape and measure themselves by European cultural standards. The consequences of the colonial project in Africa have proved to have a lasting impact beyond the gaining of “democracy”, “independence” or “freedom” as evidenced by the rise of the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa in 2015. Cognisant of the recalcitrance of colonial and Eurocentric education, RMF demanded not only a “decolonised” education but, also, an “Afrocentric” one, recognising that while “decolonisation” tells us more about what is “opposed”, Afrocentricity tells us more about what is “proposed”. Yet, discourse on this demand, in South Africa, has placed more focus on “decolonisation”, and little or no focus on “Afrocentric” education. This article has attempted to rectify this omission, bearing in mind the South African academic community’s quest for “practical” measures of decolonising education in South Africa. In line with this quest, I have examined the writings of Sindiwe Magona, a former teacher and writer, whose works should be celebrated as *practical decolonisation of education*. Cognisant that colonial and Eurocentric education sought to demonise African cultures, Magona has, through her books, celebrated African cultures, particularly the African philosophy known as *Ubuntu*, in a much more meaningful way than attempts to reduce it to acts of forgiveness for oppressors. Magona’s works align *Ubuntu* squarely with justice. She has given the same treatment to the African philosophical concept of “family” and “community”. Exposure of teacher education to the African philosophical meaning of “family” or “community” is an act of decolonisation and Afrocentricity in that it claims a place for this orientation in a space dominated by Western, colonial, and Eurocentric philosophies of education. From African cultural perspectives, teacher students would know that serving humanity requires *inspiration*, *perspiration*, and *aspiration*. It is through *perspiration* that Magona has disrupted the patriarchal tendency of monopolising scholarship by making it her responsibility to write about the struggle against Bantu Education from an African woman’s perspective, thus, hopefully, giving *inspiration* to more African women teachers who have an *aspiration* to release humanity from the clutches of recalcitrant colonial and Eurocentric education through decolonised and Afrocentric education. Such an African philosophical understanding of “community” or “family” gives meaning to education as “a communal ideal and success, a communal achievement” (wa Thiong’o 1997, 143), and teaching as “service, giving back to one’s community” (hooks 1994, 2).

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