

“Colouredness”, Female Sexuality and Respectability in Irene Sabatini’s *The Boy Next Door*

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Abstract

This article examines how race consciousness mediates the performance and experience of femininity, female respectability, and sexual desires in Irene Sabatini’s debut novel, *The Boy Next Door*. It explores how assumptions of racialised female bodyhood, femininity, and sexuality are constructed and transmitted within an intergenerational framework of the mother-daughter relationship between Lindiwe Bishop and her mother, Mrs Bishop. I argue that in the novel the notion of respectable womanhood is mediated through the desires, the sexual behaviour and the proper conduct of the female sexualised and racialised body. Reading the novel from a theoretical perspective of “hegemonic” and “subordinated” femininities, which takes into account how “other axes of domination such as race, class, sexuality, and age mold a hegemonic femininity, I analyse how the ideology of whiteness mediates discursive performances of femininity, which place certain kinds of femaleness associated with whiteness as superior to others—and how this consciousness also influences ideas about respectability in relation to sexuality.

Keywords: coloured; desires; femininity; resistance; respectable; shame

Introduction

Irene Sabatini’s debut novel, *The Boy Next Door*, is “a kaleidoscopic blend of elements” (Ginsberg 2009, n.p.) extensively covering a range of issues—including the coming of age of a young Zimbabwean second generation coloured girl from Bulawayo and her first love, race, nationalism, and the rapid dilapidation of a once-prosperous country, under the rule of Robert Mugabe. Published in 2009, the plot depicts events spanning close to three decades, from 1980, when Zimbabwe had just gained its independence, to the early 2000s, after the economic decline had just begun. The novel focuses primarily



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on the inter-racial relationship between Lindiwe Bishop, a second generation coloured from Bulawayo and Ian McKenzie, her white neighbour, who is the son of a former member of the Selous Scouts.¹ In this article, I examine how race consciousness mediates the complex performance and experience of femininity, female respectability and sexuality in Irene Sabatini's *The Boy Next Door*. I explore how assumptions of racialised female bodyhood, femininity, and sexuality are constructed and transmitted within an intergenerational framework in the mother-daughter relationship between Lindiwe Bishop and her mother, Mrs Bishop.

In respect of literary modality, *The Boy Next Door*, like many novels, which focus on a young character, adopts the bildungsroman form, aiming to demonstrate “the development of the protagonist’s mind and character in the passage from childhood through varied experiences...into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one’s identity and role in the world” (Abrams 1988, 200–201). Commenting on the centrality of sexuality as a motif in women’s bildungsroman, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland argue that “Repeatedly, the female protagonist or *Bildungsheld* must chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it, between the costs of inner concentration and of direct confrontation with society, between the price of succumbing to madness and of grasping a repressive ‘normality’” (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 1983, 12–13). I find the bildungsroman nature of the novel relevant for this article, for it directs me to an inquiry into the female characters’ shifting embodiment of, and negotiation through the received truths of their sexualities.

The scene of the novel opens with Lindiwe’s childhood in Bulawayo, in the early 1980s, when Zimbabwe, formerly Southern Rhodesia, has just gained its independence. Sabatini’s use of a child protagonist in the narration of the growth of the nation is pertinent here as it points to “the space-time idea or construct of the postcolonial nation as both an unstable and an ambivalent domain of affiliation or belonging, a relationship modulated by the slippages in the meaning of the nation” (Nwakanma 2008, 2). The novel is narrated from the perspective of an introverted adolescent, Lindiwe, who is described by her peers as “a bookworm, a teacher’s pet, a goody-goody” (Sabatini 2009, 77). Lindiwe’s self-righteous, overly religious mother, who belongs to the “Amanyano” women’s church group, and serves as treasurer (religious events occupy a significant portion of her schedule, as “Monday and Wednesdays she is away at meetings” [50]), plays an influential role in the way her daughter perceives and expresses her sexuality. As a Bildungsroman, the novel pays attention to “the formation of the individual subject or character, the development of interiority, the relation of the individual to the group” (Andrade 2011, 114). The novel, however, also gives us insights into the changing

1 The Selous Scouts was a Special Forces regiment of the Rhodesian Army that operated from 1973 until the reconstitution of the country as Zimbabwe in 1980. Their main job was to eliminate terrorists/terrorism within and outside the country in clandestine operations.

political and economic landscape of the country, plus an insight into her parents' turbulent marriage, which is rocked by her father's infidelity. As the country matures politically, so does Lindiwe's narrative voice as she grows into a more confident and emotionally-mature woman—thus showing that this occurs in a complex, interleaved relation with (rather than merely as a flat “backdrop”) to the changing sociopolitical context.²

The article positions its analysis within the framework of “intersectionality”, which recognises “myriad and multiple articulations of social power” (Moolman 2011, 93). Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberly Crenshaw as a “way of capturing the complexity of social identities”, can be defined as a “discourse about identity that acknowledges how identities are constructed through the intersection of multiple dimensions” (Crenshaw 1989, 1299). I read the novel from the theoretical perspective of “hegemonic” and “subordinated” femininities, which takes into account how “other axes of domination such as race, class, sexuality, and age mold a hegemonic femininity that is venerated and extolled in the dominant culture and that emphasises the superiority of some women over others” (Pyke and Johnson 2003, 35). In the article, I argue that the notion of respectable womanhood is mediated through the desires, the sexual behaviour, and the proper conduct of the female sexualised and racialised body. I, therefore, analyse how the ideology of whiteness mediates discursive performances of femininity, which place certain kinds of femaleness associated with whiteness as superior to others. Further focusing on the characters' interaction with each other, how they formulate, mediate and relay multiple, gendered discourses on female sexuality within “the emotional, political, economic, and symbolic structures of family and society” Hirsch (as cited by Brown-Guillory 1996, 3), I consider the domestic space as a refracted mirror of broader societal constructions of female sexuality. With regards to domestic space and femaleness, Fultz (1996, 229) argues that “this putatively ‘normative’ sphere is the site where mother and daughter encounter each other as gendered subjects. It is here that the black mother, in her role as nurturer and enabler, prepares the daughter, through example and precept, for her (prescribed) role as woman and mother.” However, in the article, I argue, not simply that the space disempowers women by “reflecting” hegemonic norms, *but* that it simultaneously offers spaces—means, ideas, actions—through which such constructions can be negotiated, resisted and reworked.

2 I discuss, in detail, the parallels between the character of Lindiwe from her childhood to maturity and the socio-economic development of the Zimbabwean nation after independence, and its encounters with economic decline in the early 2000s in a forthcoming paper titled “Intersections of race, desire and love in Irene Sabatini's *The Boy Next Door*” to appear in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

Gender, Race and Female Respectability

Studies have shown that socialisation is crucial in the formation of gendered and racialised identities. In the process of socialisation, the body, as Pumla Gqola (2005, 3) posits, is centrally located in “many of the lessons girl and boy children imbibe about aesthetics, value and being-in-the-world.” Therefore, the manner in which women carry their bodies, how they dress, how they conduct themselves sexually—all become markers that determine their conformity (or not) to modes of respectability and received ideas of “proper” womanhood. Respectability, or the lack thereof, can be embodied through “dress, public conduct, language, housekeeping, childrearing methods, spending habits and of course, sexual behaviour” (Ross 1985, 39), among other things. It is thus a “category of social control that serves partly to define the ideal and partly to define its opposite” (Lindegaard and Henrikson 2009, 33). Categories of respectability, nonetheless, evolve over time, and in different contexts, such that prevailing definitions of the respectable and the unrespectable in relation to femaleness carry particular meanings in specific cultures. For example, Elaine Salo’s (2004, 254) research on female respectability posits that during apartheid rule in South Africa, white women epitomised respectability, while coloured women were constructed as lacking whiteness—and by implication, lacking respectability—although they could become respectable through the proper management of their racially-defined bodies. The same pattern could also be observed under colonial rule in Southern Rhodesia. Even in contemporary South Africa, “respectability continues to have strong racial connotations, as black and coloured women lack respectability by default and need to make themselves respectable by modifying their behaviour” (Lindegaard and Henrikson 2009, 33). However, being a social construct contingent upon diverse social factors, respectability is a malleable category, one which non-conformist women subvert and transgress. Nevertheless, even across cultures, the category “respectability” seems to remain an enviable and sought-after position for women, and here it is pertinent to note that the meanings of the respectable and the unrespectable, for women, are closely tied to enactments of the body, and how sexualities are performed as is evident in Sabatini’s novel.

Adapting Chipso Hungwe’s (2006, 33) definitions, in her article “Putting them in their place: ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ women in Zimbabwean gender struggles”, the “respectable” woman is one “who is treated with deferential esteem, and who is perceived as an honourable and dignified member of her community or society.” An “unrespectable” woman, in contrast, is thus not respected; she is perceived as “dishonourable and lacking in dignity; she will attract social opprobrium and her behaviour may not be emulated” (33). However, I argue that the fact that certain behaviour may not be perceived as respectable potentially positions it as a locus of *resistance* to hegemonic codes, implying that some forms of femaleness may actually be premised actively on the supposedly “unrespectable” in order to subvert limits or expectations. In my analysis of the novel, I therefore, consider how the embodied self’s

multiple relationships to societal modes of respectability, values and aesthetics “continue to play roles in how people negotiate place and power, and inform how we traverse the terrain of sexualisation” (Gqola 2005, 3) and that “rather than being a mere tool, then, the body acts as both the site and language through which positioning is negotiated.” (3).

Being Coloured and Respectable

For the purpose of this article, I borrow from Ibbo Mandaza’s definition of the term “coloured” as it is applicable to the Zimbabwean context. He argues that the term not only denotes all persons of mixed race, but also

describes those who are entitled, on the basis of their being regarded as persons of mixed racial origin, to admission to various specifically and officially designated separate (from those of other racial groups) coloured institutions (schools, residential areas, hospitals, etc.) and who also regard themselves as coloured both in the genetic and social sense of the term. (Mandaza 1997, n.p.)

The use of the term is, however, not without any ideological flaws—as it is imbued by a history of fraught and unequal racial tensions between white and black people. Given the historically racial symbolologies of whiteness and its implications of “cleanness”, “superiority”, the “white but not quite” status of being coloured implies a tainting and shaming of the racialised body conceived through miscegenation. As Minesh Dass (2011, 143) argues

The sexual encounter between the colonist and the other was marked by shame precisely because the colonist was ashamed. His displacement of that shame onto his progeny allowed him a mythical purity, a whiteness that could look with disgust at what it had produced without ever admitting that whiteness itself was a child of miscegenation.”

The coloured body is thus perceived as “conduit of tainted blood. (Marais 2005, 25)

During colonial times in Zimbabwe, like in many other former colonies, space was divided along racial lines to regulate interaction, which it was perceived, might lead to the blurring of boundaries between the coloniser and the colonised—especially through miscegenation—which took place nevertheless, despite the numerous regulations. The so-called natives were corralled into high-density areas, while white people were accommodated in more spacious, well-serviced sections, where blacks were forbidden, except for purposes of work. Coloureds too resided in designated areas, depending on their social and financial status in places such as Barham Green (for the well-off) and Thorngrove (for the poor) for example. As Nims (2013, 14), supported by Mandaza (1997), asserts, coloured identity in Zimbabwe was/is a creation of the colonial government, and part of the colonial toolkit, which was a tactic used to divide and conquer. She further adds that “within this toolkit, race and ethnicity are political identities because they are both legally enforced and institutionally reproduced” (Nims

2013, 14). However, Muzondidya insists on the agency of the coloured community itself in the formation of a Zimbabwean coloured identity. He argues that

the growth of coloured identity resulted from definitions both internal and external to the group involving a wide range of actors that included the colonial state, the white public and the subject people themselves, who, through self-identification, not only negotiated the dynamics of coloured group creation, but also gave coloured identity its shape and tenure. (Muzondidya 2013, 156)

In the post-independence era, public areas in Zimbabwe were desegregated and opened for all races. As Lindiwe narrates, sardonically,

Up to a year before we moved in, Baysview was a Whites-Only suburb. Ian Smith changed the law: he wanted to show the world that his government was a reasonable one and not racist by any stroke of the imagination...There was no apartheid in Rhodesia. (Sabatini 2009, 26)

The Bishops are pioneers, inhabiting these formerly segregated areas. Lindiwe's father, who works for a telephone repairing company, is coloured—"he was light-skinned, had good hair and a straight nose" (33)—and her mother, a housewife, is black. At her age, as an impressionable young teen, Lindiwe's descriptions of her father's physiology are already imbued with Manichean, racialised binaries which, for example, categorise non-black hair as good. Mr Bishop is a product of a sexual union between a local Ndebele woman from Nyamandhlovu and "a white farmer in the area who had agreed to have his name on the birth certificate and who had paid for his education" (33). Not much is said in the novel about the relationship between Mr Bishop's parents, whether it was consensual or coercive. Nevertheless, the relationship between Mr Bishop's parents points to the existence of interracial sex, despite regulations against such unions. On a similar point, Munyaradzi Mushonga (2014, 3) argues that the high coloured population growth since 1901 during white settler colonialism provides evidence of rampant sexual activity between white men and black women. Young (1995, ix), in his seminal text *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, also argues that although racial theory has endeavoured to keep races separate forever, at the same time it "transmutes into expressions of the clandestine, furtive forms of what can be called 'colonial desire'; a covert but insistent obsession with transgressive, interracial sex, hybridity and miscegenation."

Although Mr Bishop is classified as coloured by the state and by everybody else, he does not consider himself racially-mixed, but prefers to be identified with his Ndebele mother, who had raised him, than to claim his father's whiteness. Lindiwe reveals that "he didn't like it when Mummy talked about coloureds and blacks" (Sabatini 2009, 33), implying that Mr Bishop considers the categories as useless, null and void, a non-existent in what is supposedly a new Zimbabwe for all. Perhaps, Mr Bishop's refusal to identify as coloured is a deliberate strategy by him to allow him to fit in the new

independent Zimbabwe and be accorded opportunities, which would not be the case if he chooses to identify as coloured, or with his white father. On the other hand, his refusal to identify with the white side of his heritage could point to his bitterness and internal conflict of identifying with a race that was instrumental in the dispossession of the racial group of the mother who had birthed him and taken care of him. Additionally, “he didn’t talk like a Barham Green or Thorngrove colored” (Sabatini 2009, 33), a speech performance, which distinctly marks coloureds from black Africans. Mr Bishop is, therefore, not coloured in the social sense of the term—since he does not affiliate with an (ostensibly) distinct coloured Zimbabwean racial category, an identity which reflects “constructed layers of racial and cultural meanings that provide...a shared ethnic identity” (Nims 2013, 16). Mr Bishop’s refusal to accept a coloured identity in favour of a black identity, which he resonates with, exposes the fiction of race and reflects the fact that because of its social constructedness, one can choose to reject or adapt to racial categories. Mr Bishop’s refusal is, therefore, a form of resistance that disrupts a social system of classification, based on shades of skin colour. Notably too, while Lindiwe’s father refuses a coloured identity (ironically, his wife, who is black, obstinately claims the coloured identity) for their daughter Lindiwe, even though her appearance is not recognisably coloured. Lindiwe reveals that “At my old school the real colored girls had called me names because I was not light-skinned and I had a wide nose” (33). Here, we note how the category “coloured” is hierarchised, prompting the “real” coloured girls, who are visibly lighter skinned (and closer to whiteness) and identifiably coloured to perceive themselves as superior, and separate from “fake” coloureds like Lindiwe, and therefore, justified to taunt her because of her “abominable” “black African” physical features. Although in a different national context, these attitudes, portrayed by Sabatini, correspond with Erasmus’ (2001, 13) recollection of her middle-class South African coloured upbringing, and her ambivalent knowledge that coloureds were of varying degrees, “not only now white, but less than white; not only not black, but better than black (as referred to African people).” Additionally, Nims (2013, 10), in her research involving the social lives of the coloured community in Zimbabwe, notes that historically, “many coloureds have denied the reality of the boundaries that have separated them from whites or Europeans, and more recently, have reinforced the boundaries that have separated them from black Africans.”

Paradoxically, despite this insistence on an identity separate from the so-called natives:

the fact that sexuality, sexual encounter, and shame have been central tropes in organizing the narration and ritual invocation of the coloured past, shows some consciousness of the fact that the coloured category itself originated at the intersection of different cultures or different worlds. (Nims 2013, 13)

In the novel Mrs Bishop, however, insists on claiming “colouredness” for her daughter, and Lindiwe does the same by identifying herself as a coloured person. For example, in a bid to make her fit into the coloured category, Mrs Bishop straightens Lindiwe’s hair

so that people “must see that she is a coloured” (Sabatini 2009, 33). Also, on Lindiwe’s first day of school, in her quest to present her daughter as an enviable coloured child, an identity, which to her mind brings her respect and admiration, she makes Lindiwe practice all the way in the bus, “good morning,” “good afternoon”, using [her] “best European accent” (34). She herself is dark-skinned, but to attain a certain closeness to “whiteness” she bleaches her skin with skin lighteners. Lindiwe reveals this when she compares her mother to Rosanna, her mother’s relative, whom Mrs Bishop treats with contempt. Rosanna, who comes from the rural area to live with them also ends up having an affair with Mr Bishop, and becomes pregnant with his child. Rather ironically, Lindiwe notes:

Rosanna is fairer skin than Mummy and her face isn’t marked by dark patches because of using Ambi Fade skin lightening cream. Rosanna doesn’t wear a glossy black wig like Mummy, but her short hair is neatly plaited in rows.” (74)

Juxtaposed, these two women seem to embody different notions of performing womanhood, which is inflected by race and its meaning in respect of social standing and modernity. Thus, Lindiwe’s comparison of the two women underscores her implicit critique of her mother’s absurd aspiration to attain a level of whiteness, which she can never achieve. The uneasy relationship between Mrs Bishop and Rosanna also exemplifies the tensions precipitated by class and socio-cultural conventions of womanhood, which are deeply embedded in patriarchy. Sabatini’s representation of the two women seems to replicate a binary representation of notions of the modern and the traditional, embodied in the image of the woman, although it is not without many complexities. One image connotes indigenous simplicity and racial pride, which is a resistance to white hegemony, and Mrs Bishop’s image exemplifies a post-colonial identity in crisis, wanting to identify with colonial whiteness. Although inverted, this is evocative of an early African writer, Okot p’Bitek’s characterisation of Lawino, a traditional, simple, village woman and Clementine, Lawino’s rival and mistress of Lawino’s western-educated husband, who bleaches her skin to look white in the long and famous poem *Song of Lawino*. Through Lawino, p’Bitek critiques the conflict between African cultures and European cultures, instigated by the colonial encounter. Regarding the effects of racism on the black person’s psyche, Frantz Fanon argues that the psychological effects of colour prejudice have had attitudinal and personality influences on colonial groups of black people, as well as African Americans. He further argues that victims find themselves internalising certain destructive behavioural traits or characteristics, which contribute to their continued oppression long after freedom or decolonisation has been achieved. For Mrs Bishop claiming to be coloured becomes an important marker of respectability, sustained through its supposedly closer proximity to “whiteness” or “Europeanness.” In her perspective, appropriating white symbolic markers such as straight hair, light skin tone, and speaking with a “good” English accent signifies her entry into, and is attributive of belonging to, a category of people with good

social standing—even though it alienates her from other members of society whom she views as the “other.”

Living in a “proper” neighbourhood also becomes a marker of social upward mobility and female respectability for Mrs Bishop, who is from an underprivileged background. As a result, she is constantly pressurising her husband to move them to a better suburb without taking into consideration the financial implications of such a move. From her perspective, a better suburb “is one where there are higher quality of white people and no apostolics” (Sabatini 2009, 47). For Mrs Bishop, class is a definite marker for attaining respectability and, therefore, contact and association with the “right” white people who are materially privileged and disassociation with the rather “strange” and sometimes nomadic religious group of apostolics is a prerequisite for this African woman’s ambitions into social, upward mobility. In Mrs Bishop’s perspective, respectability also distinguishes middle-class women who reside in the suburbs from working-class women who live in the high-density areas and perceived as “sexual, vulgar, tarty, pathological, tasteless and without value” (Skeggs 1997, 115). Because she associates respectability with whiteness, class and decorum, memories of her giving birth to Lindiwe are marred with shame and meanings of what an “unrespectable woman” experiences. She hates Magwegwe, the black, high-density township, where Lindiwe was born for what it represents, counter to her notions of respectable womanhood and sexuality. Lindiwe narrates:

Magwegwe was the place of her greatest humiliation, the place of my birth. Instead of being born on the right day like any normal baby, I chose to make my grand entrance three weeks early. And instead of giving warning signs so that she could go to the hospital in good time, no, I hijacked her when she was at Renkini, the bus depot, and made her give birth right there on the concrete floor with drivers, conductors, bus passengers, thieves, crooks, rapists...all watching what was going on between her legs and what kind of thing was coming out. Mummy would never forgive me for that. Or forgive Magwegwe. Or even forgive Daddy for making her live in Magwegwe. (Sabatini 2009, 26)

Lindiwe’s premature birth destabilises her mother’s sensibility of what is defined as the appropriate way to experience a “private” aspect of female sexuality, child bearing, which inflects her notions of female respectability. From the passage above, I infer how ideas of female respectability in respect of public and private spatial regulations even occupy the imagination and further construct a regimen of female sexuality. I read into ideas of hegemonic and subordinated femininities at play, whereby certain performances of femininity are constructed as the standard for the ideal woman, while others are relegated to the margins of unrespectable womanhood. In Mrs Bishop’s imagination, in order to embody the notions of respectable womanhood, she would have had to give birth on a hospital bed, out of public gaze. To make matters worse, her “violation” is witnessed by low-class people such as drivers—and she imagines that her humiliation is watched by social deviants, such as thieves and rapists. The fact that she

gives birth in the public eye with “thieves, crooks and rapists” watching what was going on between her legs, she imagines, locates her within the parameters of unrespectable, easy and degradable female sexuality. Since she imagines her private parts are almost displayed publicly, she equates herself to a woman with “lesser” moral consciousness, whose sexuality is easily accessible to men from all walks of life. Notions of class and respectability are also evoked through the material place where as a woman, one gives birth. Ideas of class hierarchies, associated with the location Magwegwe, where Mrs Bishop Lives, are all integrated in what is supposedly considered “unrespectable” womanhood. In her instance, the concrete floor of the bus depot in the townships hardly serves as a proper place for a respectable woman, who is married to a coloured man, to give birth. Because of the humiliation brought by her ordeal, she attaches notions of shame and disgust to the natural act of child bearing. Reducing her to “a thing” (Sabatini 2009, 26), the concept of shaming is subsequently extended to Lindiwe’s body, as she is the causal occasion of the shameful, exposed birthing experience.

Escaping Shame and Shaping “Coloured” Femininity

These constructed boundaries that (in terms of the parents’ differential desires) variously separate the Bishop family from, and connect them to, the social values of black Africans, have also been instrumental in the construction of a certain moral respectability that aims to distinguish itself from the so-called black African identity—at the same time, counter-narratives of shame and sexual deviance imbue the meanings of being coloured. Although her research focuses on questions of colouredness in the context of South Africa, I tentatively extrapolate Erasmus’ ideas to read Sabatini’s novel, and how she presents the concept of being coloured in Zimbabwe. Erasmus argues that the choices made by “decent, educated, middle-class coloured females”, in respect of how they should conduct themselves, lay between either “respectability or shame” (Erasmus 2001, 13). Wider scholarship also iterates that coloured respectability is often “presented as the antidote to those stereotypes that equate colouredness with degeneracy” (Marais 2012, 283). Since women are perceived as “the bearers of the shame associated with that degeneracy due to their roles in sexual reproduction and the reproduction of culture, coloured women carry the burden of performing respectability squarely” (283). Dass (2011, 138) adds that “miscegenation became construed by colonial discourse as the ‘shameful’ fault of black women, who were thus constructed as concupiscent – that concupiscence itself being the ‘source’ of shame for these women and their progeny.” Similarly, the coloured body, which “bear[s] the marked pigmentation of miscegenation” (Wicomb 1998, 93), must also bear the shame of miscegenation. Zoe Wicomb, arguing also from a South African perspective, asserts further that “miscegenation, the origins of which lie within the discourse of ‘race’, concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid’s strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in . . . attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame” (1998, 92).

Unfortunately, however, “being diligent in the pursuit of respectability”, as Marais (2012, 283) observes, “also often means denying sexual desire and restricting female agency.” Indeed, I sense the diligent enforcement of such modes of respectability in the manner in which Mrs Bishop inculcates a sanitised notion of sexuality in Lindiwe. Her approach to teaching Lindiwe about female sexuality involves instilling fear in her in relation to the dangers, which her body and sexuality are capable of attracting or even provoking. Mrs Bishop’s interactions with her daughter do not allow dialogue or questions, but rather involve impositions of instructions, which naturalise her maternal voice as authority and as being final. For example, without being comprehensive or explicit with her, she tells Lindiwe to stay away from Maphosa, their relative who had fought in the liberation war because of rape stories associated with those who fought in the liberation war.³ Lindiwe reveals: “Mummy called me into her room and told me never to converse with Maphosa, never to go into his room and to exercise modesty at all times” (Sabatini 2009, 42). Although Mrs Bishop’s warning primarily constructs Maphosa’s male sexuality as menacing and a threat to female bodies, she also iterates a discourse which locates young female sexuality as provocative towards males’ naturalised insatiable desires and places the onus upon her to prevent such male desires from assuming life. Mrs Bishop, thus, acknowledges her daughter’s sexuality—but frames it as a demand on the girl to first, also acknowledge this sexuality, and then “put a lid on the sexual desires” (Tolman 1994, 325) of men, without necessarily impressing on her that her own sexual desires are legitimate. On Lindiwe’s 16th birthday, acknowledging the growing potential of her daughter’s sexuality, she gives her the euphemistic ‘talk’: “Mummy gave me a *little* talk about *keeping myself clean*” [italics my emphasis] (Sabatini 2009, 90). One notes that Mrs Bishop locates her response to female embodiment and sexuality within the discourse of dirt and filthiness. At this point, Lindiwe has reached puberty—and through her own body developing, and from the biology lessons at school, she already knows the physiological aspect of menstruation and details of sexual reproduction. Mrs Bishop’s talk, then, serves more of a sociocultural function: how to conduct oneself as a respectable woman. Mrs Bishop’s instruction to her daughter about cleanliness explicitly communicates a notion of a menstruating body as unclean, a notion which nurtures the restrictive taboos and myths that are usually imposed on female bodies. de Beauvoir (1959, 169) has argued that the pathology behind women’s menstruating bodies as unclean is embedded in the social construction of the category of woman as an “other”: “the blood, indeed, does not make woman impure; it is rather a sign of her impurity.” The social construction of menstruation as a curse placed on women, and as something shameful and to be hidden, “is explicitly implicated in the evolution of woman as Other...That is to say, menstruation does not make woman the Other; it is because she is Other that menstruation is a curse” (Kissling 2006, 4). Mrs Bishop’s perceptions also corroborate

3 See Tanya Lyons, 2004. *Guns and Guerrilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle*. Trenton: Africa World Press Inc.

the view espoused by McFadden (2003, 51) who argues that in “all patriarchal societies, women and girls are taught, consistently... that their bodies are dirty, nasty, smelly, disgusting, corrupting, imperfect, ugly and volatile harbingers of disease and immorality.” This inflects the manner in which women as a group are taught to imagine their bodies and extends to the subsequent sexual restrictions to which they adhere. I further read into this notion as commanding Lindiwe to abstain from pre-marital sex. Virginity is one of the key signifiers of women’s respectability and that of her family. As Salo (2004, 175) notes:

a woman’s ability to control her own as well as her daughter’s sexuality is the constitutive sign...A respectable mother would not allow her daughter to be sexually active, use birth control or become pregnant out of wedlock.

Through her statement, Mrs Bishop insinuates that pre-marital sex is dirty and that engaging in it, therefore, taints one’s body and image—thus making her an unrespectable woman in the process. The duty of a respectable mother is, therefore, to raise a respectable daughter, who knows how to control her sexual desires.

Negotiating Sexuality and Resistance

Despite the restrictions that her mother places on her ability to see herself as a sexual being Lindiwe goes ahead and forge a secret relationship with Ian, the white boy next door. Lindiwe’s ideas regarding her nascent sexuality, as well as expressions of her growing desires for Ian are, however, mediated through sanitised and carefully-articulated thoughts, which fall within the paradigms of female respectability. With regard to articulating sexual desire in adolescence, Deborah Tolman (1994, 324) argues that:

as they enter adolescence, many girls may lose an ability to speak about what they know, see, feel, and experience evident in childhood as they come under cultural pressure to be ‘nice girls’ and ultimately ‘good women’ in adolescence.

This aspect is projected by the novelist, in the manner in which Lindiwe learns to negotiate her responses to her sexuality. For example, after school when Bridgette, Lindiwe’s sexually precocious and only friend, introduces her to *Lace*, an erotic blockbuster novel that the famous girls in her high school were secretly reading, she is conflicted and torn between listening to the “juiciest bits...using a small torch because it was so dark” (Sabatini 2009, 108) and refraining from being morally corrupted by such material: “Stop, I don’t want to hear any more; shush, you’re too loud” (108), she tells Bridgette; as she reads out to her. Because of her upbringing in a culture that silences, shames and denigrates women’s sexual desires, even though the erotic descriptions arouse sexual feelings in her, she fails to recognise and acknowledge her sexual desires, simply dismissing them by saying “some of the words made me feel funny” (108). Moreover, Bridgette’s suggestion to “look how you can give yourself

pleasure without a man” (109) simultaneously amuses and scandalises Lindiwe’s sense of morality, highlighting her ambivalent response to the possibilities of female embodied sexuality. In tandem with Lindiwe’s introversion and “good girl” nature, the language that communicates her narration of the intimate, erotic moments in the novel is cloaked and concealed; acts of intimacy are implied through the euphemistic mention of body parts, clothing or bodily gestures between the two characters in the novel.

Disregarding strict instructions to keep away from Ian who had been convicted of killing his step mother, Lindiwe forms a “friendship” with the pariah, whom at 16, she sleeps with just once, and gets pregnant. As she reveals to her friend Bridgette many years later:

“It was a one-night thing. It just happened.”

“But you were such a *good* girl.”

“I know, I know, and maybe that’s why it happened. I was kind of infatuated with him...I don’t know, I found him really romantic and maybe I felt sorry for him...”

“Lindiwe, a romantic killer-”. (Sabatini 2009, 239)

Although this conversation between Lindiwe and Bridgette takes place six years after Lindiwe and Ian first became intimate, it summarises how fascinated Lindiwe is with Ian, despite the fact that from the beginning their relationship was marred by controversy. A “friendship” between them only starts when Ian is released from jail, after serving two years for setting alight his abusive step mother. He comes back to live in the dilapidated house, which is next to the Bishop’s. On the character of Ian, Sabatini explains in an interview with Geosi Reads, that she deliberately invokes the “archetype” of a boy next door in the title of the novel—hence referring to Ian, in order to subvert the term, because while “the boy next door” usually refers to “a good looking, shy, middle of the road person”, Ian is nothing like that. He is “a brash boy with a distinctive way of talking and seeing the world” (Geosi Reads, n.p.); and as a son of a now deceased, alcoholic former Selous Scout, who is not financially privileged, as compared to the other white people in Bulawayo. Despite the apparent danger that Ian poses as an ex-convict, Lindiwe is attracted to him and is curious about his racial difference as well as the class differences apparent in his convict “bad boy” status. Indeed, she fixates on his “otherness”, exoticising his looks. For instance, on several occasions, she takes a newspaper clipping from her pink handbag and “look at the picture and then lift the paper up and... put [her] lips gently on his hair” (Sabatini 2009, 101). From a young age, Lindiwe, who is also conflicted by her coloured identity, is fascinated by “whiteness”, its cultural meanings and white people’s modes of romantic and other social interaction. Whiteness seems proximate and yet denied to her—hence she fetishises it and turns it into an object of excessive desire and identification. For

example, when she goes to the drive-in with her family to watch a movie, her focus is usually diverted to how the young “Rhodies” are conducting themselves:

Most of the time I’m not watching the movie on the giant screen but the groups of young white people who are calling out to each other, kissing, laughing, talking in their style. [...] They are my movie” (Sabatini 2009, 29).

This cultural difference embodied in the expressions of affect and sexuality appeals to Lindiwe, whose own family denies such apparently explicit expression of sexuality.

The perverse exoticism that she attaches to the young “Rhodies” as a group is transferred to how she views Ian as an individual. However, even though race dynamics are at play, evidenced in the manner in which she views and relates to Ian, exemplified in the manner in which she addresses him as “Mr Mackenzie”, as well as how she usually responds to him in her “best European voice” (10)—the desire for the alluring other is complicated. In trying to make sense of Lindiwe’s projection of attraction of Ian, I attempt to read this projection as an interesting reversal of bell hooks’ theory of white men’s attraction to black women. hooks (1992, 24) argues that through this gesture, white men attempt to assert themselves “as transgressive desiring subjects” by incorporating the “exotic” other into the self. This seems analogous to Lindiwe being attracted to Ian’s apparent difference. Ian is a pariah among the white friends he used to hang around with—and is ostracised by the white community at large—who continue to obstruct integration into a multi-racial Zimbabwe, to racialise space, and attempt to maintain white power (Mthatiwa 2018, 2). Because of this, Lindiwe views him as an *othered* “other”, and feels sorry for him. The feeling of being marginalised is one that Lindiwe identifies with, implying that her feelings for Ian are mediated by complex factors—which include adolescent infatuation, the dynamics of race, and the need to belong socially. Both Lindiwe and Ian (as a Ndebele coloured and white “Rhodie” respectively), belong to an undesirable category of people, who problematise the concept of the new Zimbabwe and proper national belonging. Therefore, both Lindiwe and Ian, one can argue, occupy an unsettled liminal zone in the society of the time, and despite their evident race and class differences this shared interstitial quality establishes a space of possibility—which is empathetically imaginative, and charged with the sexual interest that Sabatini’s narrative needs. Although Lindiwe is instructed by her mother to keep their family’s “interaction with that boy to the strictest minimum”; and that “if he comes here when there are no adults you must not let him in” (Sabatini 2009, 49–50), she disobeys her mother and devises a plan to meet with Ian secretly. By forging a relationship with Ian, she defies maternal authority and her mother’s attempts to inscribe her own values regarding proper morality on her, thus carving her own path and setting her own values in respect of who she should desire and have intimate relationships with. However, this defiance must “entail a process of masked negotiation, since outright defiance would mean severe reprimanding and restrictions” (Mtenje 2016, 148). Lindiwe resorts to “ambiguous tactics of manipulation which constitute

various shifts between conformity and subversion” (Mtenje 2016, 148). For example, after school she meets Ian at places she knows her parents will never go to. Also, when her mother is not around, she sneaks out of the house to meet with Ian, and returns before her mother comes back. Knowing how taboo her desire for Ian is, she keeps even her fantasies of her interaction with Ian to herself, keeping her female best friend, too, in the dark: “I don’t tell Bridgette that I lie on my bed and imagine him next to me. The two of us, side by side, on my bed” (Sabatini 2009, 78). Here again, I notice how the patterning of the sentence holds back from sexual explicitness, and yet, in repetition with variation of syntactical units (“next to me”/“side by side”) and the loaded phrase “on my bed”, it also leaves the reader with a potent sense of Lindiwe’s growing sexual longing, as her young imagination places the two of them, girl and boy, as if they are just innocently adjacent bodies located only on the surface of the sexually-associated object, yet without being “inside”, and bodies entangled. Significantly, too, and as an extension of both Lindiwe’s ordinary every day and exceptionalist imaginative fantasising of cross-racial sex, the personal bed here holds a subversive possibility, which might challenge purist nationalist discourses, based on ethnic and racial hierarchies. Pucherova (2011, 6) argues that since the 1980s when Zimbabwe gained independence “violence against white farmers, immigrants, undesirable ethnic groups (such as the Ndebele) and slum dwellers has been justified on the basis of absolutist conceptualizations of nationalist identity based on ancestry and racial purity.” Here, Ian and Lindiwe’s bodies exist in the space of romantic possibility, as if racial politics and sociocultural hierarchies are suspended. Lindiwe even resists articulating her desires and sexual fantasies in her diary: “I’ve stopped writing because what I want to write now is too big to be safe in there, even if I do have a lock and key. So, I just put Xs, my secret secret” (Sabatini 2009, 79). Lindiwe’s use of Xs is a complex strategy of not only protecting her secret desires from others, but also points to a withholding of naming her own desires from herself. Interestingly, Xs also represent kisses and therefore, presents a nice ambiguity of displacement.

Counter to the expectations of her mother, who has tried to socialise her into a “good” girl, Lindiwe falls pregnant at 16, the first time she has sex with Ian. The day after she has sex with Ian, the latter leaves for South Africa to settle there, leaving no prospects of a future with her. However, a significant physical part of Ian remains with her. She keeps her pregnancy—a physical correspondence between them—a secret from Ian, who is trying to make a living in South Africa, even though they maintain their more conventional written correspondence through letters throughout her university days. She is forced to bear the shame of her sexual transgression alone:

I think of those nine months, the look on Mummy’s face as my stomach grew. She tried to convince Daddy to send me off somewhere. [...] I think of those years when I had to go Speciss College with all the other failures to do my O and A levels because none of the schools would take on a girl who had been pregnant, the bad influence she might have on others, the contagion she might spread. (Sabatini 2009, 177)

She turns into a pariah, not only within her immediate family, as her mother tries to send her away to protect the family's reputation, which stands to be questionable, because of her apparent sexual transgression, and evidence of her lack of respectability—but also, within the immediate society, she is perceived as a social misfit—especially by her fellow girls, who brand her a morally-loose and irresponsible girl. She reveals, “The girls I would bump into from school, who would look at me up and down, pass comments to each other, words like *cheap*, *slut*, *baby dumper* tossed from one lip-glossed mouth to another” (Sabatini 2009, 177) [emphasis in the original]. Interestingly, in a turn of events, the baby that Mrs Bishop thought was a shame to the family becomes a substitute for the babies she lost in miscarriages and after “try[ing] everything for a boy. Everything” (Sabatini 2009, 98). To fulfil her longing for a baby boy, when Mrs Bishop realises that Lindiwe's baby is a boy, she takes over from her and practically excludes Lindiwe in the upbringing of the child. The child is a boy and is evidently coloured—all factors which feed into the desires for female respectability for Mrs Bishop. Under patriarchal edicts, being a mother of only one girl child, makes her a failure in as far as achieving the ideal womanhood as the mother of a boy is concerned. Here, Sabatini revisits an issue, which older female writers such as Buchi Emecheta, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, deal with, whereby a woman internalises patriarchal society's notions of a male child being of value, and not a female child. Therefore, by proxy, being a “mother” to a boy, who also happens to be evidently coloured, through his light skin, reddish-brownish hair and bluish eyes, she achieves the respectability that she has always desired—that of being close to whiteness, and also being a mother of a son. She dotes on the boy, inculcating religious, self-righteous values in the young boy, shielding him from the world—including his own mother and grandfather, until Lindiwe and Ian decide to take him back.

Conclusion

Sabatini's debut novel, therefore, depicts how race consciousness mediates performances of femininities, sexualities and respectability, and how certain forms of femaleness are hierarchised and lauded as the norm—while others are denigrated and subordinated. Sabatini's narrative demonstrates how discourses of race and identity produce subject positions and regimens of female sexuality, which are embodied, transgressed or reconstructed by characters in the novel.

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