

Manifestations of Shame at the Intersections of Gender, Sexuality, Race and Class: A Feminist Literary Analysis of Dominique Botha's *Valsrivier*

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Summary

This article offers a feminist literary analysis of the representation of shame in Dominique Botha's *Valsrivier* and it demonstrates how shame manifests itself in the spaces where gender, sexuality, race and class intersect. The study of shame offers myriad analytical possibilities and these have largely been left unexplored in scholarly engagements with Botha's critically acclaimed text. By focusing on the embodied experiences of shame of the character of Dominique and those of a number of other, often peripheral, characters, I contend that the politics of shame are as crucial to understanding these women's lived realities as those of race and class. Because of its very nature, a number of challenges crop up when one attempts to broach the topic of shame, not least of which is the fact that it makes people extremely uncomfortable. I argue that it is crucial that feminist critics move beyond the desire to turn away so that we can turn the scholarly gaze on shame in order to expose it to analysis. This article has entered into this uncomfortable and challenging conversation by considering how selected female literary characters experience shame at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality and class.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bied 'n feministiese literêre analise van die uitbeelding van skaamte in *Valsrivier* deur Dominique Botha en ek illustreer hoe skaamte gestalte verkry by die snypunte van gender, seksualiteit, ras en klas. Die studie van skaamte bied talle analitiese moontlikhede wat grootliks onbenut gelaat word in akademiese omgang met Botha se teks wat wyd deur kritici geloof is. Deur te fokus op die liggaamlike belewenis van skaamte van die karakter van Dominique, sowel as dié van 'n aantal ander, minder prominente karakters, voer ek aan dat die politieke dinamika van skaamte so belangrik is vir die verstaan van hierdie vroue se wêreld soos die van ras en klas. As gevolg van die aard van skaamte, duik 'n aantal uitdagings op wanneer mens probeer om die tema van skaamte aan te spreek. Onder andere maak dit mense geweldig ongemaklik. Ek voer aan dat dit noodsaaklik is vir feministiese kritici om die behoefte om weg te draai te weerstaan sodat ons skaamte direk kan aanky en sodoende kan blootstel aan ontleding. Hierdie artikel tree toe tot die ongemaklike en uitdagende gesprek deur te ondersoek hoe sekere vroue-karakters skaamte beleef by die snypunte van gender, ras, klas en seksualiteit.

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Valsrivier by Dominique Botha is an Afrikaans¹ fictionalised autobiographical memoir² in which the author narrates her experiences of

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1. Botha herself also translated the text into English as *False River*. About the process of translation, she notes that “writing itself is an act of translation” and she explains that she “engaged in an ‘archaeology’ of experience when laying down the material for the memoir/novel in Afrikaans” (Botha 2014). *False River* and *Valsrivier* were published simultaneously and, in conversation with Michiel Heyns, Botha explains that she produced the text while she was in the predominantly English academic Wits university environment where she wrote what was, “in essence, a transliterated Afrikaans childhood into English” (Botha cited in Visser 2013). A great deal of Afrikaans remains in the English version and she elaborates that there was “an almost physiological translation that took place initially, from experience to memory to English, and then back into Afrikaans It just slipped on like a really comfortable shoe” (Botha cited in Visser 2013). Throughout both versions of the text, it remains clear that the Botha family’s Afrikaner background is central to their identity and, for the purposes of this article, I thus use the Afrikaans version as my primary text of reference.

 2. Despite the fact that the cover of the text identifies it as a novel, the precise generic classification of the text presents some challenges. In her review, Finuala Dowling (2013) insists that this is “very much a memoir” and what is ultimately presented to the reader is “a feat of recollection, yes, but also of imagination [and] evocation ...”. Lisa Visser’s (2013) review article allows Botha to offer her own ruminations on the genre of her work: “When asked to what extent Botha herself feels her book is novel rather than memoir, she responds by saying that one of the first things she starts thinking about when she writes, is ‘do the facts alone necessarily constitute the truth?’ The other, according to Botha, is the understanding that memory is fallible – a notion which precludes any realisable ambition of writing ‘The Whole Truth’. Botha says that although as an author you’re expected to ‘enter into a pact with the reader’ through genre which would ‘delineate what kind of beast you are dealing with’, she feels ‘these discrete entities’ are ‘far more of a continuum’. Botha says too that ‘you could use the genre of a novel because you want to deflect the notion of impropriety and say, ‘this is fiction, therefore this didn’t really happen’ although the people who are familiar with the story will see through that ruse So, it becomes fiction anyway for people that stand outside the immediate circle of intimates who understand the story.’” The generic ambiguity of the text is especially interesting given the fact that it deals so probingly with shame, with its concomitant impulse to silence and secrecy. When exploring the deeply private and personal engagements of a woman with gendered shame, the generic label of “novel” could, arguably, provide some semblance of privacy and protection from the reader’s gaze. The author utilises a first person narrator and thus claims these experiences as those of the novel’s protagonist, with whom she shares a name, rather than explicitly stating that she and the narrator are the same in the more direct manner of an autobiography.

growing up as a white, middle class woman on a farm in the Free State during apartheid. The narrator details her interactions with her family as her brother's increasingly erratic behaviour causes mounting tension in their relationships with their parents and eventually culminates in his suicide. This article will focus on how Dominique's observations shed light on the gendered dynamics of shame and how these dynamics inform her experiences at selected moments in the text. While this novel has been widely reviewed and won prestigious accolades³ in the South African literary milieu, it has received surprisingly little sustained academic attention from scholars. In the few exceptions, critics have tended to concentrate on the racial dynamics in the text as they shape the coming of age of the protagonist. In his excellent review article on South African biography, for instance, Jacob Dlamini (2015: 343) focuses on how the Botha family negotiates the challenges of living "honourably in a society where even the notion of honour is tainted by race thinking and racially coded privileges". Although this is an undeniably significant avenue of research for literary scholars, I argue that the text yields its richest insights when we consider how the protagonist manoeuvres along her life path at the points where race, gender, sexuality and class intersect. More specifically, I demonstrate how these intersections expose a gendered politics of shame that shape the life choices and experiences of the protagonist at the most fundamental levels. Elsbeth Probyn (2005: 40) succinctly articulates the potential richness of shame as an analytical tool when she notes that "[t]he color, the place, the history of bodies all come alive in shame" and when she insists that "the body in shame tells us so much" (63). In our collective attempts to deal with white complicity in apartheid, South African literary scholars have done a great deal of important work on textual representations of racialised guilt and, to a lesser extent, shame. In order to do justice to the experiences of female characters, however, I argue that we need to delve deeper into the much more complex and insidious phenomenon of shame. Although guilt and shame are obviously related, the latter is a more complex and powerful phenomenon than the former. Cathrine Norberg (2012: 171) explains this as follows: "Guilt shares many features of shame, but differs from it in focussing on the actions done by someone, rather than evaluating the individual associated with those actions". This is an important distinction because it has consequences for the power of the impact guilt and shame can have on an individual. Jessica Benetti-McQuoid and Krisanne Bursik (2005: 133) articulate the distinction and its implications as follows: "Guilt and shame are internal affective states that often arise from similar situations, but have different effects on the individual. Guilt is defined as an

3. It won the University of Johannesburg prize for the best creative debut work in English in 2014 and the Eugene Marais prize for a first or early publication in Afrikaans in 2014. It was also shortlisted for the 2014 *Sunday Times* fiction prize.

unpleasant emotion accompanied by beliefs that one should have thought, felt, or acted differently”. Shame, on the other hand, “is defined as an unpleasant and sometimes debilitating emotion accompanied by a global negative evaluation of the entire self, characterized by an internal self-doubt and chastisement” (McQuoid and Bursik 2005: 134).

In *Valsrivier*, the notion of female shame crops up repeatedly and whether it features explicitly or more subtly, it is always intertwined with markers of race, class, gender and sexuality and its impact on the protagonist’s development is as profound as the racial oppression that characterises her social world. By means of a close feminist literary reading of this text, I will explore how it offers insights into what I would like to term the epistemology of female shame and embodiment. In an age that is often, erroneously and, I would argue, dangerously, labelled post-feminist and where women claim their right to express their sexualities and their bodies in so-called slut walks⁴ across the globe, it seems like a slightly retrograde manoeuvre to dwell on female shame. Present-day societies would like to believe that this is an issue that we have sorted out and moved beyond. This, alas, would be a mistake and contemporary Southern African women’s literature, such as my selected text, reminds us that shame is as salient a factor in women’s experiences today as it ever was. As my analysis will also suggest, the construction of female shame is a form of epistemological violence that contributes to creating environments where women’s bodies are rendered vulnerable to actual physical violence. As a self-reflexive feminist scholar, I locate myself in this research as a woman reading the text from a vantage point that shares significant similarities with Botha’s protagonist in that I am a white, middle class Afrikaans South African woman who continues to negotiate the profoundly gendered politics of shame in a patriarchal society. This article explores how Botha’s text exposes the gendered dynamics of shame to readerly scrutiny and I regard such exposure as a first and necessary step towards subverting them.

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4. The slut walk movement is another example of a feminist intervention that runs the risk of marginalising black women by not paying sufficient attention to the ways in which gendered experiences are racialised. Although an analysis of the movement is beyond the scope of this article, the necessity of a rigorously intersectional approach to all gendered experiences is also emphasised in my article. For readers who are interested in knowing more about the too often neglected racial dynamics of slut walk, please consult the important article “An Open Letter From Black Women to the Slut walk” (Black Women’s Blueprint 2016) in which the authors offer the following salient reminder: “As Black Women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves ‘slut’ without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don’t have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned in our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations” (10).

Janice Irvine (2009: 71) explains that shame operates as a “direct mechanism of social control” and that “[s]hame has long been a key ingredient by which societies convey disapproval or punishment” (75). Shame does “identity work” and it does so in ways that are fundamentally gendered. This is a complex process through which the individual who is shamed is reinscribed into the norms of her surrounding context. Irvine elaborates that the “politics of shaming do more than simply denigrate the humanity of those being shamed- they also draw on existing social [and profoundly gendered] norms for their power and operate to strengthen those norms”. Shame thus works by perpetuating a vicious cycle and, because of the avoidance that is part of the dynamics of shame, these processes often remain invisible. Given the role it plays in reinforcing current gendered power structures, it seems obvious that feminist scholars and activists have a vested interest in confronting shame and its enormous “regulatory power” (Irvine 2009: 77). However, even as “[s]hame demands acknowledgment” (Probyn 2005: X11), these are challenging conversations to have, not least because of the phenomenon of secondary shame. Francis Broucek (1991: 14) describes this of feeling “shame about shame” as follows: “People tend to hide their shame from others and from themselves because they are ashamed of their vulnerability to the shame affect”. Fortunately we can draw on a long legacy of feminist thinkers who have gone before us and dared to tread into spaces and conversations that were both uncomfortable and difficult. Fiction offers an ideal environment from which this academic confrontation can take place in relative safety since I will be exploring how the gendered dynamics of shame play out on the psyches and bodies of female characters, rather than exposing women who have already suffered tremendously because of private or public shaming to further scrutiny. Rather than being merely an exercise in literary analysis, however, it will emerge that my research has implications for feminist and queer shame praxis, since I will demonstrate that “shame is neither an immutable mental state or a discrete essence residing within individual souls” but, rather, how it “is strategic and performative, a social script responsive to historically evolving social norms” (Irvine 2009: 77). Irvine recommends a reconsideration of shame and a greater focus on its banality since “[v]iewing shame as banal means acknowledging its historical contingency and making shame available for social analysis and political intervention”.

Women’s experiences of shame cannot be comprehensively considered without also exploring discursive shamings of female embodiment. J Brooks Bouson (2009: 1) argues that, “to be made of female flesh is to be well-schooled in the abjections and humiliations of embodiment”. She continues to explain that, “[c]onceived of as defective or deficient from male norms and as potentially diseased, women have long been embodiments of shame ... and, indeed, the female socialization process can be viewed as a prolonged immersion in shame”. Marilyn Mason (1992: 175) makes a

similar point when she calls for greater attention to women's socialisation, which she regards as the "ever-present shaper and perpetuator of women's shame". In *Valsrivier*, the reader catches glimpses of how women's socialization in shame operates even as the characters' main concerns are with the intimate and larger political destruction that apartheid is leaving in its wake. From a feminist perspective in which any distinction between private and public spheres is artificial, shame is as much a political phenomenon and it is in as urgent need of political intervention as the racist injustices that are described in the text. The narrator, Dominique, recounts her physical entrance into adolescence in a way that foregrounds an acute sense of shame. She notes how she wore tight fitting vests under her school uniform to hide her growing breasts and stole one of her father's shaving blades to get rid of her pubic hair (65). She admits to sometimes wishing that she could rather die if growing up was to be so humiliating (65). A close reading, however, reveals that what she is finding so humiliating is not the process of becoming an adult, but the manifestations of developing a female body. This is quite a profound observation that is not explored much further in the text but the literary critic should ask herself why a young woman would, without much question, articulate that death is a sentence preferable to inhabiting a female body. This is a young woman who is represented as having a fairly happy, so-called normal childhood with a loving family, yet she must have received the messages of the shamefulness of being female from somewhere and these messages had to have come across loudly and clearly enough for her to feel shame so strongly that she would rather die than face a lifetime of it.⁵ In keeping with my commitment to intersectional feminist analysis,⁶ it is important to note at this point that I refer to her

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5. Like gender, shame is a social construction. Simone de Beauvoir's (1997 [1949]) famous dictum that one becomes a woman rather than being born one is apposite here. Shame is also something that women are inducted into and trained in. These messages range from those received from teachers and the church, as explored on page 13 of this article, to those emanating from family friends, as revealed in the comments Dominique's mother shares about her friend's husband on page 19 of this article.
 6. According to Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (2010: 147-148) intersectionality has "become a core concept of feminist theorizing" and it "conveys the sense that individual identity and our social life are both shaped by multiple, overlapping, and contradictory systems of power that operate simultaneously". Thornton-Dill, McLaughlin and Nieves (2007: 629) explain that an inter-sectional feminist theoretical framework "locates its analysis within systems of ideological, political, and economic power as they are shaped by historical patterns of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity and age". Over the course of this article, it clearly emerges that all these systems of power and historically constituted markers of difference contribute to shaping the life experiences of the characters.

childhood as “so-called normal” in obvious recognition that all situations in apartheid South Africa could merely be approximations of normality within a larger context that was perverted and rotten to the core. From the very beginning of the text, the author repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to the racial inequalities and violence that infuse every part of this society. In addition to the deferential terms with which adult black people address white children, Dominique describes an incident where she has to collect an order from a local shop for her mother. She is assisted immediately in the whites-only section and she recalls how she felt embarrassed⁷ amongst all the black men who were waiting in the “non-white” queue ahead of her (18).⁸

Even though Dominique’s family is represented as liberal white Afrikaners and despite their disdain for the ruling nationalist politicians, they call to mind Antjie Krog’s well-known ruminations on the place of Afrikaners in South Africa in her celebrated *Country of my Skull*, another text which, like *Valsrivier*, melds fact, fiction and memory and thus defies easy genre classification. Of her commonality with Afrikaners, Krog (1988: 96) says: “What I have in common with them is a culture- and part of that culture over decades hatched the [apartheid] abominations for which they are responsible”.⁹ For the purposes of this article, my focus is on how the

7. In the original Afrikaans edition, Dominique’s character says “Ek kry skaam ...” (18). This can most directly be translated as feeling embarrassed but “skaam” can also be translated as “shame”, depending on the context in which the word is used. As with guilt and shame, embarrassment and shame are related emotions. Shame can be regarded as the “master emotion” (Mason 1992: 175) while Brooks Bouson (2009: 6) identifies embarrassment as one of shame’s “related feeling states”, along with “chagrin, mortification, lowered self-esteem, disgrace and humiliation”.
8. Throughout the text, references to such inequalities crop up, with or without comment, but they make it clear that the lives of this white family can never be separated from the discursive, structural and physical violence that their black neighbours are experiencing daily. For instance, Dominique notes that a black person must be practically dead before they are granted access to medical care from a white doctor (19). The extent to which the apartheid system was propped up by a form of Afrikaner nationalism that was distinctly gendered has been well documented by scholars. A typical justification for the white violence is articulated by one character when he tells Dominique that he is fighting to protect white South Africa, specifically white women and children (175).
9. Interestingly, during a brief scene in *Valsrivier*, the Botha family visits Antjie Krog at the farm Middenspruit because Paul had shown some talent in writing and their mother arranges the visit to encourage this pursuit (85-86). When recalling this visit, Dominique mostly refers to Krog as “the poet” (85). She is in awe (86) but the visit was arranged for her brother and she plays outside while Paul and her parents have tea with Krog. It turns out,

gendered experiences of the female characters are always shaped by their racial and classed position and, in this regard, Dominique finds that the racialised nature of poverty in her community means that, however sympathetic and kind the black workers on the farm are to her first period, this is an aspect of womanhood that they are forced to negotiate quite differently. She notes that the farm women used left over pieces of cloth which they would wash and re use since they were unable to afford sanitary products (56). Women's menstruation and entrance into adolescence are overdetermined topics that offer rich insights into how the gendered politics of shame operate on the bodies and psyches of individual female characters in the text.

Although Magdaleen, the black woman who works in their home, attempts to comfort Dominique when she gets her first period by bringing her a hot water bottle and hot milk, the differences in their class and racial positions mean that the connection between them is always already compromised and constrained (56). Debbie Fallon (2013: 321) explains that "the discourse of shame is one of the most insidious means by which women come to recognize, regulate and control themselves through their bodies" and "suggestions that common facts of women's lives [...], such as menstruation, are sites of shame that necessitate a 'constant mindfulness' [...] indicate that shame may be connected to the very meaning of adolescence for girls even before sexual relationships are considered" (322). Magdaleen clearly empathises with Dominique, but Probyn cautions against reading connections between women over menstruation in too straightforward or simplistic a manner. She explains this as follows: "Rather than drawing a purely causal connection – I am a woman; therefore I feel another woman's shame – we might find it more intriguing to think about how women tend to be brought up around women, in women's spaces In this atmosphere, talk is encouraged, and empathy ingrained" (Probyn 2005: 85). She then quotes the Aboriginal scholar, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, who insists that "The female body is not the site of empathy or unity between all women" (cited in Probyn 2005: 102). Significantly, the text does not represent Dominique as having any actual knowledge about how Magdaleen "manages" her own periods. The information about using left over pieces of cloth comes from her mother who, in turn, asked her friend Mary Dlamini about it. Mary is an English teacher and comes to the area when her husband applies for the position as headmaster of the new local school. She is thus a middle class black woman with whom Dominique's mother feels comfortable enough to have a conversation about how working class black women

though, that Dominique is the one who becomes a writer and who shares many of the thematic concerns of female embodiment and the formation of identity at the intersections of gender, race and class that have become hallmarks of Krog's writing in collections like *Down to My Last Skin* (2000), *Body Bereft* (2006) and *Kleur Kom Nooit Alleen Nie* (2000).

deal with their periods. Other than kindness from one woman to another, Magdaleen remains very much unconnected from Dominique and, in fact, she is othered to such an extent that the family refers to her as “mal Magdaleen” or crazy Magdaleen. Her otherness in reaction to menstruation only confirms her supposed craziness to Dominique. She resists shaming and the concealment that is associated with it by holding Dominique’s blood stained underwear in the air (55) and doing a little dance to celebrate Dominique’s first period. It is interesting to note that this minor character of Magdaleen displays other forms of atypical gender behaviour in various references in the text. If shame is used as a tool for exerting gendered discipline over women, Magdaleen’s resistance to the shaming of menstruation helps the reader understand why she is also the only character who seems to be less controlled by patriarchal structures. Dominique describes her as a woman who uses obscenities (54) and is rumoured to have beaten her now deceased husband’s girlfriends with a spade (54). She was eventually banished by her in-laws because the only way in which they could fit her refusal to conform to the gendered script of conventional femininity into their own narratives was to believe that she was capable of dark magical powers and that she put a curse on her husband (55).

In societies across the world, women are, in different ways, expected to “manage” their periods in order to contain the shamefulness of their leaking bodies. Johnston-Robledo, Sheffield, Voigt and Wilcox-Constantine (2007: 27) explain that menstruation and breastfeeding are regarded as a “private activities” that are “associated with shame and embarrassment” and “[c]ultural norms that dictate how these activities should be concealed, sanitized, and actively managed around”. When recalling her own experiences of menstruation, Inga Muscio (2002: 18) reflects on the disciplinary power of shame as she remembers how “[s]hame kept a close eye on [her] and all [her] girlfriends. It was shameful to bleed, to be seen bleeding, for blood-soaked paraphernalia to be visible on or about one’s person at any time, to speak of bleeding, to look like we were bleeding ...”. Because girls receive the message that “bleeding is a bad thing, an embarrassing thing, a secret thing”, they know that it is something that they “should hide and remain discreet about come hell or high water” (Muscio 2002: 19). Even though Dominique’s parents and Magdaleen try to reframe this shaming narrative to one in which her first period is cause for celebration, the underlying sense of shame is so potent that this is what most centrally characterises her experience. Their attempts at positivity are no match for the likes of Dominique’s teacher, Mr Louw, whose biblical references to women’s preordained bodily suffering and submission to men run through her mind as she watches her first menstrual blood trickling down her thighs (54). Although the construction of shame and its manifestations are always shaped by and embedded in very specific temporal and spatial locations, the shame that Dominique experiences in her

privileged white Afrikaner context, crops up in different ways for other women in very different spaces.¹⁰

The reader's only access to Magdaleen's experiences is via Dominique's reflections but a close feminist reading of this peripheral character suggests a woman who actively resists gendered oppression rather than someone who is crazy. In a passage where she features, the extent to which this resistance sets her apart from the rest of her community emerges along with another subtle reminder of the vast differences between women who are differently located in terms of race and class while also emphasising the casually careless privilege white men exert. The section starts with Dominique describing how young, self-assured white men who lack experience come to their district with a mandate of uplifting the rural poor (167). In a scathing tone she tells how they stand in homes with sink roofs preaching the gospel of needlework patters and mayonnaise recipes to submissive women with threadbare overcoats (167). They refuse to pay attention to Dominique's mother's pleas to focus on sharing more practical skills and, eventually, Dominique and her mother settle on a plan to teach the women embroidery since this will at least enable them to earn some money (167). As Dominique struggles with the stitching she notes how, in the olden days, girls used to stitch an entire trousseau by hand and that such work and dedication enabled them to, one day, make the beds in the homes of their spouses (168). These thoughts reveal her own disdain for the gendered restriction of women's life choices but later in the same section, she recognises that her challenges as a white privileged woman can scarcely be compared to those of the black working class women in the district who are the "beneficiaries" of this upliftment programme. The descriptions of the experiences with which the women come to the classes leave little doubt

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10. If one doubts the gendered disciplinary potential and real life impact of such shame, one should keep in mind the various non-governmental organisations that are now working to provide sanitary products to girls in rural African communities because research has found that girls miss a disproportionate number of school days when they have their periods because they cannot afford sanitary products and are thus unable to conceal their periods. As a result, they choose to stay home rather than go to school unable to hide or effectively manage their bleeding. This, in turn, has obvious consequences for girls' educational progress and their gender development and empowerment that shape the lives of not only the affected girls, but those of their children and larger communities. One such organisation, Dignity Dreams is located in Pretoria and explain the issue as follows: "... there are 2.1 million young girls, between the ages of 12 and 18 years that are living below the poverty line in South Africa, who have to resort to using old clothes, rags, newspapers, leaves, bark and grass because they cannot afford sanitary towels. Girls who cannot afford pads or tampons miss approximately five days of school a month, which amounts to 60 missed school days a year".

about the enduring impact of racial and socio-economic divisions. Dominique is at the classes in the first place because she was unhappy with her life in Cape Town and she is struggling with a general sense of dissatisfaction and unhappiness (167). She shops for her embroidery supplies in a little shop that imports the thread from France and packages it in elegant boxes with delicate tissue paper and gold labels (169). The women from the squatter camp, on the other hand, are at the classes hoping to find work and earn some money (169). When they return home to work on their embroidery they must do so by candlelight and they come to class with their cloth stained with blood and reeking of smoke (169). Dominique explains how they need to soak and wash these products so that they are free of any sign or smell of their producers' bodies or their embodied experience of racial, classed and gendered suffering and are thus regarded as clean and fresh enough to beautify the guest rooms of wealthy homes with manicured gardens (169).

Without any comment, the reader is told that one of the women who is part of the embroidery group, Elsie Setloka's, husband regularly beats her in the face and that these beatings leave her eyes swollen shut to such an extent that she is unable to see enough to embroider. When this happens, she borrows money from her anticipated future income to pay her daughter's school fees (169). These observations, which are completely unrelated to the text's main plot, offer the reader a poignant glimpse into the life of an abused woman who continues to exercise whatever limited agency she can to secure an education for her girl child.¹¹ Even with an education, it is, by this stage of the novel, clear that any girl will face an uphill battle in a society where misogyny is so ubiquitous that many women have internalised its oppressive dictates. Magdaleen's difference from other women in her community is strikingly represented in the women's reactions to Elsie's abuse. Martha, for instance, says that a man should beat his wife otherwise she will not behave (169). Magdaleen, however, is the only one who disagrees and her suggestion is to hit back (169). The idea of actively resisting and fighting back is an opinion that is so radical that it earns her the moniker of crazy Magdaleen. The notion of a woman behaving properly subtly reminds the reader how intricately constructions of femininity, sexuality and embodied shame are interwoven. Magdaleen's shamelessness is represented as extending to her unabashed celebration of female sexual development. When she learns of Dominique's first period, her impromptu dance of joy is accompanied by her placing her hand between Dominique's legs and telling her that now the man will come for this thing while she licks

11. Research confirms that the far reaching impact of an investment in girls' education cannot be overestimated. For instance, girls who finish high school "will be less likely to get HIV/AIDS or fall pregnant before they reach the age of 18 years, and will likely earn higher wages and successfully educate their own children" (Destiny Dreams).

her lips as if she just ate something tasty (55). This explicit articulation is represented as something lascivious and vulgar that makes Dominique even more uncomfortable than her mother's metaphoric explanation that a woman's body has its own seasons with the first blood signalling the end of Dominique's spring but the beginning of her summer (55). Akujobi Remi (2008: 1691) explains that "[m]adness as a condition is seen as a female sickness, a manifestation of excess female sexuality" and that madwomen are "stigmatized and made outsiders – the 'Other'". Scholars have done a great deal of work to unsettle conventional understandings of madness, particularly when it comes to women. Carol Long and Estelle Zietkiewicz (1998: 1) argue that "[p]ost-Structuralist accounts of madness (e.g. Foucault) illustrate that categories of madness are not fixed or objective, but rather participate in productive and exclusionary practices in the exercise of power". Like discourses of shame, discourses of madness thus function to discipline people and these processes are distinctly gendered. In the text, Magdaleen's relegation to the othered sphere of "madwomen" cannot be disentangled from her refusal to be shamed by either the blood leaking from a female body or her husband's marital infidelities. By excavating this marginalised, somewhat buried character from the text, the feminist literary critic can reveal a woman who, despite suffering multiple levels of gendered, racial and classed oppression, is in some ways much more empowered than Dominique whose very body and sexuality are infused by shame, which is revealed in the tell-tale blush at various points throughout the text (69, 74, 117, 155).

When Dominique's menses start, she experiences feeling dirty because of the blood, yet she is left with no doubt that this is a crucial part of her initiation into womanhood (57). Cathrine Norberg (2012: 162) argues that "a woman's shame is typically presented as sexually coded and produces responses like silence and a sense of physical shrinking". Even as Dominique literally tries to shrink her body by flattening her breasts, she attempts to cloak her menstruation in silence by making her mother promise not to tell anyone about it. She feels a profound sense of betrayal when her father arrives home that day with a bunch of flowers to congratulate her on becoming a woman and she bitterly reflects that she will never again tell her mother a secret. In this brief paragraph, the author deftly makes a number of significant points about how female shame and sexuality are social scripts that mutually reinforce one another while the dynamics of silencing add a further potentially toxic ingredient to an already pernicious mix.

In another section that refers to menstruation, the imbrication of a patriarchal sense of paternalistic control, sexuality, and embodied shame emerge in an interaction between Dominique and her brother Paul. The relationship with this sibling is represented as one of the most important in Dominique's life and the reader sees how Paul's clashes with apartheid structures eventually contribute to his suicide. This mostly sympathetic

character, however, is not above using his position as a white, heterosexual man to perpetuate Dominique's sense of shame and to exert a very subtle form of control over her. When Dominique receives complaints from a character called Greg about a subletting arrangement, Paul dismisses them by saying that Greg is probably having his period (193), thereby invoking the age old misogynist trope of menstruation as some hysteria inducing pathological condition that renders its "sufferers" incapable of rational thinking. That some of his words are clearly spoken in jest and are well meaning does not lessen their impact on his sister. When they are both going to boarding school, he tells Dominique that her older brother will watch out for her and then adds that she should be wary of the lesbians, for which he uses the terms "letties" that can most directly be translated as "lezzies" (69).

The myth that casts lesbian sexuality as predatory and a threat to unsuspecting heterosexual women is one that simply serves to perpetuate the heteronormative status quo in which women and their bodies remain available to be used at the discretion of heterosexual men. Paul's more liberal thoughts on sexuality, to which I refer later in the article, seemingly do not stretch far enough to consider women centred sexuality as anything other than some confused mix of a joke and a threat. With these words, he laughs and waves good bye but Dominique's reflections as she watches him leave reveal the layers of meaning concealed in this seemingly innocuous interchange. She describes herself blushing as he walks away and she notes that that word relates to pornography, which is an even worse topic to think about than menstruation (69). According to Probyn (2005: 4), the "tentacles of the blush, of blood rushing to the face, attest to the inner cringe [of shame]". She goes on to describe how blushing can "act as a metonym for the wider structures of social domination. Blushing stands in for everything that makes me ashamed, including the informative early experiences of class and gender. The blush tells of the sum total of all that has made me" (53). The mere mention of lesbians and menstruation, which are in her mind regarded as taboo topics, results in blushing because they are related to sexuality and female bodies and are thus discursively coded as shameful. It is hardly surprising that Dominique's interactions with boys follow the same trajectory and she finds a blush creeping up her neck when she chats to one of her brother's friends about a topic as ordinary as school subjects (74). When she asks her brother about oral sex, she is unable to use the word vagina and asks whether it is normal for people to kiss each other down there while pointing to her genitals. The entire conversation again leaves her blushing in the darkness of the bedroom they are sharing (117). At this stage, Dominique is still unable to articulate the source of her shame and discomfort about sexuality but she seems to know that it is gendered. Paul insists that if something makes her feel good and she likes it, she should enjoy it and he asks whether that is not what the body is for (118). Of course, he is making the mistake of assuming that there is something such as

“the body” (and the normative body is male, white, straight, privileged and able bodied) when there really are only very differently located bodies that are the sum totals of various markers of difference. Dominique knows that embodied experiences are always gendered and she answers his question by saying that she does not know but that it is different for girls since they are less free (118).

When Dominique’s father arrives with the flowers, the source of support that the mother daughter bond provided seems to be severed because Dominique’s mother did not honour her shamed secrecy and, in her later descriptions of sexual encounters, her sense of isolation makes it very clear that this separation from the mother is a great loss that will continue to reverberate throughout Dominique’s life. In her reflections, Dominique reveals how discourses of religion and medicine contribute to the sense that women’s sexually developed bodies should be associated with suffering and deficiency as she recalls verses from the bible (54) as well as observations about her mother’s friend. Her description of this friend is particularly revealing regarding the power of the pressures women face in terms of being shamed for being in the world in a female body. In the naïve diction of a young girl, Dominique notes that her mother has a very intelligent friend who has two doctoral degrees and a husband who insists that women’s bodies leak (55). The husband, it turns out, is a gynaecologist, which Dominique describes as medical specialisation which is dedicated to women’s deficiencies. The notion of the inherent defects of the leaking female body is theorised by Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies*. Grosz posits that

the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply a phallus but self-containment – not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order.

(1994: 203)

Grosz’s (1994: 203) argument that “women’s corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage” and the “association of femininity with contagion and disorder [as well as] the undecidability of the limits of the female body (particularly, but not only, with the onset of puberty and in the case of pregnancy)” are representational dynamics that result in “discursive links between female bodies” and “strong revulsion” and “deep-seated fear of absorption” (Murray 2015). When we read narratives that dare to expose the dynamics of shame, we need to ask ourselves what the implications are when “the source of a woman’s shame is her own body, its violability and secretiveness”, and when female sexuality is “so laden with negativity and ambivalence that it feels the twist of shame to its core” (Nurka 2012: 318).

The constant social and internalised surveillance and disciplining through which shame operates plays out on the female body and the resultant disempowerment is underestimated at the peril of gender justice advocates. In *Valsrivier*, Dominique reflects that her mother guards against the leaking of her body during pregnancy by regular visits to a gynaecologist to prevent the unravelling of stitches that are meant to contain a pregnancy that is in danger of premature labour (55). In her own early sexual experiences, the reader sees a young woman whose ability to consent is always already compromised by her early pubescent induction into embodied female shame. When a young man wants to kiss her, she reflects that she does not want to but she lets him go ahead regardless (161) and as he penetrates her on a mattress with stinking sheets, she merely notes that she does nothing to stop him (162) and that she closes her eyes. The entire encounter testifies to her unsuccessful attempt to negotiate the dynamics of shame rather than representing the experience of a woman who is able make empowered sexual decisions regarding her own body. Just how dismally her attempt fails is articulated towards the end of the text when her brother reveals the fact that she had sex and Dominique runs to her bed and cries and cries while reflecting in two stark, parallel sentences: I feel bad. I *am* bad (196). This last description succinctly represents Irvine's (2009: 74) contention that "[s]hame does identity work". In other words, shame does not simply speak to what one has experienced, it speaks directly to what or who one is. The power of shame is thus all the greater and, as this paper illustrates, this power is fundamentally gendered.

In the classic text of second wave feminism, *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer (1999[1970]) argues that "women must learn how to question the most basic assumptions about feminine normality in order to reopen the possibilities for development which has been successively locked off by conditioning". This is an on-going project and, if women are to reach their full potential, we need to include for deconstruction and critique perceived notions about the shamefulness of the female body. Often debilitating feelings of shame do not crystallise in a vacuum. Rather, they are shaped by and serve to reinforce existing assumptions about normative identities and these assumptions are, in turn, raced, classed and gendered. For a female character such as Dominique, her body is the locus at which she needs to negotiate the disciplinary power of shame as she tries to make her way in the world. Probyn (2005: xvi) reminds us that the "body is a repository for the social and cultural rules that, consciously or not, we take on". Shame and its meanings are not immutable, however. Probyn (2005: xvi) insists that, "[w]hile shaming people is a powerful and potentially destructive and violent way to patrol the borders of normality ...", it can also be a positive force but this "all depends on the structure of the society and how it uses shaming". It is thus crucial that feminist critics heed the call, as made by Irvine earlier in the article, to move beyond the cringe and desire

to turn away so that we can turn the scholarly gaze on shame in order to expose it to analysis. The novel's final chapter sees Dominique and her parents organising Paul's funeral and, even in this extremely emotional time, she observes how her mother's concern with "proper" behaviour takes precedence as she insists on a cheap casket in order to appear thrifty and to set an example to the farm workers regarding appropriate expenditure of resources (200). She also notes that she will not cry at the funeral because she wants Paul to be proud of her (200). These observations are fundamentally racialized and gendered and Dominique recounts them without comment. The novel, however, ends with an italicized prose poem in which she describes her mother's life as a living death (204). In this same poem, she notes how she feels as if she had been gutted open like a live fish by a man with a chopping chisel and she refers to her scars (203). Although this poem is addressed to Paul and speaks most directly to her attempt to come to terms with his death, her experiences in the preceding part of the text can leave little doubt that the violent nature of this image of a vulnerable, brutalised and scarred woman has also been shaped by the gendered experiences of shame that characterised her life course. This article has entered into the uncomfortable and challenging conversation about gendered shame by considering how a female literary character experiences shame at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality and class. Further fruitful avenues of research could continue this conversation by broadening it to include explorations of how other contemporary South African woman writers represent the dynamics of female shame in their work.

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