

Religious Mapping, Epistemic Risk and Archival Adventure in Athambile Masola's *Ilifa*

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I offer a feminist reading of Athambile Masola's award-winning debut collection of poetry, *Ilifa*, focusing on her use of religious imagination. I demonstrate how Masola's repeated use of religious metaphor, language, and Christian location illuminates more than aspects of religious community, piety, and belonging, important though these are. In *Ilifa*, specific appearances of religious language, as well as the rhetorical uses to which religious imagery and the disruption of Christian iconography are put, reveal the poet's understanding of the making of transgenerational southern African feminist publicness. Her deployment of Christian vocabularies amplifies multigenerational African (women's) contribution to (South) Africa's intellectual and creative archives. While her religious references are not confined to Christianity, I limit myself to Biblical references to better tend to the intersections of feminist mapping, epistemic risk, and the poet's engagement with two centuries of South African isiXhosa literary archive in print. Masola references these intellectual entries into publicness to negotiate her own admission into literary public life. I surface the context and conceptual landscapes of Masola's own poetic project.

KEYWORDS

Religious imagination, literary archive, isiXhosa literature, African feminism, South African women's poetry

Introduction

For black women, especially, the story writes an entry into the world of creativity, of (re)writing the self, and of authoring alternative visions of the world.¹

To use language with awareness that we are de-forming it, deliberately changing its meaning by changing its context, is an exercise fraught with danger. We may be misunderstood by those with whom we agree because they do not understand the new contexts in which we use old words. Or we may evoke agreement

¹ Barbara Boswell, *And Wrote My Story Anyway: Black South African Women's Novels as Feminism* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press 2020), 7.

from those with whom we disagree, because they too have not understood the new context which de-forms, re-forms, and transforms the meanings of the words we use. But this is a risk we take in attempting to make ourselves understood. Perhaps there is no other way to create new language.²

Whereas all deliberate products of the imagination are an encounter with risk, additional danger attaches to a poetry project in which a contemporary African feminist attempts to write herself into a vanishing tradition. When her polyvalent project also seeks to arrest this disappearance, she is obliged to do more than problematize erasure. Athambile Masola's debut collection of poetry is one such project and, in what follows, I illuminate her uses of Christian vocabularies to amplify multigenerational African³ (women's) contribution to South Africa's intellectual and creative archives. I do so as a way of reading the context and conceptual landscapes in which to locate Masola's own poetic project. Subsequently, I show how Masola's Christian religious imagination enacts her place in a tradition of African literature and literacy, inaugurated by the first generation of missionary educated Africans over two centuries ago. In other words, what she puts to use in her feminist and religious imagination is recourse to the rhetorical and linguistic repertoires of the literary traditions within which *Ilifa* roots. Finally, I outline the subversive uses through which Masola extends religious imagination to feminist imaginative ends.

Historically,

in Southern Africa, it was with the arrival of the printing press in the 1800s that educated, Christianised, African men emerged as writers of religious texts to enable the Christian missionary conversion of

² Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (New York: Beacon, 1995), iii.

³ In this essay, I sometimes refer to Xhosa, Black, and African women's scripted (literary) traditions interchangeably in relation to specific phenomena under discussion. This is not a universal conflation but a recognition of how Masola's text engages aspects of all three, concerned as it is with multiple entries (and erasures) of Xhosa, Black, and African women's public contributions in the political, creative, and intellectual arenas. The interchangeable application is only when what is discussed applies to all three.

Africans. Later, with the introduction of newspapers, there was an alternative to the religious texts.⁴

Literacy, literary expression in print and Christianity have enmeshed histories.⁵ Religious references and lenses were an integral part of how missionary-educated, literary Africans – among whom was Soga, the first ordained Christian minister in southern Africa – negotiated their place in the world and asserted authority from which to speak as literate and literary agents.⁶ Such Christian *public* articulation, through the pulpit and the published word, could easily co-exist with vibrant Xhosa identity. Analyzing the first century of written Xhosa literature, focusing on Soga (1929–1871), SEK Mqhayi (1875–1945), and Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, Nxasana argues that they

believed that Africans had to incorporate into their very identity both education and Christianity: importantly not only to make sense of the African past and present condition but in order to have hope for the future and for Africa’s renewal.⁷

Masola’s deployment of religious imagination is “an archeological exercise” that unearths muted aspects of the past while making different futures possible.⁸ For the pioneers like Soga, Mqhayi, Mqgqwetho, as well as Masola publishing two centuries later, multiple imaginative universes offer productive literary resources.

⁴ Athambile Masola, “Journeying Home, Exile and Transnationalism in Noni Jabavu and Sisonke Msimang’s Memoirs” (PhD diss., Rhodes University, 2020), 14.

⁵ Sydney Zanemvula Zotwana. “Literature Between Two Worlds: The First Fifty Years of the Xhosa Novel and Poetry” (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 1993); Thulani Litha Nxasana. “The Ambivalent Engagement with Christianity in the Writing of Nineteenth- and early Twentieth-Century Africans in the Eastern Cape”, (MA diss., Rhodes University, 2009); Pamela Maseko. “The Intellectualisation of African Languages with Particular reference to isiXhosa”, (PhD diss., Rhodes University, 2011).

⁶ Gareth Griffiths, “Conversion, Identity, Resistance in Colonial and Postcolonial Spaces: The Writings of Tiyo Soga, 1829-1871,” in *The Future of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Chantal Zabus (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 69-84. See also Duncan Brown. “My Pen is the Tongue of a Skilful Poet: African-Christian Identity and the Poetry of Nontsizi Mqgqwetho,” *English in Africa* 31, no. 1 (2004): 23 – 58.

⁷ Nxasana, “The Ambivalent Engagement,” 2.

⁸ Thulani Nxasana, “The Journey of the African as Missionary: The Journals and Selected Writings of the Reverend Tiyo Soga,” *English in Africa* 38, no. 2 (2011): 61.

Masola's recourse to "religious imagination" anchors itself in generations of African literary and intellectual work, here in isiXhosa, wherein Africans are referenced not "as subjects" but "as masters in the production of knowledge".⁹ Paula Cooley's "religious imagination" akin to Nxasana's enabling Christian idiom¹⁰ is productive lens. Like her,

[b]y 'religious imagination' I mean imagination whose creativity is governed by and expressed through religious imagery; a person who exercises religious imagination may or may not be conventionally pious in relation to religious institutions.¹¹

Reading Masola's work through the lens of religious imagination lays bare the significance of missionary-educated Africans whose Christian connections were unapologetic, on the one hand, as well as their treatment of Christian text as literary resource, on the other.

Ilifa (2021) is a highly intertextual collection of fifty-one poems thematically divided into three sections: Umyalelo wentombi (On Feminine Instruction), Uthando (Love) and Apha (This Place). The collection's title refers to both direct inheritance and legacy creation, highlighting the poet's location in an established isiXhosa literary tradition *and* her own contribution to a (future) legacy, a space clearing.

The two epigraphs to this paper come from feminist literary scholars Barbara Boswell and Carol Christ, both of whom approach women's literary engagements with taken-for-granted archives seriously. Boswell's book *And Wrote My Story Anyway: Black South African Women's Novels as Feminism* is both "a history of black South African women's fiction"¹² in English and "takes as a point of departure, the fundamental power of stories to shape and transform lives".¹³ Boswell underscores how literary imagination creates more than the explicit project between the covers of a book, but a tangible imaginative world where the existence of a future novelist and essayist

⁹ Pamela Maseko, "Exploring the History of the Writing of isiXhosa: An Organic or an Engineered Process?," *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017): 81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18186874.2017.1400218>.

¹⁰ Nxasana, "The Ambivalent Engagement", 92.

¹¹ Paula M. Cooley, *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis*. (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

¹² Boswell, *And Wrote My Story*, xiv.

¹³ Boswell, *And Wrote My Story*, 1.

(Boswell) or poet and essayist (Masola) is possible. In other words, Boswell teaches us that some creative texts inaugurate literary traditions and specific writer subjectivities. For Boswell, it is an encounter with Bessie Head's writing about Cape Town, Boswell's hometown, that opens the possibility of Boswell's own future writing career when a younger Boswell begins to think about her context as worthy of literary signification. Furthermore, Boswell establishes that Head generates future Black women's creative universes by centering creative women protagonists across her novels.

I use Carol Christ's citation to foreground the slipperiness of language in the context of creative projects that seek to intervene in the intersections of language and inherited religious rhetorical strategies. For Christ, space clearing demands what Guyanese-British author, Grace Nichols, calls "a battle with language"¹⁴: a necessary risk at the seams of legibility. Since imaginative language relies on recognition and newness, it is haunted by misreading. For example, it is possible to misrecognize Masola's project as merely partaking in religious poetic tradition, wrestling with piety and meaning. Equally likely is a misreading of *Ilifa* as only a feminist literary archival endeavor to surface an existing, albeit obscured, century of women authored literature in isiXhosa so that she may take her place as heiress.

Importantly,

[b]ecause the activity of imagining and the objects imagined depend on pre-existing social and material conditions, and because the objects are further shareable with others through visual, verbal, and audial symbol systems, imagination, both as activity and as condition, is necessarily social, however individually exercised.¹⁵

To work in a literary tradition requires deployment of its literary strategies, techniques and gestures. Masola's repeated use of religious metaphor, language, and Christian location illuminates more than aspects of religious community, piety, and belonging, important though these are. In *Ilifa*, specific appearances of religious language, as well as the rhetorical uses to which religious imagery and the disruption of Christian iconography are put, reveal

¹⁴ Grace Nichols, "The Battle with Language," in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Wellesley, MA: Calaloux, 1990), 283-289.

¹⁵ Cooley, *Religious Imagination*, 4-5.

the poet's understanding of the making of transgenerational, southern-African feminist public articulation. In her study of Black women publishing in 1930s South Africa, Corrine Sandwith establishes that, normative Western print genres were not simply reproduced in African spaces but rather became sites of improvisation, refashioning, and indigenization thus opening the way for the development of alternative print cultural practices and a female-centred African modernity, which sought to refashion the cultural dominant to new and more emancipatory ends.¹⁶

The tradition in which Masola writes and the linked one Sandwith studies are distinctive. Masola's deployment of Christian vocabularies amplifies multigenerational African (women's) contribution to (South) Africa's intellectual and creative archives since "in literary works, the structures of ideology are not only thematic but disperse in every element of the work",¹⁷ which becomes even more evident in my discussion of Masola's Preface later in this article.

Contesting claim to a legacy

At the Braamfontein, Johannesburg launch of the collection held at the independent bookshop, The Commune, Masola's interlocutor and feminist activist, Kwezilomso Mbandazayo, highlighted that the title *Ilifa* is at once apt and provocative. Mbandazayo outlined how "*ukubanga ilifa*" (to lay contesting claim to inheritance) is sacrilegious in Xhosa cosmology. Masola's title choice is disruptive in a manner resonant of the artistic tradition *iimbongi*. Technically (oral) poets, although sometimes misleadingly called "praise poets", *iimbongi* are allowed to speak about the unspeakable, to have complete free reign over the word and what they create and critique with it; that is, poetic license. It is their entitlement. Historian Nomathamsanqa Tisani is especially instructive on this matter when she writes of Mqgwetho as follows:

¹⁶ Corrine Sandwith. "Progressing with a Vengeance: The Woman Reader/Writer in the African Press," in *Comparative Print Culture: A Study of Alternative Literary Modernities*, ed. Rasoul Aliakbari (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 143.

¹⁷ Diah Ariami Arimbi, *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 18.

[w]ithin African knowledge systems there are provisions for “transgression” of assumed social boundaries. Those with special gifts and abilities are given recognition and are accorded space to be. In many ways Mgqwetho is a prime example of a gifted woman . . . A proper analysis of Mgqwetho as *imbongi*, historian, preacher and public commentator must be undertaken within an understanding of a Xhosa woman whose gifts are acknowledged by editors, and the general reading public. Mgqwetho’s acceptance and recognition by the African community can be deduced from the fact that for about ten years she enjoys the ‘poetic license’ of *imbongi* as she tackles contentious topics, like drunkenness, immorality, religiosity, licentiousness and even cowardice.¹⁸

Masola goes beyond taking poetic license. She invests “*ilifa*” with generative conceptual capacity not conventionally associated with that word. In her Preface (“*Intshayelelo*”), the poet declares, “*Le mibongo ndiyibhalela intombi endakhe ndayiyoy*”, which loosely translates to “I write these poems to/for the girl I once was”.

Traces of this girl are everywhere in the poems that follow. She is a girl with multiple relationships to self: socialized into proper, religious heterosexuality in the opening poem “*Umyalelo wentombi*”, unable to recite her full ancestral lineage poem, or ‘clan names’ in “Coconut”, caught between the demands of a private school education that on the one hand would have her make sense of her life only through the lenses of her English speaking life, and on the other, a mother who refused to surrender her to this world. This “girl” appears as a persona with multiple ways of surviving in the shadow of violence in “*Wakrazulwa*”, and in numerous poems, navigates mutating senses of self in private and public, including in the terrain of sexuality and intimacy.

The Preface (“*Intshayelelo*”) is book ended with quotations from the poet Nontsizi Mgqwetho and novelist Victoria Swaartbooi. Taken from work published in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, respectively, these literary invocations reveal as much about Masola’s

¹⁸ Nomathamsanqa Tisani. “Review of *The Nation’s Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho* edited by Jeff Opland,” *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 34 (2008), 322.

approach to women's literary traditions, language, and publicness as do her own words sandwiched between Mqgwetho's and Swaartbooi's.

These two early twentieth century authors writing in isiXhosa function for Masola, akin to how Bessie Head's imaginative energy is outlined in Boswell's own Preface: as a literary energy that enables "a space into which I could enter, dream different dreams, and imagine myself as a creative being".¹⁹

Mqgwetho, "a visionary whose points of reference were entirely biblical, and yet her poetry consistently addressed contemporary social and political issues",²⁰ is currently the best-known Xhosa woman poet of her time following the republication of a collection of her poems in 2007 with translations by the leading scholars of Xhosa literature, Jeff Opland and Abner Nyamende, and pre-eminent literary translator and feminist intellectual, Phyllis Ntantala. Until then, Mqgwetho had fallen into obscurity despite her stature in her day. In that volume, Opland writes:

the poetry she left behind claims for her the status of *one of the greatest literary artists ever to write in Xhosa*, an anguished voice of an urban woman confronting male dominance, ineffective leadership, black apathy, white malice and indifference, economic exploitation and a tragic history of nineteenth-century territorial and cultural dispossession.²¹ (Emphasis mine)

Opland's evaluation of Mqgwetho rhymes with her status as a historic and thematic reference point in Masola's own poetic debut. Swaartbooi's 1934 novel, *uMandisa*, is often credited as either the first novel by an African woman, or the first feminist novel by an African woman.²² Margaret Daymond et al.²³ and Barbara Boswell's reminders of the out-of-print novels,

¹⁹ Boswell, *And Wrote My Story*, xii.

²⁰ Nxasana, "The Ambivalent Engagement," 95.

²¹ Jeff Opland, ed., *The Nation's Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mqgwetho*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007), xiv.

²² Mfusi Cynthia Hoza, "Patriarchal Self-Inflated Pompous Image Deflated: A Feminist Reading of Swaartbooi's *UMandisa*," *South African Journal of African Languages* 32, no. 1 (2012): 63 – 70.

²³ Margaret Daymond, Dorothy Driver, Sheila Meintjes, Leloba Molema, Chiedza Musengezi, Margie Orford and Nobantu Rasebotsa, eds., *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, Vol. 1 (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2003).

*Intyatyambo Yomzi*²⁴ and *UThandiwe wakwaGcaleka*²⁵ by Lilith Kakaza point to a more complex story of firsts.

The epigraph from Mqgqwetho, taken from the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* sometime in 1924, reads, “*Asinakuthula umhlaba ubolile*” (italics in original), translating to “We dare not keep still while the land decays” or, more poetically, also as “We have no peace in a world in disarray”. There are obvious overlaps in the two meanings in both the collective voicing of psychic and material discontent is evident. The literal meaning exhorts the listener to intervene in the crisis whereas the second engenders curiosity.

A much longer excerpt is taken from Swaartbooi:

Zintombi zeAfrika qhubani eyenu indima ekubuyiseni nasekuyinyuseni iAfrika, elilizwe lokuzalwa kwenu. Xa siyenzileyo ke indima yethu ngabanye, singahlali sisonge izandla, kofaneleka xa sithi, 'Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika, makuphakame uphondo lwayo!

(Women of Africa, take charge in restoring and elevating Africa, this land of your birth. As protagonists, rather than sitting with folded arms, we appropriately declare, “God save Africa, let its horn [glory] sound.”)²⁶

The excerpt from Swaartbooi’s novel provides a clearer sense of the intended tone than Mqgqwetho’s, although Swaartbooi’s addressed audience is a fictional one and Mqgqwetho’s a historic one. Both assume direct address where writing is intervention and call to action.

Masola’s chosen gestures of self-introduction surface a variety of discourses: she draws a direct line between herself as a writer and the literary traditions of Mqgqwetho and Swaartbooi. To enter an existing literary tradition is to be in conversation with its strategies and thematic concerns, tending to its irritations and modes of address. Given the omission of Mqgqwetho’s and Swaartbooi’s work from the canon, as well as pervasive accusations of African feminism’s newness, Masola’s gesture matters. It establishes her in a long line of African feminist literary presence.

²⁴ Lilith Kakaza. *Intyatyambo Yomzi* (Alice: Lovedale Press, 1913).

²⁵ Lilith Kakaza. *UThandiwe wakwaGcaleka* (Alice: Lovedale Press, 1914).

²⁶ Victoria Swaartbooi, *UMandisa* (Alice: Lovedale Press, 1934).

Such emphasis on transgenerational women's literary presence confronts the ongoing erasure of Black women's historic and contemporary intellectual and creative energies in the (re)making of South Africa, which Simamkele Dlakavu writes, "we have witnessed . . . in school curricula, our media, history books, museums and heritage sites".²⁷ Dlakavu highlights the deliberate institutionalized unremembering. Mqgwetho and Swaartbooi function as literary reference points for Masola's own project, reaching into the past and the present to highlight the multifaceted, multigenerational sites within which African women have "engaged in activist-intellectual projects to build a more humane society through our time, voices (written, signed, made verbal), labour, physical presence, ideas and political strategies to build" different senses of possibility.²⁸

Introducing herself as a poet by claiming a long lineage of women authors in the same language of her poetry also highlights the world-making effects of women's creative energies in the manner articulated by Dlakavu above. Whereas the missionary-educated, and indeed, the Xhosa literary tradition is often articulated in reference to the great men from this tradition, their women peer pioneers are seldom accorded the same attention. Mqgwetho and Swaartbooi are not merely symbolically resurrected in Masola's poetry collection, they are part of the path clearing way to the past which makes Masola's project possible, as well as how she charts future possibilities as a strategy against unremembering. More than forgetting, "unremembering is a calculated act of exclusion and erasure"²⁹ and partakes in "a much wider field than simply collection, recollection and recalling and is itself a commentary on the (dis)junctures between memory and history".³⁰

Writing shortly after Mqgwetho's re-introduction in 2007, Duncan Brown is particularly illustrative of the *unremembering*:

²⁷ Simamkele Dlakavu, "'Say No, Black Woman': *The Giant is Falling* and the Erasure of Black Women in South Africa," *Agenda* 31, no. 3-4 (2017), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2017.1391615>.

²⁸ Dlakavu, "'Say No, Black Woman'," 5.

²⁹ Pumla Dineo Gqola, *What is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), 8.

³⁰ Gqola, *What is Slavery*, 8.

Nontsizi Mgwetho was a Xhosa poet who published between 1920 and 1929 in the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* (The People's Spokesman[sic]). She is one of the first black women poets to have produced a substantial body of work: 95 poems and three articles appeared between 23 October 1920 and 4 September 1926; and two more poems appeared after a two-year gap on 22 December 1928 and 5 January 1929. Jeff Opland and I have been the only critics to write on Mgwetho (besides a brief discussion by Deborah Gaitskell in an article on women's prayer groups (1997), and even briefer mentions in Hofmeyr (2004) and Daymond *et al* (2003). Her work was discovered by Opland in its archival locations, and edited and translated by him (with assistance from Phyllis Ntantala and Abner Nyamende) in the recently published volume *The Nation's Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgwetho* (2007).³¹

In place of unremembering, Masola invokes a collective memory and a century-long Black South African feminist literary tradition. These historic women writers held significant stature during their time and were considered major writers. Writing in the press, they were not unicorns or peerless, even if "[t]he prominent writers were mostly men from the mid-1800s until the 1970s in South Africa".³² Though a minority, a significant number of women wrote in the same avenues. Indeed,

[w]hile there were women writing at the same time, especially in newspapers in the late 1800s (Daisy Makiwane began working at *Imvo Zabantsundu* after 1888) and early 1900s, such as Adelaide Tantsi and Ellen Pumla Ngozwana, most of their writing has not been preserved in the same way as male writing.³³

They have been obscured through critical neglect that has led to their being disappeared from public view and exclusion from the canon. Through modes of reception and memorialization (or erasure),

different expectation created for would-be elite men and women had consequences for the kind of intellectual cultures women developed

³¹ Duncan Brown, "Modern Prophets, Produce a New Bible': Christianity, Africanness and the Poetry of Nontsizi Mgwetho," *Current Writing* 20, no.2 (2008), 78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1013929X.2008.9678302>.

³² Masola, "Journeying Home," 14.

³³ Masola, "Journeying Home," 14.

later for themselves in the 20th century. The gendered nature of intellectual and public work (such as speeches and letter writing) allowed men to be men of politics, educational leaders, clergymen, writers etc.³⁴

The valuation of these kinds of writing was further bolstered by patriarchal evaluation even when women produced standalone literary texts.

Religious imagination as literary device

The deployment of religious imagination is an intertextual one because the “source domain is religion and culture-specific”.³⁵ There is an activation of background knowledge – recognition of Christian idiom and reference that is then transformed as part of a repertoire to comment on a situation that is apart from the religious. This creates new meaning and positions the newly crafted perspective as one of importance.

In what follows, I analyze specific poems in *Ilifa*, mapping three specific uses of religious imagination by Athambile Masola: to construct the overlapping of Christian consciousness and public space taking; to contest religious patriarchal collusion in the making of femininity; and, to assert belonging in a complex literary tradition with established intertextual repertoires though which importance and gravity are established.

Christian references are found in numerous poems in this collection across the three sections. Poems like “*lizwi elidala*” create a refrain through which religious consciousness permeates otherwise mundane activities, reinforcing this sense in which Christian intertextuality is part of the construction of a subjectivity and a sense of public articulation. In this poem, for example, each of the three stanzas has a speaker whose concern is interspaced with an italicized religious reminder, “*Ekuqalekeni ube ekho uLizwi*” (In the beginning was the Word/Voice): the world was created through words (or the uttering of the words) because “*ilizwi*” is both “word” and “voice”. Each speaker’s worried commentary focuses on their child’s or grandchild’s adventures in the world: knee scrapes, reckless life choices, low self-esteem in transactional relationships, and other life challenges.

³⁴ Masola, “Journeying Home,” 16.

³⁵ Arimbi, *Reading Contemporary Indonesian*, 13.

Modimo Ntate	God the Father
Modimo Mora	God the Son
Modimo Moeoa O halalelang	God the Holy Spirit
Ntate rona yamahodimong	Our Father who art in Heaven
O Morena wa marena	You are Lord of Lords
Namhlanje siza kuwe	Today we come to You
Sicela uvikele ubumnyama	Keep the darkness at bay
Xa sibheka ePitoli.	As we head to Pretoria.
Sithandazela iingane zethu	We pray for our children
Imindeni yethu	Our families
Ngale mini ibaluleke kangaka.	On this very important day.
Hamba nathi njengoba wahamba	Go with us as with the Israelites in the
namaSirayeli entlango.	desert
Lo msebenzi wokubhukuqa umbuso	This business of overthrowing the
ngumsebenzi esiwuthwaliswe	state
nguwe Moya oyingcwele	is one you have tasked us with, Holy
	Spirit.
Dira ho nna diqhalane	Scatter my enemies
Ke hloletswe ke wena	You will conquer for me
Le matla, Le khanya ka ho safeleng	The power, and everlasting Light
Amen!	Amen!

Here, as in the poems discussed above, faith and religious language are part of the construction of a public sensibility that includes ways of re-making the world, contesting dominance, and the unapologetic and hopeful creation of a better future across the personal-political axis. Strikingly, the prayer seamlessly moves through different South African languages, implying both different speakers and reminds the reader of the prayer's status as a collective, rather than individual appeal.

The phrase "*oomama bomthandazo*" is not commonly understood to carry political significance. Despite established radical histories and longstanding traditions of political positions taken by some religious communities against apartheid, *oomama bomthandazo* are framed in ways consistent with coalescing patriarchal nationalist and popular narratives of Black women as self-sacrificial, pious, and submissive mothers.³⁹ Masola's reference is

³⁹ Substantive bodies of academic critique exist on this trope of the long suffering, stoic mother of (South African) nationalism. In South Africa, the most voluminous feminist

unlike this collective memory. Instead, her project rhymes with another feminist articulation, that of political scientist Lihle Ngcobozi's reading of the rich tapestries of Manyano women's social, economic, and political cultures and the century-long traditions in South Africa as constructing a counterpublic set of narratives to citizenship. Ngcobozi's reading of Manyano women complicates longstanding intersections between women's religious and political organization. Whereas "oomama bomthandazo" are broader than and inclusive of Manyano women,⁴⁰ Ngcobozi's arguments are relevant for Masola's poetic representation here.

In Masola's poem, the continuity of prayer as it moves through different languages maps space, pointing to the many towns, villages, and cities the marchers travelled from. Religious imagination is part of the shared vocabulary of members the oldest Black women's organisation, its role in

writing against this rendition has been in response to the TRC re-inscription of women's political passivity and the reinforcement of the "mother Africa" trope, cf. Sheila Meintjes and Beth Goldblatt, "Gender and the truth and reconciliation commission," *A Submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Witwatersrand, South Africa: University of Witwatersrand* (1996); Nthabiseng Motsemme. "The meanings in silence: Memory," *Rhodes Journalism Review*, no. 24 (2004): 4-5 and "The mute always speak: On women's silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Current Sociology* 52, no. 5 (2004): 909-932; Zoë Wicomb, "Five Afrikaner texts and the rehabilitation of whiteness," *Social identities* 4, no. 3 (1998): 363-383. For feminist critiques of representations of the stoic Black mother in cultural texts and popular imaginaries, cf. Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African literature and the politics of gender* (London: Routledge, 1994); Susan Z. Andrade, "Rewriting history, motherhood, and rebellion: Naming an African women's literary tradition," *Research in African Literatures* 21, no. 1 (1990): 91-110. For a more focused, sustained engagement with this trope with specific reference to Black women's religious formations, see Lihle Ngcobozi's outstanding studies "Lizalise Idinga Lakho [Honour Thy Promise]: The Methodist Church Women's Manyano, the Bifurcated Public Sphere, Divine Strength, Ubufazi and Motherhood in Post-Apartheid South Africa," (MA diss., Rhodes University, 2017), and *Mothers of the nation: Manyano women in South Africa*. (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2020).

⁴⁰ In their majority and most established forms, "oomama bomthandazo" include Manyano women (Methodist Women's Guild, founded in 1907) with their symbolically important uniform of black skirts, pantyhose, black formal shoes, red coat-shirt and white hats with standard Thursday meetings, Anglican Women's Guild, and St Anne's Sodality (Catholic 'guild' named after Jesus' maternal grandmother, established in 1934 in southern Africa) with black skirts, pantyhose, black formal shoes, a purple shirt-cape and black hats with standard fortnightly meetings. Each has a daughter association with equally complex structures, uniforms, and codes. For an in-depth study, see Ngcobozi *op cit.*; Beverly Haddad, "Church Uniforms as an Indigenous Form of Anglicanism: A South African Case Study," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 14, no. 4 (2016), 156-171.

the largest women's political march in South Africa's history, and answers an often-asked question about the locations of the organizational capacity to bring twenty thousand women to Pretoria to march on the Union Buildings. Finally, this rendering of the consciousness of the women at the march on 9 August 1956 places them in the tradition of the literary women discussed earlier in this paper by symbolically mapping an unbroken tradition of women's religious imagination that survives in different guises even if obscured, erased, and minimized from the outside.

A second deployment of religious imagination is at play in the poem "*Umyalelo wentombi*", which lists ideal characteristics of a properly socialized woman:

Ukhuthale	Be industrious
Ube nembeko	Polite
Ube nes'dima	Upright
Unyamezele.	Endure.
Intombazana ayilali emini	Daytime napping is not for girls,
Ukwazi ukuququzela.	Instead, be energetic.
Ungabhentsi	Do not sit with legs wide apart
Ungathethi gqithi	Neither loquacious
Ungabiz'amehlo	Nor an exhibitionist be
Ungakhwazi	Do not raise your voice.
Umlenze, iqhiya	Pantyhose, headwrap
Ispaji, unondrokhwe	Purse, petticoat
Umthandazo.	Prayer.

The unidentified speaker authoritatively lists ideal feminine attributes and taboos which make up the composite idealized femininity in the outlined society. There are clear links between the femininity, comportment, and embodied lessons in this poem, and the uniform of the Manyano women. In stanza 4, the shorthand communication is in code. For example, "*umlenze*" literally means "a leg" but in this context it refers to the proper form of leg presentation. Similarly, the other clothing items listed reflect modesty rather than styling choices. In the previous stanza, what is forbidden is "*ukubhentsa*", a particular way of sitting with legs open. Here, a proper woman's position is written on her body, underscoring the "ambiguous status of the body as both location and artifact of human imagination".⁴¹ Indeed, Masola must be aware that,

⁴¹ Cooley, *Religious Imagination*, 8.

[t]he more we understand about the body and the role it plays as object of and vehicle for the social construction of reality, the clearer the inseparability of knowledge, value, and power becomes. This inseparability makes inescapable the perspectival character of all claims to knowledge; it intimately links knower and known to the particular historical, material context in which the knowing relation occurs. This inseparability forces us to reexamine old questions in new ways and to raise new questions as well.⁴²

The stylistic choices are not just expressions of personality or preference; they are important social cues for onlookers. Importantly, the instruction is as religious as it is socio-political. Prayer is not just the punctuating end to the poem. It has been anticipated in the call to industriousness, modesty, perseverance, restraint, and proper comportment. It climactically breaks the 4-2-4-2 line structure of the preceding stanzas, making it rhetorically the final statement on the matter of proper feminine instruction.

The teaching is akin to Christian education against sloth, laziness, boastfulness, and pride. The first line, instructing against daytime napping for girls and women, anticipates the poem “*Intombi ezilala emini*” later in the same collection. As a feminist poet, however, Masola troubles the expectation when the poem “*Intombi ezilala emini*” ends up being a celebration of these taboo-breaking women from a speaker who watches them with amusement and admiration. Modesty is equally complicated in a poem named after a slur, “*Isifebe*” (The Whore), in which Masola stages the “limits of culture, especially the limits of language”⁴³ and employs religious imagination to underscore the “double role religious symbols can play, both to enforce and to disrupt the continuity of the cultures in which they take hold or from which they emerge”.⁴⁴

The poem “*Isifebe*” is a short one, reproduced here in full:

NgeCawa ucula uSiyakudumisa.	On Sunday, she sings the Te Deum.
NgoMvulo uyaphangela.	On Monday, she goes to work.
NgoLwesibini usentlanganisweni	On Tuesday, she attends a meeting at
yesikolo sabantwana.	her children’s school.

⁴² Cooley, *Religious Imagination*, 5.

⁴³ Cooley, *Religious Imagination*, 7.

⁴⁴ Cooley, *Religious Imagination*, 8.

NgoLwesithathu ubukela uMzansi Magic.	On Wednesday, she watches Mzansi Magic.
NgoLwesine uya emanyanweni.	On Thursday, she goes to Manyano.
NgoLwesihlanu yi-nice-time negals.	On Friday, it's nice-time with the gals.
NgomGqibelo udibana no Temba;	On Saturday, she meets up with Temba;
Okanye uXolani,	Or Xolani,
Okanye uSam.	Or Sam.
Ok'salayo ufumana le nto ayifunayo.	Basically, she gets exactly what she wants.
NgeCawa ucula uSiyakudumisa.	On Sunday, she sings the Te Deum.

For Masola, “*Isifebe*” is not the woman who is beyond the pale. She is quite ordinary, in a gesture of writing against the patriarchal deployment of the label whore/slut. Indeed,

[b]ecause women who enjoy sex and/or have it freely, and people who are same gender/sex attracted threaten the logic of patriarchy by fudging numerous boundaries ready-made for surveillance and punishment, the words accorded to these transgressions are powerful. At the same time, however, it is the mere naming as such that brings danger [...] Patriarchy needs these names as stamps on those individuals who are deemed safe to violate and render outcasts.⁴⁵

Importantly, the woman observed in this poem defies easy characterization. Irony is used to chart and process conflicting versions of femininity under patriarchy: virtuous women versus whores. Read within the larger context of the poems in *Ilifa*, this woman adheres to the instructions to be “industrious” and “energetic” to impressive effect. Masola’s humorous rendition is of a woman’s capacity for adherence to feminine instruction, attentive parenting, and commitment to her own pleasure. Masola’s complex feminist staging of the granularity of women’s lives dislocates patriarchal ideals and interpretative lenses.

The subject’s commitment to Christian religious life is evident not only in Sunday observation, but in the choice of additional participation in Manyano, the Methodist Women’s Guild work. She chooses to be an industrious and

⁴⁵ Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Female Fear Factory* (Cape Town: Melinda Ferguson, 2021), 75.

an attentive mother, a friend, and a woman who attends to her own spiritual, financial, entertainment, and sexual needs. Her multiple partners are listed in matter-of-fact manner in the poem, rendering their numbers mundane. Yet, the detailed listing of her week's activity by a speaker removed from the poem's subject hints at the surveillance that women are placed under in patriarchal societies for the purposes of categorization as one kind of woman rather than another. Masola stages this patriarchal surveillance to reveal it for what it is: a reduction of women's lives and complexity.

An excellent example of Masola's third use of religious imagination is evident in the poem "*Wakrazulwa*" (He was ripped apart) where pain is "voiced" "not only through language but through a symbol system laden with religious meaning, meaning she appropriates even as she challenges it".⁴⁶ The titular phrase is familiarly applied only in relation to Jesus' crucified body and cloth in isiXhosa. Its use in this third context highlights the extremity of the violence and pain, placing it out of the ordinary. This elevation is particularly striking here in its application to a woman's heart and body in the aftermath of rape. Her wound, not always visible, is a consequence of another's sinful violence. Masola writes:

Yeyani na le mikrozo kule ntliziyo yakho?	What lacerations are these on your heart?
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Xa ndikujonga umgumqaba-qaba Xa ndikubuza uthi akhontw'ibitheni Xa uhamba ufana nomntu wonke Uncuma njengomntu wonke Uhleka njengomntu wonke Kodwa Wakrazulwa.	You are the picture of health Claim not a care in the world Your stride unspectacular Your smile ordinary Your laugh habitual Yet You were ripped apart.
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Intliziyo yomntu uyayazi Wazibonela ngamehlo akho. Amehlo omntu ayathetha. Ngakumbi umntu omaziyo. Wagqibela nihleka, nigigitheka Kumnandi	You know the human heart Saw it with your own eyes. A person's eyes communicate. Especially someone you know. One minute you were laughing, giggling Deliciously
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Kodwa wothuka xa ephezu kwakho	The next he was on top of you.
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⁴⁶ Cooey, *Religious Imagination*, 6.

Waphelelwa ngamandla wakubona His hateful eyes draining your energy.
intiyo yakhe.

Wakrazulwa ngenxa yokungabi naw' Torn and sapped,
amandla,

Wakrazuka. You tore.
Wopha. Bled.
Inxeba elingapheliyo. An unhealing ulcer.
Wanexeba likaYesu. Yours Jesus' wound.

Mawuhanjululwe Heal
Mawuhanjululwe Heal
Mawuhanjululwe Heal...

Masola's metaphorical comparison of the addressee's rape injury to Jesus' crucifixion wounds is striking. It establishes the addressee's wound as an enduring hurt that is not always treated with the attention it deserves from its society. Recounting the rape primes the reader to anticipate Jesus' appearance. Its unfolding recalls Jesus' transition from intimacy (preceding the Last Supper) to betrayal (Judas Escariot, Peter's Denial) to the wounding (the Passion) and the long aftermath. As with Jesus, there is an afterlife for the addressee. For the addressee, the violation casts a long shadow whereby redemption and healing are infinitely delayed.

Here, Masola scripts an "example of religious imagination at work making up and making real a self and its world, directly out of the pain".⁴⁷ The use of "*wakrazulwa*" and the crucifixion metaphor is Masola's scripting of rape's significance. If, as in "*Ilizwi elidala*", the world was made through the w/Word, it can, therefore, be remade through the same. Therefore, although the metaphor of the crucifixion is a death metaphor, it recalls a tradition in which a different end is possible. Diah Ariami Arimbi writes of how "[l]iterary representations become one way among others trying to portray women's strategies that will give them maximum control over their lives and bodies".⁴⁸ Arimbi's hopeful reading makes even more sense upon consideration of the last three lines of Masola's poem. The repetition of the desire for healing and redemption clearly points to an unfulfilled wish or prayer. Yet the triple

⁴⁷ Cooley, *Religious Imagination*, 4.

⁴⁸ Arimbi, *Reading Contemporary Indonesian*, 14.

reiteration is illustrative of Masola's religious imagination in generative ways. In Christ's passion, Peter denies Jesus three times before the cock crows, a betrayal foretold at the Last Supper. At the same time, the prayer for healing is repeated three times in the concluding three lines of Masola's poem, symbolically undoing the betrayal and consequential harm. For readers familiar with the Christian tradition, the relevance of the number three will be clear for its substantively more positive denotations: the third day of resurrection, the Holy Trinity, the Three Wise Men, most importantly for my purposes here. In an intertextual gesture, such a closing is not only hopeful but also generative.

Conclusion

The girl evoked in the Preface to *Ilifa* has been socialized into specific articulations of femininity, love, and negotiating space, all of which are religiously punctuated, enabling the kind of transgenerational textual reading proposed by Bhekizwe Peterson in which there is "transmission of a number of recurring tropes across generations".⁴⁹

Thus equipped and recalling that "one of the goals of feminist literary criticism, which is to help find alternatives to androcentric experience and analysis in order to more accurately interpret women's texts",⁵⁰ it is possible to recognize how much more than feminist revision is present in Masola's text, where the poet demonstrates dual awareness of her vulnerability and her resources. The former stems from the fickleness of archives, her vulnerability, and the precarity of her location as an African woman writer given the enduring unremembering. Masola also understands that such location is always under question because of the intersections of the logics of colonial heritage and African patriarchal canonisation processes.

At the same time, equipped as an accomplished literary historian who studies the same literary traditions to which she contributes, Masola chooses in *Ilifa* to "invite readers to identify with the protagonist and participate in the author's creation of new matrifocal history"⁵¹ and literary space.

⁴⁹ Bhekizwe Peterson, "Spectrality and intergenerational black narratives in South Africa," *Social Dynamics* 45, no. 3 (2019): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2019.1690757>.

⁵⁰ Janice Crosby, *Cauldron of Changes: Feminist Spirituality in Fantastic Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 1.

⁵¹ Crosby, *Cauldrons of Changes*, 4.

Producing a text that is thematically and structurally concerned with the intersections of women's entry into publicness, Masola is aware that in South Africa, and for the missionary-educated generations, religion became a resource for navigating entry into public life and public articulation, and navigating the world as individuals and subjectivity more broadly as a group. Religion and Christian language were also resources for making written literary meaning in the African missionary tradition.

While her religious references are not confined to Christianity, I limit myself to Biblical references to better tend to the intersections of feminist mapping, epistemic risk and the poet's engagement with two centuries of the South African isiXhosa literary archive and intellectual entries into publicness to negotiate the poet's own entry into literary public life. To do so offers a way of reading the context and conceptual landscapes within which to locate Masola's own poetic project and, therefore, make sense of its complex engagements with tradition.

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