

A vampire and a damsel in distress: A postfeminist analysis of selected female South African viewers' perceptions of the romance between Bella and Edward in the film *Twilight* (2008)

ABSTRACT

The film *Twilight* produced by Wyck Godfrey, Mark Morgan and Greg Mooradian and directed by Catherine Hardwicke, enjoyed global box office success, and proved particularly popular with female filmgoers. Despite the commercial success of the film, it was derided specifically by feminist critics for its portrayal of women and heterosexual relationships. Within the context of postfeminist views of gender roles, this article explores how selected female South African viewers' between the ages of 18 and 45 living in Johannesburg perceived the romance between Edward and Bella in the film *Twilight* (2008). Participants were divided into age-determined focus groups and each participant completed a questionnaire containing a list of questions around the genre of the film, their feelings about individual characters and their reasons for watching the film. Interview data in the form of quotes from individual participants has been included in the article.

Michele Tager is a senior lecturer in the Department of Journalism, Film and Television in the School of Communication at the University of Johannesburg. She teaches on the Film and Television Studies programme within the department. Lauren Nell completed her Master's degree in 2015 in Audiovisual Communication in the Department of Journalism, Film and Television in the School of Communication at the University of Johannesburg.

INTRODUCTION

Twilight (2008) has evoked questions and cautions about the representations of heterosexual romance, and has caused controversial debates about the anti-feminist nature of the romance and characters in the film, suggesting that the gender roles are reminiscent of those found in the Gothic novels of the pre-feminist eighteenth century (Backstein, 2009:39; Bethune, 2008:54; Mann, 2009:132; Myers, 2009:160). Being based in South Africa, taking note of the huge box office success the film enjoyed in this country and watching the global reaction to the film, we were eager to understand the way in which selected female South African viewers perceived the romance between Bella and Edward. By integrating an overview of the film and audience ethnography, this article briefly explores the representations of gender roles and heterosexual romance in the film *Twilight* (2008) and specifically the perception of these representations by selected, female South African viewers using postfeminism as a theoretical framework.

While the profound appeal of *Twilight* (2008) to women of multiple ages is more than evident, theorists and critics appear to neglect the female audience's interpretation of the romance and instead focus on the problematic representations of gender roles and the 'abusive' nature of the romance, both physically and emotionally, depicted in the film through the characters of Bella Swan and her vampire partner Edward Cullen (Kokkola, 2011:179; Taylor, 2012:32; Taylor, 2014). Housel states that "Edward is not the ideal boyfriend-lover. In fact, Jacob is... Edward will only lead to black eyes, rape, torture, and possibly even death" (Housel in Housel & Wisniewski, 2009:188). This characterisation of Edward struck the researchers as particularly interesting in the context of South Africa, a country in which according to POWA (People Opposing Women Abuse), one in every six women who die in Gauteng are killed by an intimate partner (Anonymous, 2010). Living in a country in which violence against women is rife, would this feature in any way in terms of how the selected women we interviewed perceived the relationship between Bella and Edward in *Twilight* (2008)? We deliberately avoided asking the respondents questions around violence against women in South Africa, to avoid leading the discussions or imposing a value judgment on them for idealising or enjoying the relationship between Bella and Edward. The fact that they live in a city, Johannesburg, and country where violence against women abounds, didn't stop them enjoying the film, or feature in their discussion of the relationship between Bella and Edward at all.

Critics such as Lisa Bode, who described audiences of the *Twilight* saga as housewives neglecting their children and adult responsibilities (2010:717), belittle the viewers of the films for being lost in a fantasy world whereby they desire to be in relationships with abusive men like Edward and Jacob. Responses and interpretations of the characters indicate just how complex the engagement between viewer and character is and how, when it is convenient for them to suspend realistic criticism, they do so to the point of justifying within the parameters of the fantasy world the actions, intentions, and characteristics of Edward in particular, as will emerge in the discussion of the viewer responses later on.

While a great deal has been written about the romance between Edward and Bella, emphasising the romanticised violence that their relationship perpetuates both physically and emotionally,

studies on the *reception* of the film have been focused on the extent to which the film constitutes a feminist or anti-feminist depiction of romance (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2014). For example, Anne Helen Petersen's postfeminist ethnographic study on female viewers' interpretation of the film focuses only on the pleasure *feminist* viewers may get from *anti-feminist* representations in *Twilight* (2008): "yet what might lead a feminist to pursue distinctly non-feminist fantasies as roundabouts to pleasure?" (Petersen, 2012:57). The issue this raises is that if, as many feminist theorists today suggest, society has entered a postfeminist period (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009) and *Twilight* (2008) emerged within this postfeminist context, then it is from within this context that the film should be explored rather than the extent to which the representations can be considered 'feminist' or 'anti-feminist'; particularly when concepts of 'feminist', 'femininity' and 'patriarchal' in a postfeminist context are fluid, fragmented, individualised and contradictory (Genz, 2010; McRobbie, 2009). The aim of this article is to describe how the relationship between Bella and Edward was received by a selected South African female audience. While it does provide some textual analysis of the film, its focus is the responses of the audience to the film. What follows is a brief overview of the methodology used to gather and interpret the data.

Studies of local interpretations of globally broadcast, usually American, programmes, are generally approached from a sociological perspective, aiming to understand how local cultures interpret American texts and what the relationship is between their local culture and the meaning they ascribe to American texts (Croteau, Hoynes & Milan, 2012:268). In the context of audience studies, the focus has fallen on the ways in which audiences of different cultures: "make use of images that are often heavily laden with ideological messages" (Croteau *et al*, 2012:269). Despite the discourses about cultural imperialism and globalization, Ang states that one cannot separate the 'global' and 'local' as two opposing concepts, but rather they should be viewed as "complexly articulated, mutually constitutive. Global forces only display their effectivity in particular localities; local realities today can no longer be thought outside of the global sphere of influence" (1996:153).

Ang's findings in her 1985 study on Dutch viewers of *Dallas*, while acknowledging that there was no single explanation for viewer enjoyment of the show, suggested that Dutch viewers' enjoyment of *Dallas* stemmed mainly from the emotionally realistic nature of the show. Ang analysed the Dutch viewers' interpretations thereof from the perspective of pleasure. "For we must accept one thing: *Dallas* is popular because a lot of people somehow enjoy watching it" (Ang, 1985:3-4).

It is Ang's (1985) concern with pleasure and fantasy involved in viewing *Dallas* which is of central importance to this article. Ang was interested in the fact that the majority of Dutch viewers of *Dallas* were women and yet the representations of women characters in the show depicted women as powerless. Often socially reviled texts aimed at female audiences are actively engaged with by female viewers (Hobson, 1982; 1990; Press, 1990; Radway, 1984; Turner, 2001:144). Mary Ellen Brown explains:

Women have often been thought of as a problem, as a mysterious 'other' whom we, the audience, cannot hope to understand. Classical Hollywood narrative film frequently investigates the woman, presumably for the pleasure of the male viewer. Paradoxically,

when the tables are turned, when women derive pleasure from popular narrative forms, the process is viewed as a problem. (Brown, 1990:201).

Ang states that while feminist critics dismiss popular culture as patriarchal, women's pleasure in *Dallas* is the 'here and now': "Fiction and fantasy, then, function by making life in the present pleasurable, or at least liveable, but this does not by any means exclude radical political activity or consciousness" (1985:135). Ang suggests that fantasy and fiction should be taken seriously and that the fantasy and identification with fictional characters by female viewers should not be dismissed as 'anti-feminist' but explored in terms of the emotional involvement viewers put into these identifications. Though the findings of the study presented here were focused on South African women, the focus was on the nature of the viewing pleasure derived from watching *Twilight* (2008), rather than trying to examine any particular cultural imperative. As viewers of *Twilight* (2008) they form part of a global female audience united in the act of consuming the *Twilight* saga, united in idealizing the film's representation of heterosexual romance. Ang points out that, "we have to recognize the hybrid, syncretic and creolized, always 'contaminated' nature of diversity emanating from constant cultural traffic and interaction rather than from the persistence of original, rooted and traditional 'identities'" (Ang, 1996:155). What emerged from the study presented here, is that despite the fact that they live in a country characterised by violence against women, it didn't influence the way they related to the relationship of Bella and Edward.

In order to understand the viewers' perceptions of *Twilight* (2008) it was necessary to understand the romance between Edward and Bella in *Twilight* (2008). The following section provides an overview of the film to familiarize the reader with the central characters, plot and conventions of the gothic romance evident in the film.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF "TWILIGHT" (2008)

In its year of release, 2008, *Twilight* ranked number eight in the top twenty grossing films in the United States and twenty-sixth on the South African box office index. *Twilight* first appeared as the opening instalment of a four part fiction saga written by Stephanie Meyer in 2005. The book gained global popularity and was translated into over 39 different languages (Pomerantz, 2010). The success of the story has been considered a boost for the romance and fantasy genres both in film and in literature (Mendick & Sawyer, 2010).

The book was adapted into a film by Summit Entertainment. It follows the story of Bella Swan, a clumsy, awkward and reserved teenager, who decides to move from her mother's home in Phoenix, Arizona to her father's home in Forks, Washington. It is in Forks that she meets Edward Cullen, the wealthy and mysterious young man who is the romantic obsession of many of the girls at Forks High. The focus of *Twilight* (2008) is on the development of the relationship between Bella and Edward and the obstacles they have to face and overcome in order to make their relationship work. After several awkward and bizarre encounters with Edward at school, and two near-fatal incidents where Edward (as a result of intensely observing her and secretly following her) saved Bella from death, the two finally admit their feelings for each other from which point

the central conflicts of the story begin. As the film progresses it becomes evident to Bella that Edward is a vampire and that the intense attraction that Edward has for her is in fact the scent of her blood. He therefore has to restrain his urge to kill her every time they are together while at the same time protecting her from anything and anyone that threatens the existence of his new 'addiction'. In turn, Bella cannot imagine her life without Edward, and desires to be immortal like he is. She thus asks him to transform her into a vampire.

This violent obsession has been the cause of much controversy and the centre of criticism of the film. This obsession however has also been one of the more appealing factors to female viewers (Backstein, 2009:39; Bethune, 2008:54; Esposito & Happel, 2010:530; Mann, 2009:132; Myers, 2009:160). The interviews discussed in this article indicate that selected South African viewers were no different in this respect, despite living in a country with one of the highest instances in the world of violence against women.

2. DATA GATHERING

Audience ethnography aims to understand how audiences interact with, interpret, respond to and take pleasure in media (Ang, 1996:69; Gillespie, 2005:42). In order to obtain detailed, qualitative data from the selected viewers and use this data to understand their perceptions of the film, audience ethnography, specifically questionnaires, observation, and focus group interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. The selected participants were placed into age-determined focus groups. The focus group method is commonly used in audience ethnographies and was popularized by Liebes and Katz's 1993 study of Americans, Israelis (Israeli Arabs, Moroccan Jews, Russian immigrants and Kibbutz residents) who watched *Dallas*. The study involved four focus groups, each consisting of between five to seven women who had completed high-school, had seen the film *Twilight* (2008), and who were South African. Focus groups were comprised as follows:

1. 18-23 years
2. 24-29 years
3. 30-35 years
4. 36 and above

This study on which this article is based did not seek out women who physically displayed their fandom of *Twilight* (2008). Although many participants were part of a local South African fan site and several arrived at the focus group interviews wearing *Twilight* T-shirts and possessed various fan paraphernalia such as jewellery and bags depicting the characters of Edward, Bella, and Jacob, this was not a requirement for the acceptance of their participation. In the context of this study, the term 'fan' was approached not as deviants or as hysterics, but rather as individuals who "display interest, affection and attachment, especially for figures in, or aspects of, their chosen field" (Jenson, 1992:9).

For this article, female South African women who live in Johannesburg served as the population and the sample frame consisted of the following criteria, which were limited in advance of data collection:

- Must have at minimum completed high school;
- Must have seen both films *Twilight* (2008) and *New Moon* (2009);
- Must have a detailed knowledge of the films, characters and narrative;
- Must be between the ages of 18 and 45;
- Must have volunteered to participate in the study.

Thus, only women who matched the criteria were selected as sample units to participate in the study and formed part of the end sample. In line with the central views of postfeminism, and to avoid what David Morley (1992) described as 'class essentialism', the parameters for the sample frame did not limit the participation based on factors such as race, sexuality, religion or class. This was because the goal was to understand the individual female viewer's interpretation and not generalise or attribute their perceptions across any socially constructed demographics or category, but rather, emphasize the transient, fluid and unstable nature of individuality within a postfeminist context.

The beginning stages of the sampling selection involved finding an intermediary respondent to establish contact between the researcher and the interpretive community. Identifying the 'intermediary' is one of the most significant steps when starting any research (Gobo, 2008:121). For Janice Radway, it was Dot, the bookstore owner; for Ien Ang, it was the Dutch women's magazine *Vivo*; for David Morley, it was the academic institutions and unions; for this study it was approaching a local fan site of the films through one member (who also became a focus group participant, NM (33)).

All of the women in the 30-35 and 36 and above focus groups were part of this local fan site called www.twilightaddict.co.za. It was through posting in this fan site that the participants of the two older focus groups were discovered. While approaching a certain fan site does evoke questions of bias in that the majority of participants were part of a select group, not all participants were part of this or any fan site. There was no requirement for the sample that women had to be part of a fan site. In order to discover women in Johannesburg who were familiar with the films, it seemed that a fan site would be an appropriate starting point to initiate snowball sampling through referrals. This particular fan site did provide participants for the older age groups. However, the younger age groups, 18-23 and 24-29, were more difficult to recruit and, interestingly, the fan site's population lacked younger women. Snowball sampling was used to overcome this issue and many of the younger participants were discovered through word-of-mouth or suggestions by friends and family, and some by women who participated in the older age groups.

Focus group questions centred on the representation of the lead female protagonist, Bella Swan, and her vampire love-interest, Edward Cullen, and the significant phases in their relationship as depicted in the film *Twilight* (2008). Each focus group was asked the same set of questions which

were accompanied with the relevant clips from the film so as to ensure that all participants could refer to the same scene and to refresh their memories.

Each participant also completed an individual questionnaire focusing on the perceived genre of the film, their favourite scene, their motivation for watching the film and the appeal of the film to them. Focus groups were held on a university campus in Johannesburg. Answers were recorded on video and then transcribed, ensuring participant anonymity through the use of their initials only. Demographics such as race, religion, sexual orientation and so forth were not a determining factor in the selection of participants, as the aim was not to focus on a specific demographic of women and generalise the findings across that demographic, but rather on the interpretation of each individual woman who claimed to enjoy the film; thus participants had to volunteer to participate and, provided that they fell into one of the four age groups and met the education criteria as outlined previously, were automatically allowed to participate. What follows is a brief overview of postfeminism, to contextualise and set the scene for the audience responses presented in the article.

3. POSTFEMINISM AND GENDER ROLES

“What are we to assume Edward Cullen and his teen bride suggest about the current, purportedly postfeminist, socio-political context with regard to young women?” (Taylor, 2012:32).

Postfeminism derives from central notions of postmodernism, described by Len Ang as “a cultural space which is no longer circumscribed by fixed boundaries, hierarchies, and identities and by universalist, modernist concepts of truth and knowledge” (1996:3). This ‘wave’ of feminism consisted of a new generation of women who grew up during the backlash of feminism in the 1980s and felt confused, let down, and overwhelmed by what it was that feminism now stood for, due to the fact that many feminists goals were, for most women, already embedded in daily life and freely available – such as education, property rights and career opportunities and as such, were not considered as lacking or as a result of feminism’s struggle but taken for granted (Campo, 2009:80; Genz, 2010:2; Harnois, 2008:121; Kinser, 2004:130; Klein, 2002:141; Scanlon, 2009:127; Whelehan, 1995:127). The political and cultural climate in which postfeminism emerged was one centred around issues of fragmented identities, de-centred subjects and an overall rejection of meta-narratives and binary identities such as feminism and ‘male/female’; ultimately a ‘schizophrenic cultural milieu’ which embraces contradiction, plurality and multiplicity and maintains that gender equality has been obtained and gender is seen as a fluid and unstable performance shaped by and through popular media; as a result feminism is no longer relevant (Harnois, 2008:123; Huffman and Mann, 2005:62; Kinser, 2004:145; Whelehan, 1995:145). Individuality and choice are central to postfeminism however; there is an emphasis on the idea that any identity taken up is fluid and performed. This idea of performative and blurred gender identities and a rejection of binary oppositions such as oppressed/oppressor; subject/object allows for multiple layers of identification which are contradictory (Genz, 2010:7). This contradictory nature is reflected in the interview responses which follow. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and each participant is represented by their initials and age.

Rosalind Gill rejects the tendency to define postfeminism in any context that provides ‘pre-specified meaning’, particularly in relation to feminism. Instead, Gill refers to it as a ‘sensibility’ rather than any type of historical shift or backlash, which is informed by postmodernism and poststructuralism, that should be critically explored: “This approach does not require a static notion of authentic feminism as a comparison point, but instead is informed by postmodernist and constructionalist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender” (2007:254). This statement by Gill encompasses the adoption of postfeminism as both a theoretical orientation for this article and a social context. It does not rely on binaries such as ‘feminist’ or ‘anti-feminist’, and does not rely on previous tenets of feminism in its approach to understanding contemporary depictions of gender roles. As such it rejects feminist criticism of gender roles and aims to understand representations in their own right and not by any prescribed or pre-defined categories. This approach forms the foundation of this article as the aim is not to understand the representations of gender roles as ‘feminist’ or ‘anti-feminist’, but rather to understand how the selected viewers related to the depiction of heterosexual romance in *Twilight* (2008) as part of the contemporary postfeminist context in which the films emerged.

4. PERCEPTIONS OF EDWARD AND BELLA’S RELATIONSHIP: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED AUDIENCE’S RESPONSES

The relationship between Bella and Edward has been reviled by critics:

What are, in fact, dangerous ideas that devalue the female in society are too frequently seen as legitimate choices in the *Twilight* saga – choices made in the name of “true love” or in the face of supernatural forces. When presented through these lenses, Bella and Edward’s relationship is seen as romantic and desirable, when in any other world it would be destructive (Miller, 2011:174-175).

However, the selected viewers’ perceptions of the relationship between Bella and Edward were fundamentally different from that of the critics. As one participant put it:

LM2¹ (39): This is what women dream of getting one day and this is what she’s [Bella’s] getting.

This response reflects the contradictory nature of postfeminism. ‘Feminism’ in this context is about active, individual freedom of choice regarding work, domesticity, parenting and sexuality. (Negra & Tasker, 2005:2; Orr, 1997:34). Feminism becomes something to be consumed as part of popular culture, highlighting the contradiction, complexity and messiness which, postfeminists believe is the reality of women’s lives: “the reality that women do not necessarily share experiences

¹ Note that LM1 and LM2 refer to two different participants with the same initials who were also in the same age-based focus group. Therefore, to differentiate the two, the numbers 1 and 2 were placed after their respective initials, as well as their different ages: LM1 (38) and LM2 (39). This was implemented purely to prevent confusion between the two women.

and perspectives, that the lines between oppressed and oppressor are not always clear, and that some women do, in fact, enjoy their positions in what others see as a patriarchal society” (Harnois, 2008:134). What became evident from the viewer responses is that one woman’s stalker is another woman’s ideal man, and that living in a country where violence against women is the norm rather than the exception, didn’t deter the selected viewers from viewing Edward as a romantic ideal.

The sections which follow are centred on Edward, with a central focus on the perceived themes the character represents in relation to gender roles in heterosexual romance.

4.1 “The vampire in the Volvo is the new knight on a white stallion” (JK 21²): Viewers’ perceptions of Edward Cullen

We asked participants: “What attracted you to the *Twilight* Saga? If you read the books first, explain what attracted you to the books/why you chose to buy/read them. If you saw the films first explain what attracted you to the films/why you chose to go and see them”. Answers included:

- BD (44):** The beauty of Edward.
- AN (30):** I fell in love with Edward’s character.
- NM (33):** I wanted to see how Bella and Edward made it work!
- KC (27):** They just tapped into everything mysterious and forbidden about romance.

While the significance of Edward being supernatural is beyond the scope of this article, this does beg the question of why women are fantasising about a man who, by his very nature and characteristics, represents traditional patriarchal values and gender roles? Also, why is a contemporary film such as *Twilight* (2008) portraying the patriarchal realm as some form of magical realism in which women can obtain infinite and unchanging beauty, strength and above all, true love? According to Branch:

What makes *Twilight* Gothic... is that creepiest of secrets which this mesmerizing tale half conceals, half reveals, that we as a culture have made this dream impossible; by putting our desires for family, love, and togetherness into the usually abject realm of the vampire, we confess that we have made unnatural and impossible the very thing we most desire or profess to desire. (Branch, 2010:65).

Branch’s statement places the focus on what this romance represents, why it has been placed within this unobtainable fantasy realm, and thus why it is that women are fantasising about it, should be of more concern. This is particularly relevant in relation to the research presented here, as part of the enjoyment experienced by the participants was the fact that

² JK (21) is one of the South African female participants selected for the study. She is 21 years old and thus part of the 18-23 focus group.

the film presents them with a romantic fantasy. Some of the participants (particularly the younger groups) compared or associated their own romantic relationships with Edward and Bella's, while others maintained that their desire for Edward and Bella's romance remains in the realm of fantasy:

KH (23): You get sort of, the ideal, that doesn't really exist um, like true love 'I love you and I can't explain it and maybe I don't actually want to be with you and maybe it's not a healthy love but I can't help it and we're drawn together' that sort of love at first sight.

JS (24): Romance films allow us to live out a life, a fantasy, that we will never be able to experience in reality.

BD (44): We all hope and want romance. The fantasy of it. Life is harsh sometimes so the fantasy or wanting of something that does not happen in real life is good for the heart/soul.

SS (42): When it's your life and the guy's from the other side of the track, you kind of think [pulls a face and shudders]. It's not so exciting but that's why we fantasie. That's the whole, for me the *Twilight* thing is totally... you can step out of all the normal, everyday things that you restrain yourself with and just live in the fantasy and it's delicious.

The responses above indicate that the respondents viewed the film as an escape into a romantic fantasy. The physical and emotional dominance of Edward and the submissiveness of Bella did not seem to bother them at all. On the contrary, they seemed to view it as a romantic ideal.

Edward perpetuates the masculine character-type found in Romance: the Byronic Hero. Named after Lord Byron, the Byronic hero is described as a man dangerous to love and know:

The Byronic hero is attractive in an unusual, sometimes sinister way. He is dangerous...he is exciting in his subversiveness but to love him is to put oneself and one's soul in mortal danger...he may be protective of the woman he loves but he is also selfish. He takes what he wants and acts as he likes without regard for mortality or the safety of others. (Groper, 2011:132).

Focus group participants also noticed this personality trait in Edward:

JK (21): Well he's very selfish. I mean it doesn't matter what happens he never asks her what she wants. So throughout everything their relationship is like he's assuming and he's taking control and he's taking the lead which irritates me a bit...Edward kind of assumes that he knows best and then just goes on and makes decisions for everyone.

JS (24): We're saying that the perfect couple is love, trust and equality, Edward is none of those things, he cannot love, he's incapable of it. Um, he doesn't trust her fully at any point and she never trusts him because he's always hiding something and he never treats her like an equal, the entire film. So if that's the basis of a perfect relationship, they're the furthest thing from it.

Despite being aware of these characteristics in him, all the focus groups, with the exception of the two younger groups, unanimously stated that the appeal of *Twilight* (2008) was Edward and his desire for Bella. The participants' focus was specifically on the intensity of this desire:

KH (23): You know that she's going to end up with him [Edward], it's like her soul mate but at the same time you know well actually maybe it's better if you're going to go with someone who loves you for who you are and doesn't treat you like an object because he really does the whole way through the entire saga. She's like this possession that he doesn't want but he can't leave and it's like she's almost a poison to him

LM2 (39): I've always liked Edward ...He wants everything done his way but just the way that he loves her so intensely, it's like, it's like a dream every woman has to be loved where you are the most important person in somebody's life; he will give up everything and everyone for you.

BD (44): He'll die for you.

In *Twilight* (2008), the appeal of the film for the majority of the focus group participants had nothing to do with Bella; in fact, many found her annoying despite the fact that the story unravels from her perspective and that the films in the *Twilight* Saga all centre on her. Instead, the appeal was the male hero, Edward. It is through Edward that Bella gains some form of identity and it is through Edward's interactions with Bella that the focus group participants find pleasure in the film. This is primarily where the criticism of the film lies – in the fact that Bella has no interest, or life beyond Edward. Bella has been the foundation of the concern that impressionable teenage girls will identify with such a masochistic character however, although this study was not focused on teenage girls; from the focus group responses, it is not Bella directly with whom the participants relate, nor is it her actions or ideologies that appeal to the audience – instead it is Edward's desire and Edward's actions which are the central appeal. Bella serves only as an avatar through which the audience can vicariously experience being the object of such intense desire.

JK (21): I think that Bella is like a blank slate...every girl in the audience can project themselves onto her... I suppose if you're sitting in the audience you can pretty much project all your own emotions and all of yourself onto her.

KB (23): I mean you fall in love with Edward; you don't really care much about Bella in the movies.

Participants were asked what their perceptions were of an ideal romantic couple and if they identified any of the qualities they listed as part of an 'ideal romantic couple' in the film. Answers included:

CB (25): Equals. You have to have (...) of the individuals in the couple and you have to be able to trust and rely on each other. You know, I mean if you're looking in terms of Edward and Bella there's a self-destructive need between both of them, they both hate each other so much that they fit perfectly together with each other because they're eventually going to destroy each other. That's the way it comes to me and, um, maybe that's why they ended up together because of their self-loathing but, there has to be an equality within a relationship and if you don't have that equality it's doomed from the start.

GB (36): They're not trying to be something for the other person; they're being themselves. Within that they just comfortable enough um, to use an example 'you are comfortable in silence'. You can actually sit with someone and not say a thing but your body language is saying a million things and you're so comfortable with that person.

The concept of 'power' in a postfeminist society is choice, which Bella has and uses. Defining Bella as a representation of pre or anti-feminist ideologies is problematic in that women now, in a postfeminist context, re-evaluate those social elements considered patriarchal and oppressive such as physical appearance and traditional beauty practices (Campo, 2009:82; Genz, 2010:92; Gill, 2007:3; Huffman & Mann, 2005:73; Scanlon, 2009:128; Showden, 2009:177; Whelehan, 1995:144). In this context the character of Bella could be perceived as independent and empowered:

On one hand, we have a hero who is literate, is independent, and goes after what she wants...despite many good reasons for not getting involved, she remains devoted to Edward...These seem like reasonable arguments for Bella being a fierce and fabulous feminist hero, a model of steely determination, stolid independence and undying passion for young women of the ipod generation. (Myers. 2009:157).

The following section explores the romance between Edward and Bella and how the audience related to it.

4.2 "His love is not superficial. It's true, old-fashioned, old-fashioned love that he has for her" (BD 44³): Perceptions of Edward's desire for Bella.

When asked about the scene in *Twilight* (2008) where Edward and Bella finally confront their feelings for one another, focus group participants emphasized the way in which Edward seemed so 'tortured' by his feelings for her:

SS (42): Ja⁴, there's this tormented soul element about him that just totally appeals.

BD(44): It's mysterious.

LN (Researcher): Do you unanimously have a tormented soul thing?

GB, LM1, BD: Yes [all three participants unanimously responded 'yes' and laughed together].

SS (42): It's a rescuer thing; you want to rescue them.

GB (36): I think there's a lot of confusion in him because you can see he's warring with himself 'I want her to know me but I can't, she's going to reject me' and there's this whole war going on within Edward, 'do I tell her, don't I tell her; I really, really want to be with her but that means telling her about myself and I know she's not going to take it well; will she reject me?'

AN (30): And he [Edward] was so tortured I mean look at those...the eyebrows (laughs) I was looking at the eyebrows. The forehead, the creases here [points to her forehead] that just got me, that just broke my heart.

Within the context of postfeminism, the concepts of desire and romance have changed significantly from past representations. Shachar states that:

Romance narratives teach us how a man and a woman should behave, what desire and love actually are, and how to attain such a love...that demonstrates what it means to be a man or a woman and also what it means to be in love as defined by our specific history, culture and society. (Shachar, 2011:149).

In a context which rejects and questions the legitimacy and success of master narratives and cultural institutions, elements such as 'man', 'woman', 'marriage', 'relationships' and 'gender' have become fragmented and blurred too, as stated previously, and thus, as a reflection of society, representations of these elements would suggest a fragmented and unstable identity.

³ BD is 44 years-old and participated in the 36 and above focus group.

⁴ The term 'ja' is a colloquialism for 'yes' in South Africa, taken from the Afrikaans word for 'yes' which is 'ja'.

According to Shachar, these traditional models of love and romance in *Twilight* (2008) force us, as part of a postfeminist context “to either accept inherited modes of love and gender, formed in vastly different historical contexts to our own, or to question them forming our own ideas of masculinity, femininity and love” (2011:160), thereby emphasising the individual and contradictory interpretations of the film as ‘whatever works for you’ rather than categorising them as ‘anti-feminist’.

5. CONCLUSION

“It’s like a dream every woman has to be loved where you are the most important person in somebody’s life; he will give up everything and everyone for you” (LM2⁵ (39)).

The viewers we interviewed had in common the fact that they were desirous of the kind of romance depicted in the film between Bella and Edward. Though they may not have been enamoured with Bella, they wanted like her, to be the object of the kind of desire Edward has for her. Rather than find the nature of the relationship disturbing or even abusive as some authors such as Taylor have pointed out, they both fantasised about it and aspired to it. They at no point saw parallels between Bella and Edward’s relationship and an abusive relationship.

Genz makes the point that the “postfeminist landscape generates complex and ambiguous portrayals of femaleness, femininity, and feminism, exploring the contingent and unresolvable tension between these subject positions” (2010:98). The Postfeminist Woman (PFW), says Genz, “provides multiple opportunities for female identification” (Genz, 2010:98). In *Bella*, we have a young woman whose reason for being is essentially tied into her love for Edward and her desire to be with him. Finishing high school and going to college and pursuing a career, are not what Bella aspires to. She wants to be with Edward and that’s where her aspirations and desires begin and end.

Twilight has evoked questions and cautions about the representations of gender roles and heterosexual romance found within the film, and has caused a controversial debate about the ‘anti-feminist’ and abusive nature of the central themes and characters of the films as reminiscent of those found in eighteenth-century gothic novels, predating the feminist suffragette movement (Adams, 2010; Backstein, 2009:39; Bethune, 2008:54; Bolle, 2008; Lezra, 2009; Mann, 2009:132; Myers, 2009:160; Sax, 2008; White, 2008). The fact that a film like *Twilight* resonated with a global female audience, is indicative of the fact that in the era of postfeminism, women can *choose* their female and romantic role models and can explore their female subjectivity and agency, even if that exploration may not resonate with feminist critics, and metaphorically takes them back in time: “In these complicated times, women seem to have lost their sense of direction as they are in the process of experimenting with a new set of identities, simultaneously revolving around feminist notions of empowerment and agency as well as patriarchal ideas of feminine beauty and heterosexual coupledness” (Genz, 2010:100).

⁵ LM (39) is one of the South African female participants selected for the study. She is 39 years-old and thus part of the 36 and above focus group.

It may not be politically correct for South African women living in a country characterised by high instances of violence against women, to find the relationship between Edward and Bella appealing, but this did not prevent them from enjoying the romance depicted in the film. What emerged strongly from the interviews is that these women wanted to be in Bella's shoes – to be the obsessive object of someone's affection. The potential dark side of the kind of obsessive love represented in the film was not something that featured in their identification with the film's depiction of romantic love.

While this article intended to explore South African readings of the film *Twilight* (2008), it did not approach the viewers with an assumption that South African women would have similar or different readings of the films in comparison to other countries and cultures. Furthermore, within South Africa there consists a diverse array of cultures and it cannot be assumed that South African women can be generalised and represent a uniform group.

Responses and interpretations of the characters have indicated just how intense and often contradictory the engagement between viewer and character is and how, when it is convenient for them to suspend realistic criticism, they do so to the point of justifying within the parameters of the fantasy world the actions, intentions, and characteristics of Edward and aspire to what has been classified by critics of the film as a dangerous relationship which romanticises violence in heterosexual relationships.

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