

Wrestling to Exist

Womanist Struggles of Junior Scholars in South African Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The waves of 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall protests saw South African students questioning every inch of the higher education structure and its exclusionary patriarchal racist roots. Few alliances between students and staff were created because of the “us vs. them” divide, despite junior scholars in particular, having a great deal in common with students and the oppression and trauma they endure. “Post-FMF” saw many institutions scramble to create “transformative policies” for students and minority staff like women, people of colour, people with disabilities, the LGBTQ+ community and so on. Now, years later, everyone has policy fatigue. Minority staff have been pushed back to the margins and students battle the same challenges the fallists questioned. This paper will be a narrative study tracking the experiences of three junior scholars, black women at historically white universities; with the pseudonyms *Thoko, *Andile and *Thandazile. The research took a narrative approach rooted in qualitative research. It studies their insiderness/outsiderness to show just how little work institutions have done to ensure equality and inclusivity. This piece unpacks issues of belonging, and their experience as they try to navigate being postgraduate (PG) students and being staff, and being insiders and outsiders in both. This discussion is in relation to Alice Walker’s womanism theorising, focused on the experiences of black women. The authors also

bring their own life experiences because the strong similarities between their own experiences and those of their participants are impossible to ignore. The authors' diverse scholarly background is used in the analysis, leaning towards Critical Race Theorists like Cornel West's discussion on black nihilism to better understand the aggression of black men towards black women in the academy. This is juxtaposed with a crisis of masculinity discussion. These experiences will also be viewed from a victimological perspective.

Key words: womanist, feminist, decolonisation, scholar, university, narrative

Introduction

After the fallist movement slowed post-2016, South African universities got into dialogue and policy drafting mode. They had heard the calls of the students and staff and were committed to having decolonised institutions, or so it seemed. Very little changed in the supposed "post-#FeesMustFall" era, and decolonial practices went from being an emerging revolution, to being out of touch, bureaucratic tick boxes. The Covid-19 pandemic and the frustrations over the lack of real change snuffed out the hopes that many had that higher education institutions were working towards being safe, truly decolonised, revolutionised spaces of learning that are welcoming to all. One of the biggest university protests "post-#FeesMustFall" spread across South African universities in early 2021 (Mlaba, 2021). The students were again faced with the same challenges that the fallists had fought in 2015/2016. This time the challenges were worsened by the global lockdown to curb the spread of Covid-19. As industries closed or slowed production, parents lost jobs, families were struggling, and it made the dream of higher education even more elusive (Iwara, Musvipwa, Amaechi et al, 2020:764), Furthermore, institutions of higher learning were not coming up with strong solutions to support students. Instead, many students were being excluded because they could not pay 2020's tuition fees. Students challenged many things; including issues relating to challenges around housing, the cruel manner in which the university responds to protests with violence through the state police or private security, as well as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, a student funding model which contributed to some of the issues above because funds are typically released late by the Department of Higher Education and Training (Payi, 2021).

Much of the pain and trauma of the students has been well documented in both social and more traditional media, and the universities themselves have capitalised on it as if the institutions were not willing contributors to the violence students continue to endure. What we hear less about is the experiences of staff, especially junior staff members, and how their experiences have so much in common with the students'. The difference is that as employees they are limited in their ability to share their experience because of non-disclosures some sign when starting a lecturing role. They cannot speak because they have families and children who rely on them and to lose their roles would plunge them into poverty. They do not speak because of the victimisation and aggression from their Heads of Departments (HOD), faculty and different university structures who punish them just for existing in this space. This is one of the reasons why the participants are anonymous.

This paper documents the experiences of three black women working and studying at historically white universities. The paper will narrate the challenges they have faced in the academy, using a qualitative narrative approach to record and discuss their experiences. The authors pull from their own diverse scholarly background which includes Sociology, Gender Studies, Law, Anthropology and Criminology. Alice Walker's womanist discourse is invoked to help make sense of the challenges sometimes unique to black women. This discussion is in relation to the intersection between Critical Race Theory and the crisis of masculinity, to make sense of the oppression from black men towards black women. We adopt victimological theory to show how black women are tagged and identified as inferior to justify the violence directed towards them. The article ends with a brief look at how these women find comfort and success in an unsupportive, dehumanising space. The discussion starts with an overview of decoloniality, resistance movements and black women's positionality in higher education to help set the context in which the participants exist.

A Brief Literature Review: Decolonisation, Resistance Movements And Black Women In Higher Education

Decolonisation of knowledge, power, and being is a long-standing 'turn' from colonial discourse. Increasing calls for decolonisation of universities are informed by decoloniality, not postcolonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018:10), which means that, rather than being satisfied functioning in a context that

exists after colonialism/ postcolonialism, that claims to be free of colonial oppression, one must question everything. Decoloniality, rather than post-coloniality, encourages the questioning of Westernised education systems rooted in profit and which maintain the status quo that keeps poverty alive by continuing to exclude the “ex-colonised”. One must question the commodification of knowledge and important social structures that instil a zero-sum mentality where gains are often made from the oppression and marginalisation of the colonised body (Mignolo, 2018: 40).

As a result of decolonisation, ex-colonised peoples are able to judge and expose Euro-American hypocrisy and deceit. Decoloniality encourages a retelling of the story of humanity and knowledge from the standpoint of those epistemic sites that have suffered from modernity’s negative effects, emphasising appropriations, epistemicides, linguicides, and denials of humanity as part of the history of science. Finally, decolonisation accepts ontological pluralism as a reality that needs “ecologies of knowledge” to be understood (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018:11). The fallist student movement’s understanding of ontological pluralism was evident in the call for curriculum change and diverse hiring practices, so that the knowledge and the scholars might start to pull from diverse local and global experiences, and so that education might become more than just a way to find employment. Instead, it becomes an important tool for addressing poverty, racial discrimination, gender inequality, public health challenges, ecological degradation and many other social ills (Mignolo, 2018:57).

This approach showed that the development of decolonial thinking always involves a double critique, since Western thought was founded on a dichotomy of exclusion, while also showing that defining decolonisation in the academy is only a small part of the global and larger process of decolonising knowledge and being (Mignolo, 2018:50). #FMF, while an important decolonial movement, also shows the danger of what happens when even revolutionary movements fail to adopt a double critique. The gender divide during #FMF shows women are othered even in spaces of liberation and revolution. It was at this moment that the gender tension seemed to prove that the “other” is not encountered but is made. The university operates as a microcosm of contemporary inequality. Mbali Mazibuko (2018, 490) illustrates that during FMF the solidarity was threatened as soon as feminists started questioning patriarchal domination which was becoming heavily visible. It was evident that women carry multiple forms of oppression in the university space. Mazibuko

(2018, 493) argues that the solidarity was threatened by the fact that men benefit from sustaining patriarchy; hence the fallist feminists became unapologetic about challenging the sustainability of patriarchy (Mazibuko, 2018:493).

Narrative Approach as A Solution To Womanist Erasure And Methodology

A narrative approach has been used to represent the participants' experiences. This approach comes from qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is unstructured, flexible and relaxed, and aims to describe and explain a situation, phenomenon, problem or event (Mason, 1994:101). It is important to consider the historical background of the research topic, people's opinions of and responses to issues and detailed descriptions of research issues (Kumar, 2005:12-13). The central research technique was in-depth interviews which were done in a virtual online focus group discussion. Open-ended questions were asked, and participants had the freedom to take the conversation in any direction through their storytelling-like responses. This is not only an important decolonial tool; it is also life-affirming. The participants spoke about not feeling seen and the hurt which ensued when those who were responsible for assisting them were not even willing to listen. Possible solutions were not supported through the institutional bureaucracy required in order to access them. Because of this, it is important to represent some of their stories as they narrated them. It is through the narrative approach that the colonised can begin to re-examine and rediscover themselves, others, and the world around them. This rediscovery helps Africans start to see themselves in empowered ways rather than as an extension of Western discourse.

Narratives can restore the African self that was once eroded by the colonisers, or in this case, uncaring universities that are built on patriarchal racism (wa Thiong'o, 1987:18). This approach does have some challenges because only certain parts of that which was narrated can be represented, and because some information can threaten anonymity. The narrative approach was also used because of its ease of accessibility; in order to avoid veiling the experiences and discussions in complex academic jargon and overly theoretical interpretations. Bell Hooks argues that theory, particularly feminist theory, should be for the everyday. When it is veiled in complex ideology, it alienates those who it should be representing and narrating. These individuals then

end up struggling to see themselves in the writing and how the work could advance them (Hooks, 2000:X).

Scholars such as anthropologist, Halleh Ghorashi (2021:53) speak of using narratives to create a ground of reflective zones to challenge normalised images. In this case these may seem to be just like any other voices on campus, but they represent critical voices of an unsettling normalisation of repression. If the oppressed remain silent, space for the reproduction of such inequalities is created, and silence ends up working as consent. Ghorashi (2021:59) further adds that it is our intellectual task to challenge exclusion and indifference through looking at discursive power and our own agency. Engaging with these three narratives and positioning ourselves as insiders is not only a revival of womanist scholars' agency, but a call to question our role as engaged scholars.

Meeting the Participants: An Overview Of Their Stories

*Thoko joined her institution in 2016 as a mother of one child, *Sibongile. She joined as a New Generation of Academic Programme (nGAP) candidate. This is a development role that gives staff time to focus on their studies by giving them minimal to no undergraduate (UG) teaching. The role also comes with mentorship support, funding for postgraduate studies, conferences, fieldwork and other related costs. Thoko's enrolment was to do her Master's and eventually her PhD. Numerous factors contributed to significant delays in completing her MA, a process which took six years. From the outset, her workspace was inadequate, in a room isolated from the rest of the department. She says the room was loud, it doubled as a storeroom, and was shared by student assistants, contract, junior staff and ad hoc staff. Many of them were not contractually bound to spend their office hours there and would often leave to quieter spaces when they had to focus, something that Thoko, as a permanently employed staff member, could not do. Staff members would come to print or collect paper, and student consultations were chaotic because of the multiple students visiting different staff. She was placed in this room even though there were a few vacant offices. The other major hindrance was that she was never allowed to fulfil her nGAP duties. She was given undergraduate (UG) classes to teach from the first year and often had the biggest teaching load in her department, with no marking assistance. She often single-handedly marked 400 scripts or more per assessment, with students typically having three or four assessments per semester, so she was

constantly marking. She was also assigned an unqualified supervisor, and when she would complain about the supervision or lack of supervision, she was ignored. Finally, the supervisor resigned. This resignation occurred in the middle of the supervisor's disciplinary hearing when other things had come to light and it was now clear the supervisor had misrepresented some of their skills and capabilities. *Thoko was close to finishing her MA at the time and had to be moved to a new supervisor. Therefore, her approach had to shift and what she had been complaining about for years was now obvious: she had basically been supervising herself.

For years she also battled with disappearing funds. She is still struggling with this matter, and no one can account for where her funds went. Lockdown affected her work just as it did other people's, but she experienced a lack of support, and for about a year she had no access to a working computer and struggled to give even her online classes. While struggling to stay afloat with the social, professional and personal challenges that came with the pandemic, the MA became less of a priority for a full year. After a long fight she finally got a laptop to help her with her MA and classes in 2021.

*Thandazile joined her institution in 2018, she had already been accepted to do her PhD for 2019 at a different institution to the one at which she was working. She struggled to get her institution to pay for her PhD studies at the other institution even though during her interview they had promised her that they would do so. She paid for her own tuition in 2019, but the lack of support she got from her department, broken promises, and heavy UG teaching load forced her to move her PhD to the university she is employed at. She thought that this would make life easier. She was in debt from paying her own tuition and had last worked on her proposal at the beginning of 2019, meaning she had wasted the whole year she had paid for. Her PhD proposal was strong because she had travelled to her study institution to present her work; a trip which she paid for herself. Her work was supported at departmental level and was ready for ethical clearance, all that was missing was an institutional letter of support from the department where she was employed. The letter had to state that the department supported her study especially because she was doing an ethnographic study which at some point would require her to spend six months or more in the field. This could be done all at once or broken up to accommodate her work commitments. Her Head of Department (HOD) called her fieldwork plan "a holiday" and refused to support it. Even though she insisted the HOD speak to her supervisor, he was uninterested. Moving

her research to the institution she was employed at was supposed to make life easier especially because she was basically ready for ethical clearance at her previous institution, and she moved her study in 2020. The change in supervisors did not cause much delay or a big shift in approach. What delayed her was the ethics process, which took over nine months, only finally being approved in 2021. Her funders took away 2020's budget. This made concluding fieldwork challenging because she was working with half the budget and had to spend a lot of her own money to do it, putting her even deeper in debt.

The pandemic also meant that she had to contribute even more towards her family as some lost jobs. She worked hard to get a promotion in 2020 but was disappointed to see it was mostly a title change because the financial increase was small, and she had received bigger general annual increases than her promotion in the past. Her HOD, whilst persuading her to join the university, had convinced her that with her hard work, she would get a big promotion that might almost double her salary in a year or two. He raised this when she was considering turning down the offer because the university was struggling to match or beat her previous salary. When challenging the small promotion, her HOD seemed aloof and pretended not to remember the discussion. She was told the policy had changed and promotions did not work as they did before and was encouraged by Human Resources (HR) that the new policy allowed for staff to apply for promotions every six months. A year later, she had published in various spaces, written technical reports for corporate and education clients, worked in policy, and had amassed international partnerships. She therefore decided to apply again. Her HOD rejected her application and suggested the promotions committee do the same. He told her she was too ambitious, told her she was not ready for another promotion despite having mentioned previously in shock, hearing her list her achievements, that she was doing work that even professors were not doing. She took the issue up with the faculty and the response was the same as the department; finally, she went to HR. She gave up and threw herself back into her PhD when a senior member of HR lied about certain things that had to do with her process. HR finally asked her to call for clarity, but during this call, they yelled at her, calling her entitled and spoiled. They refused to read her promotion application, and when she asked that the matter be escalated to top management, they refused. They subtly threatened to fire her by suggesting that her promotion from junior lecturer to lecturer at the end of 2020 meant that she was on two-year probation again and all probation

rules apply, including dismissals based solely at the employer's discretion even if there is no wrongdoing. Despite the delays and challenges, and thanks to some of the relief her funding did provide, *Thandazile is doing her fourth year of her PhD and is confident it is her final year.

*Andile joined her university in 2015 and like *Thandazile, there was no full transparency with her appointment to a division that dealt with engaged scholarship. She knew she was taking a significant pay cut from her old job to pursue her goal of being an academic, but she was shocked upon receiving her first salary to realise how big the cut was. She had been promised tuition fees for PhD studies and had also been told residence on campus was affordable, only to be placed in one of the new and most expensive PG residences on campus. Her PhD research has a strong engaged scholarship approach, the inspiration for which came from her previous Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) work and other community service work. She eventually applied for PhD funding elsewhere. She joined the fallist protests because she herself had struggled to find funding. Other staff criticised her for standing with the students and some questioned why she would do it because she had recently been awarded a very good grant to study and had a salary. By the end of 2015, her supervisor was leaving the university, but he did not tell her. He had planned to move her to a different department. She was uncomfortable with the lack of communication and refused to change departments. Her supervisor was furious and told her that he had good intentions for her but since loyalty was important to him, he had decided that he was no longer interested in her PhD study.

*Andile carved her own plan and eventually landed a contract lecturing job at the same institution in 2016. They disregarded her MA when they hired her and paid her a junior lecturer rate; she had to fight to be appointed as a lecturer. Even when HR decided to correct the contract, there was no back pay. The first few months were the hardest as she could not believe that she finally had a job she loved and dreamt of, but it came with no support. At that point she did not even have access to the locked bathroom. After futile attempts to request a bathroom key, she eventually had to threaten to stop coming to work for them to finally get her a key. When she finally settled in, she was excited to get back to her research at long last, but the teaching load was overwhelming. The senior colleague she taught with, who would later become one of her supervisors, would purposefully give her more work and more scripts to mark, with no markers. With difficulty, after a

year as a lecturer, she resigned, because she had not touched her PhD since 2015. In 2017 she threw all her efforts into her PhD, there were changes to her work because of the change of supervisors and she had already lost time looking for supervisors. She finally completed her proposal and went to the ethics committee for the first time three years into her study. She remained stuck at Ethics for 18 months, often being rejected for grammar and spelling issues, even giving new corrections with every submission. At some point they insisted she translate her interviews to an African language even though all her participants were working professionals who even preferred to be interviewed in English because some of the industry-specific words might not exist in African languages. She spent a lot of money on editors and translators, only to find out there was no one at Ethics who spoke African languages who could make sure she translated properly and was not causing harm. In 2020 the lockdown caused tremendous delays on her work, and in 2021 she had a mental breakdown and almost gave up on her study. She was told she needed to stay registered and would be provided with provisional registrations due to the breakdown. However, in 2022 she discovered she was blocked from registration due to owing the university money. She still had to fight again for registration and constantly got reminders that her registration was conditional until she had paid the outstanding balance. Andile hopes to complete her PhD in 2023. Even though there are still challenges, she is in a better place now and has decided to complete her study at a distance from her university and in a different town to where her campus is. The university continues threatening her about fees to date.

Shared Oppression: Seeing Ourselves in the Participants' Stories

All three women moved to academia from the NGO environment. They had thriving careers in the NGO space and moved to the university space because they wanted to study further and had a passion for education. They are all women of colour; another reason why we refer to their womanist experiences, rather than their feminist experiences. Womanism is a term coined by Alice Walker, a novelist, activist and poet. Womanism refers specifically to the experiences of black women or women of colour; experiences which are not adequately represented in feminism, even though their contributions have historically shaped much of feminist discourse (Walker, 1983:xi). Historical and

contemporary feminism has ignored the struggles and contributions of black women. Early feminist suffragette struggles in the 19th century disregarded the exclusion of black women in discussions on who should have the right to vote. This even prompted formerly enslaved abolitionist and women's rights activist, Sojourner Truth, to write a poem titled; *Ain't I a woman?* in 1851 (Humez, 1996:44). Second-wave liberal feminism in the 1960s was also influenced by the expressions and fights of black women within the civil rights movement. But feminism failed to support the black struggle they drew inspiration from and only elevated the contributions of white women within the feminist movement (Langston, 1998:158). It is for this reason that activists like Walker adopt the womanist theoretical discussion. Womanism is about black women's ability to self-determine and is concerned with the sexism and racism faced by black women. Western feminists' engagement with feminism is at times at the expense of black women who end up being excluded. In fact, some of the hardships some of our participants have had to endure have come from white feminists in their institutions who have masqueraded as friends and allies, only to later marginalise and withhold support as they experience various challenges. And so, just like the discussions from Walker and feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins (1996:10 & 11), we start to see through the participants' experiences that, white women are a part of the problem that contributes to the marginalisation of black women.

Another thing the participants have in common is that they are all young and believed that their womanist expressions would find the most acceptance in academia, because universities are supposed to be liberal and accepting places of learning and discourse. Furthermore, they are PG students and lecturers at their respective institutions. Their role of straddling two very different functions in their universities brings its own complexities. They have to constantly navigate their insider/ outsider positionality in the institutions. Being a staff member often comes with certain advantages, even if it is in just the way people treat you and show you a level of professionalism and respect. But because in some ways, they are not fully staff, or they are both staff and students, they never fully access the privileges of being staff. In some ways they are outsiders, and not really staff, because they have far more in common with students based on how they are treated and at times undermined. However, they are also not students, and it is hard for them to find comfort in student struggles because students might not see them as students and might even associate them with the whole uncaring system of which they

appear to be a part. They also have to be careful especially when there are sparks of student protests; if they are seen to be supporting the actions of protesting students, they could experience further discrimination. So, they are outsiders even as students, although materially they are also in a far better position than students and enjoy certain liberties that students do not. The fluidity of their insiderness and outsidership can be unsettling (Naples 1996, 84). Fluidity can be important because it brings a certain level of flexibility. But when the outsidership of junior staff is used against them, especially in relation to their staff role, it can create lack of stability and be disempowering. *Thandazile's discussion on the challenges with getting ethical clearance and their slow response which was threatening her research and funding shows the complexities of the insider/outsider challenges, of balancing being a student and a staff member. *Thandazile adds (interview with authors 2022);

The responses to my ethical clearance submissions were taking longer than usual to come. I had already been rejected once over an IT error that made it look like I had not uploaded certain documents. The error was later discovered. I was then told to resubmit anyway because my application was strong. But when feedback took longer than usual to come after the second submission as well, I reached out to Ethics to find out what was the delay. I was told, as a staff member I should be more patient and have more understanding because I understand the extreme amount of pressure we are all under and that things get delayed sometimes. I backed off, when the feedback finally came I was rejected for things like not using Afrikaans questionnaires, small grammar errors, and other issues that had nothing to do with the ethics process. When I questioned why I had been rejected, given the IT error and the promise that had been made after my first submission, the same person who had told me to have more grace for her as a member of staff now told me that she does not answer to students, that I had no right to access her, and that if I wanted to talk to her, it should be through my supervisor.

Identity is important to people; even more so when navigating difficulties, as individuals often get support from the groups they identify with. In the workplace, identity helps people to fit into the workplace culture and find some sense of belonging within the organisation. It creates a crisis for people like *Thandazile to feel like they are finding belonging when senior staff members confide in them about their challenges, only to later on be rejected and harmed by them. It becomes difficult for the person to make sense of who they are within the institution, what value they bring and why their

role is important (Reissner, 2010:288). This can create a kind of dissonance towards the work and their role in the institution. Some become content with remaining in junior roles and give up any ambition to publish, complete their studies and make it to senior roles. This is as they realise the kind of support they need will not be provided. Departments typically see the goal to publish as a personal goal rather than an organisational one in which lecturers should be supported. Alternative individuals, especially womanists, realise they must give up a lot of the individual identity to fit into the collective identity of their department/ university, this also threatens creativity as newness and implementation of new strategies can be frowned upon (Shange, 2022; Reissner, 2010:297).

*Thandazile later mentioned that she had avoided reporting the committee for the first rejection based on the error because she understands the difficulties staff face. She did not want to get them into trouble for something that was no one's fault. She related to them as staff, only to later on feel alienation when they used her insidership and outsidership to not only reject her ethics, but also undermine her as a staff member. Workplace culture is also how people often access resources that are provided by their social environment (Thornton, 1988:24). One can say the resource here was the ethical clearance or at least clearer communication from the Ethics Committee on what she needed to do to get ethical approval. Culture in social spaces is not equally accessible to all and some have more power to shape the culture and determine who gets to enjoy the resources that culture provides (Thornton 1988, 25). This is especially true for universities in South Africa and arguably globally, where men and white people typically have more access and more power to wield and control the institutional culture. White people and men become wary or suspicious of the changes and diversifying happening in universities, because these might change their positionality and power roles in the institutions. So, it is not uncommon for them to use structures such as Ethics to eliminate or side-track the perceived threat coming with the new wave of calls for decolonisation. They might try to control the study by raising arbitrary restrictions and going beyond the limits of the Ethics Committee by engaging in content in which they do not have expertise (Cannella & Lincoln 2007, 315 ; Schrag 2011, 120). This is particularly worrying when the research under scrutiny is decolonial discourse. This might force some to abandon it altogether or reproduce destructive Western discourse that decolonial theories seek to address. This can also be stifling to candidates who might

end up feeling limited in their research approach, and beyond the candidate, it threatens the discourse. halting the calls for decolonised institutions (Shange 2021, 4 & 6).

As authors, we can relate to the participants' struggle to navigate her insiderness/outsiderness as we balance our studies with often massive UG teaching and learning responsibilities. Some of us are even hired under developmental roles like nGAP. In the long run, nGAP hopes to address the shortage of lecturers, especially senior lecturers, who can provide much-needed supervision to the growing postgraduate (PG) cohort. This programme requires the candidate to do minimal to no UG teaching and learning while they focus on their PG research, engaged scholarship or publishing in academic books and journals. And like *Thandazile, we have all faced challenges with navigating ethics, the worst of which resulted in one of us being delayed for two years

Womanists are not Welcome Here: The Victimisation of Black Women Scholars

The fact that I was a parent was frowned upon, and that I was pregnant yet again was seen as time-wasting. I was hurt by the department associating parenting with unproductivity. Falling pregnant with my second child immediately painted me as unreliable and unprofessional. When I challenged the lack of support I received, which led to my research being delayed, my having children was thrown back in my face as the reason for my challenges...A senior colleague once said in a meeting, with confidence that if the younger academics are to make it, they should let go of the ideals of having any sort of life outside of academia, that marriage and children are a far-fetched dream - this is whilst I was the only parent, and the only black woman in the room...This was not the treatment I expected from a liberal space. As a Christian woman, I thought I would even relate to the Christian religious foundation of most South African universities. My religion has taught me to love, and to be respectful and humble, but I have never received the same from the university. I eventually realised that even similarities in religious sentiments or the new decolonial agendas are not going to help me find acceptance in this space because it is me the space hates. I am a black body, a woman and child bearer. I am the thing that the university and the world targets to reject and marginalise. (*Thoko, interview with authors, 2022).

*Thoko's victimisation is important to make sense of and acknowledge. The study of victimology considers the various ways people regard themselves as victims. It acknowledges that actions, regardless of the intentions behind them, may be experienced as victimising by the next person. Victimology argues that the concept of victimhood is defined differently based on culture and society (Fohring, 2018:5). Scholars in this field are sensitised to how people can be victimised and that offending actions can only be interpreted based on how the next person experiences their treatment. One would expect that scholars would express the most empathy towards people, because of their deeper intellectual understanding of society. But they often ignore the discourse they often teach, write about and build strong careers on. When you operate from the fact that people are naïve or ignorant, you almost have an excuse for their actions. Even Jesus recognises this on the cross when He says "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (The Holy Bible, Luke 23:34). However, in academia, they do know what they are doing; in fact, they know better. And when these levels of victimisation exist in the academy, it brings the whole system into question and threatens the very existence of universities. One might rightfully question how people can trust uncaring and violent spaces like universities to lead society and come up with solutions to its problems when academics behave in violent ways themselves. They are the same perpetrators and oppressors they write and teach about, using their intellect to hide their intentions and target those they see as "weak".

In his book *Crime and Community*, labelling theorist and criminologist, Frank Tannenbaum defined "tagging" as the process whereby an individual is negatively defined by societies (Bernburg, 2009:189). He believed that once a person has been defined and tagged as 'bad', few legitimate opportunities will remain open to them. The frustration of being seen as lazy and the constant pressure black women have to prove themselves emanates from how people see them and "tag" them before knowing them. Critical Race Theorist, Cornel West has a similar discussion; he writes about black nihilism. It is a kind of angst, hopelessness and self-hate that black people feel towards themselves when whiteness has tagged blackness as inferior (West, 1994:23). It sometimes leads to violence, especially towards more marginalised groups like women or children. It also causes inward anger as the person slowly becomes the thing they are often stereotypically against.

The anger towards the oppressor and need for liberation become more challenging to express. The inward anger further promotes hate and a sense

of worthlessness, while self-hate is reinforced by the environment, broken communities, lack of resources and support structures (Warren, 2015:225). West and civil rights leaders like Dr Martin Luther King Jr suggested that black nihilism can be treated with love, restoration of the black being, politics of conversation or a new kind of politics that needs care and constant analysis (Warren, 2015:215). It is therefore important for institutions striving to decolonise to become truly inclusive and rid themselves of the stereotypes and tags they place on black women and consider love and care in policies and their operations.

Womanist Presence in Universities and the Rise of Crisis of Black Masculinity

“During this PhD journey, an HOD looked at me with a straight face and told me that he didn’t think there was racism in this department or in the university. Actually, he cannot see any of his staff capable of being racist. But we still see overt and covert racism, exclusion, and indifference everywhere in our experiences as junior staff. Most South African universities are built on racism and segregation. And here is the black senior scholar telling me he thinks there is no racism here, when I have even had to fight with a white woman for months for a basic human right, like access to the toilet” (*Andile, interview with authors, 2022).

Black men in academia often marginalise or ignore black women. Usually because black men are the dominant non-white group, the instinct as junior scholars are to go under their wing and be mentored by them. One believes the shared trauma of being black and oppressed will unite, that black men will see themselves in black women or see a struggling sister or daughter. But at times black women experience the harshest treatment from black men (Shange, 2017:60). By claiming there is no racism, not only did her HOD fail to protect *Andile when she was being victimised, he also disregarded her hurt by invalidating her concerns about racism.

Black men also typically overlook womanist challenges; they see them as women complaining, they fail to see the commonalities between their own racial oppression and those of women and different gender groups. They also often see women, especially in the workplace, as a threat to their own success and livelihood. They do not believe there is enough space on the table for black women and men, and so they find ways to exclude black women. Feminist

scholars refer to this as a crisis of masculinity, a phenomenon which was most obvious in European post-war society. Men constructed a lot of their ideas about what it means to be a man around work, the ability to provide for the family and so on (Morgan, 2006:109). When they could no longer do this upon returning from war, they started to question their manliness, thus creating this crisis of masculinity. This crisis of masculinity is often directed towards women in violent forms, especially in the home (Morgan, 2006:111). In the workplace, it looks like *Andile's pain being undermined or *Thandazile's promotion being intentionally disrupted by her black male HOD and faculty head. They allow patriarchy and whiteness to constantly reproduce themselves at the expense of junior staff.

Finding Solutions in Emerging Decolonial Scholars

Emerging decolonial scholars like Ntando Sindane (2021, 238) might argue that the reason why people still experience these kinds of challenges in higher education and society is because the focus is often on transformation rather than decolonisation. He argues that these two often get used interchangeably whilst representing different things. Sindane (2021:243) argues that "decoloniality frames the starting point of decolonisation as studying the three localities of coloniality, namely the coloniality of Being, Power, and Knowledge. To be sure, the coloniality of Being has to do with how the coloniser dismembered the 'Being' of colonised bodies."

The dismembering black colonised body still exists in higher education, where the colonised body is seen as incomplete, lacking or even as a non-being (Shange, 2021:11; Sindane, 2021:244). Transformation suggests there is some level of equality between people and can only be implemented when people are relatively equal, not when some have had their humanity stripped from them. Transformation can only take place when colonial lingering ceases to exist. These colonial lingering create power imbalances, suggesting that whiteness and manliness are superior to blackness, womanhood and other marginalised groups, and undermine any contributions to knowledge coming from women, people of colour or anyone that does not fit into the "superior white man ideal" (Shange 2017, 61 & 65).

Finding Comfort and Success in Hostile Universities

While theory is important for finding solutions, tangible ways people find comfort and strength are crucial. Here we felt it best to leave the participants' views as they are, without going too deep into a discussion or interpreting them. This is to help with maintaining the narrative tradition of allowing those who have been marginalised to control and tell their own history and experiences (wa Thiong'o 1987, 18). The one observation is that few of the participants find comfort and solutions in the university or their departments/faculty, which reflects just how lonely a space a university can be for women and people of colour. What is also important from their responses is networks and connections; social or professional networks are important, it is not possible to go through this journey alone. It is also important to mention that all the people who supported these participants institutionally were women of colour, they showed each other love, kindness and caring. This is what the participants had to say about how they find comfort in their difficult journeys:

For me it's just looking at the women that have made it. Guys, if you look at people like Prof Puleng *Lenka Bula*. That's why even when a friend was struggling a few weeks ago, I told her to follow the story of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson because she had a lot in common with her and were in similar professions. These women don't die when they bury them, they multiply in other ways, they multiply, in you and me, these women fight... So, it's important to really have a support structure. Even my brother will tell me to go on and bloody fight, I didn't bring you up to give up. My family and friends are really there for me...In the institution, *Kim really supported me. *Kim (one of her PG research interview participants) opened all these doors for me to be taken with on research field trips on the institution's budget. She would give me someone that would go with me to some of these places in the field I had to visit. She was already in the pits with her own PG studies and facing similar exclusion we are facing and she still helped me. I saw now she is *Dr Kim and that inspired me to push because we used to cry together, she would close the door and we would pray in her office. She and some of the staff from her office would sometimes even take me in their own cars to the field when I didn't know how I would get there (*Andile, interview with author, 2022).

I think... I think for me, my saving grace is actually my little babies, because I cannot fail them by failing myself. If I say I'm giving up, I can't do this anymore. I'm already saying, you know, *Sibongile and *Cairo, you'll get to this point, but you won't be

able to break any more ceilings. I'm working so that their lives can be easier to a certain extent even if I'm not the richest woman in the world... Look in my family, I was the first graduate from a university, but there were a lot of difficulties and challenges... I want to be able to say to them [the children] that I did it with all these difficulties, you guys have the resources, you guys have the ability to do it... You can change the entire world... There are friendships that I lean on because they support me and we have the same shared oppression, so my problems don't feel like they are just mine, it is a general institutional disease.

I find my comfort in feminist theory, it helps me make sense of what is happening to me and why and sometimes it even offers solutions. I love to write, so that is my other comfort, and it has led to many career successes and being acknowledged outside of the academy. It feels good to see my work impact people's lives. I have also been fortunate enough to have senior womanist mentors, including my PhD supervisor, she makes me feel like I can do anything and restores me when I doubt myself. They all push me to take on new opportunities even when I am scared. I also speak to my ancestor through ukuphahla (meditating) but sometimes even this can be triggering because I run out of prayers. (*Thandazile, interview with author, 2022).

Conclusion

The poor representation of women is not an issue that is unique to higher education, it is a symptom of colonialism and apartheid that democratic society has been unwilling or unable to correct. Women are underrepresented everywhere: in politics, in policy-making, leadership, in religious structures, corporate spaces and even in the family (Alison, Sithole & Williamson, 2010:71). The reason we focused on universities is because of the participants' experiences as scholars. We wanted to narrate their experiences and show how they intersect with ours. Universities globally and especially in South Africa, have been spaces for debate; they have led or sparked social change that led to the liberation of South Africa. When they systematically oppress womanist scholars and students, they betray the liberties and ideals they once stood for. They also undermine the discourse they teach and at times promote, ideas coming from race and feminist discussions like the importance of understanding intersectional struggles in order to ensure equality.

This paper has discussed these intersectionalities by pulling from the works of Walker and her concern with how black women are not adequately represented in feminist struggles. We further show the additional conflict and displacement black women experience when they are marginalised by black men. We turn to the crisis of masculinity and black nihilism to make sense of this phenomena. Finally, we end with reflections from the participants who narrate how they cope, how they create a supportive space with and for other women. These reflections are supported by decolonial analysis on the importance of instilling the personhood that has been desecrated by colonialism in Africa. Universities must do this in every effort they adopt to try and make the space more supportive and welcoming of marginalised groups.

Universities should be a fair space, where women are not constantly having to prove themselves. They should understand that women, although in this space, still function in a society where they are primarily caregivers, not simply of their children, but their parents, other family members, neighbours and friends. By simply being a woman, more is expected of us. Therefore, an institution that does not take this into consideration is not decolonised or inclusive. Women deserve similar ease to men, especially in places of higher learning that demand high-functioning individuals to contribute to multiple spaces including teaching and learning, engaged scholarship, research and leadership. Scholars are expected to juggle all of these roles without adequate tools or support. These challenges often come from within; they come from the junior staff's own departments and faculties. These women struggle to meaningfully integrate into workplace culture as they navigate these challenges, because in some ways they are neither staff nor students. They exist in an in-between space, wrestling to exist.

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