CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 Findings

The intention of this study was to discover how black women read representations of black women in South African films. This was achieved through conducting an ethnographic study of women’s interpretation of *Fools*. Jacqueline Bobo’s *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) was used as a model in order to explore how black South African women read films that claim to represent them.

In the previous chapters I have considered how feminist theorists have encouraged the involvement of the recipient in the interpretation of literary material. The research drew on the readings of bell hooks and Jacqueline Bobo as the theoretical foundation regarding black female spectatorship. Bobo and hooks go further to gather women in groups and watch specific films to observe responses and later encourage the women to discuss their responses.

As it has already been pointed out, hooks and Bobo are African-American women who have a lot in common as they are both interested in the notion of women interpreting texts that represent them. Though these women are black, they are Americans with different priorities from black women in Africa. Alile Sharon Larkin (1998:158) does indicate that as a black woman she experiences all areas of oppression – economic, racial and sexual.

Though the basis of my research derives from Bobo (1995), I differ with her through my approach to issues of class. I was careful not to concentrate on one class (middle class) as in the case of Bobo. Bobo chose her spectators only from
the middle class while my spectators were black women across all classes from different ideological and contextual (rural, township, urban) locations.

Ifi Amadiume, to a large extent shares Sharon Larkin’s concern with economic issues that have affected black women in Africa as well as influence their needs. Thus, in relation to my study, Sharon Larkin and Amadiume highlight concerns affecting my interviewees as spectators, as black women in South Africa from disadvantaged backgrounds and come from the historical experience of apartheid. Comparing and contrasting Amadiume’s work with the two already mentioned American theorists, Jacqueline Bobo and bell hooks, it is obvious that Amadiume comes from a completely different background and shares some of the concerns expressed by the spectators.

One should also bear in mind that black women in America are a minority while black women in South Africa are in the majority. This majority is incapacitated as the filmmakers fail to recognise the historical shift from apartheid to democracy that has impacted on the lives of these women. While the women are aware that they are now constitutionally represented, civil society has not sufficiently evolved to represent their interests and concerns.

There is an interesting synergy between African American theoretical paradigm and Amadiume. Amadiume is concerned with the abuse of girl-children who are forced into marriage before time brought on by the unfortunate economic and political circumstances still lurking in African countries. According to Amadiume, while the American women are aware of their rights, black women in Africa are subject to lack of such knowledge, which makes them vulnerable to traditional structures of patriarchal oppression. Women in Africa are subject to abject poverty. However, my interviewees contrast Amadiume. It is evident from their responses to Fools that they are very much aware of their rights though the question remains, can they access these rights?
Black women in Africa, according to Amadiume have to prioritise the concerns of their family over their own personal rights, forcing them to sacrifice some of their needs for survival of the larger family or community. It is circumstances of poverty that have pushed them to desperate measures.

After four interview sittings with three groups composed of three generations accordingly, I drew the following conclusions from the women's interpretation of *Fools*; black women in South Africa are experiencing a historical shift that is very prominent. Moreover, this has obviously contributed to the fact that they are seriously yearning for instrumental change in the representations of black women in South African cinema. Therefore, the impact of the historical shift in South Africa on black women makes them desire representations which reflect the political and social changes they are experiencing.

Three generations of women are experiencing change from patriarchal oppression in society. From the time of the making of *Fools* in 1994, the same era of the first democratic elections in South Africa to 2004, women have become increasingly familiar with their rights and are impatient with the dutiful behaviour of women reflected in the film. Women in South Africa under apartheid while knowledgeable about the rights of women did not have the space as black women to practically achieve what they deserve. For example, as my spectators indicate, Nosipho is a nurse and knows about women and human rights. However we see her succumbing to maltreatment by her husband.

When watching *Fools* with all groups of women, one could easily recognize the fact that though the two groups of elder generations identify with the elderly women characters, they were questioning issues that relate to characters' behaviour, especially their submissiveness. This is evidently brought about by the fact that these women have been affected by change in the country. They now look at matters with different eyes and are responding accordingly due to their
experience. Therefore, the women’s experiences constitute their interpretation of the texts that represent them.

Looking at the two groups of the elder generations, I have observed that if they had had an opportunity to watch Fools five or more years earlier, they would have uttered different views from what they are expressing today. This is because these women have at a certain point in time been under the same circumstances as women characters in Fools. Back then they behaved more or less like these characters. However, as a result of change and exposure to their rights, they now see things differently. They are now empowered by the historical changes.

The second group of women aged between 25 and 46 as I indicated before, only came to Johannesburg later in their lives to seek jobs and some ended up marrying in the city while others still go back home for holidays and important matters. This means at a certain point in their lives they were just women from a village or rural context with not much exposure to women’s rights, especially during the political climate they lived under.

With the eldest generation, they recall well that the street committees used to comprise of men only. When this happened they were not very young and they very much followed the society’s rules despite the fact that they had opportunities for better education. However, things have changed and so has their thinking. Therefore they cannot tolerate the submissive behaviour of female characters as it only shows continued exploitation of women.

For the youngest generation, their impatience towards the older generation is understandable; the submissive behaviour of women characters in the film is intolerable to the younger generation. This is a generation that never really suffered the laws of apartheid directly. Their growing up coincides with the historical shift; concern for education of women and growing concern with human rights. The younger sample group are advantaged as they have also acquired
better education than the Bantu education that women in other groups had to endure. Therefore this is a better-informed group that truly perceives the submissive behaviour of women characters in *Fools* as sometimes foolish indeed.

Representations of women need to mirror the changes in South African society. There should be structural change resulting in authentic and credible modes of representations of women reclaiming power. Not only should women be knowledgeable about their rights but also exercise them. As the interviewees have indicated, they would love to see representations of women in happier situations instead of women bickering among themselves. They would love to see women who take action against perpetrators hurting their children instead of submissive women who leave everything in the hands of men that come up with decisions that are only oppressive and unfair to women.

During the screening of *Fools* some of the women commented, “I would love to see Nosipho at work where she is probably happy.” From the above quote, women in a way offer alternative representations from those offered. They make it clear that the existing representations are merely assumptions not their true experiences. These women are asking for authenticity. Men make assumptions about women therefore women are calling for representations that are different, which reflect their knowledge or experiences.

The middle generation among the interviewees calls out for difference in behaviour of women in relationships, especially men-women relationships. They do not understand Nosipho’s behaviour at all and this is a woman who is supposed to represent this particular generation. Though they are still reserved and easily get shocked by Busi’s forwardness, their shift is obvious as they confess that there is no way they would leave their homes like Nosipho did. They also indicate that they would demand an explanation for their husbands’ behaviour if he ever raped a little girl. This further indicates how open-minded black women in South Africa are as they clearly indicate that they would seek
professional help before just giving up on their marriages. This change has clearly been brought by the historical and political shift. Therefore, Amadiume’s concern about women succumbing as a result of hunger is no longer the case from these women’s responses to Fools.

This historical shift has created a historical turn from disempowerment and re-empowered women with powerful constitutional rights. There are many interesting changes brought about by this historical shift thus women expect filmmakers and everyone to embrace this shift and create positive meanings and initiate constructive images.

Magogodi in his essay, “Sexuality, Power, and the Black Body in Mapantsula and Fools” (2003), encourages new representations of women. He, like the spectators, appeals for instrumental change. He does this by highlighting the fact that Suleman’s exclusion of women from important community matters, such as the decision about Zamani’s future as a teacher, is a failure to make women equal partners in shaping the destiny of the nation. Instead, women are seen as mere sexual partners. For example, Zamani sees Mimi as a sexual object not as a student.

The fact that Ntozakhe is not credited with leadership qualities is a problematic issue. In watching Fools, Zani is portrayed with leadership qualities as he is also introduced to Zamani’s pupils as “one who possesses the truth of light.” Ntozakhe like Zani studied in Swaziland and has acquired equivalent education to that of Zani yet she is never glorified in the film as the “one with knowledge.” As Magogodi puts it, “Suleman’s portrayal of Ntozakhe as a mere girlfriend derives from the social referent he is attempting to represent,” (2003:195). Therefore Magogodi indicates that Suleman can be faulted for not inserting a female character at the centre of his narrative. Rather women in the film are credited with a fragile form of sisterhood, as they are seen with an internal strife among themselves during the preparation for the wedding celebration.
Magogodi asks, are women mere bodies without voices? Magogodi asks this question referring to the scene where women are seen working together for the first time and this happens the day Mimi is bleeding as MaButhelezi is passing a bucket to Nosipho. However, this scene occurs in silence.

When one refers to South African history, black women in South Africa have played a major role in fighting the apartheid system. They collectively fought against the pass laws in 1956. They took care of families under difficult circumstances and managed to keep the black community intact. Many families were left fatherless when men had to leave homes to join the training camps in the fight against apartheid. Others were sent to exile while others went to jail. A black woman would raise children and educate them alone. The black culture was still manifesting despite all the problems a black family endured under the supervision of a black woman. Therefore, when they marched through the streets indicating vividly their dissatisfaction with the pass laws, it was a lucid indication that black women in South Africa have not exactly been voiceless.

When interviewed by Olivier Bartlet about Fools, Suleman responds to the following question; the women remain dignified and silent vis-à-vis the men: is that typical of South African women? The response is as follows, “It reflects a political situation and a background custom. Under Apartheid, women were not able to choose their destiny and found themselves imprisoned in their own homes. When they pack their bags to leave, I see it as a hopeful act. Free of Apartheid, women today have choice to say enough is enough.” As much as Suleman attempts to portray the dual oppressions and the cultural structures, what he fails to note before this response is black women’s contribution in the making of South Africa that is free of apartheid.

Women have been part of the liberation struggle. South Africa’s black women such as Winnie Mandela could never be referred to as women imprisoned in their
homes as Suleman claims. Not only women involved in politics directly could be said to have taken part in the struggle but also women in other fields had their share of continuing and contributing to the struggle. Musicians also expressed through songs expressions to keep black community stronger. Famous songs that ended up popular countrywide and are still growing stronger were sung and performed by women even though such songs were not allowed by the rulers then. *Khauleza* by Miriam Makeba, *Not yet Uhuru* by Letta Mbuli and of course music by Dorothy Masuka are interesting songs that brought hope and eventually change to the lives of black people during the struggle.

So, what Suleman says about women being imprisoned in their homes is highly debatable. Black women in South Africa cannot exactly be quoted as historically silent. This again continues to emphasize the urgency for progressive representations of women in South Africa. By progressive I refer to those representations that reflect social transformation and successful women who are able to exercise their rights. Moreover, representations that recognize black women’s contribution socially, economically and also politically.

During one of the interviews Suleman indicates, “*Fools* is a mirror that I extend to them (politicians). For today and for tomorrow to ask themselves, ‘Did something change at the end of three years of democracy?’” He continues, “In South Africa, people are conscious and responsible, they are not asking for everything. Just a drop of change.” This in a way is ironic as my spectators on the other hand are also requesting change only that their request is towards progressive representations of black women in South African films.

Magogodi concludes by suggesting, “The need to release black sexuality and gender portrayals from colonial, apartheid, and patriarchal imaginaries must be stressed, particularly in terms of what that means for women.” (2003:200).
Some of the questions asked by Magogodi and the issues he raises are put forth by the three generations interviewed in this case study. While Magogodi raises the theoretical need for alternative representations, this research on the other hand endorses this assertion while also offering sustained empirical data to show how and why women feel these representations are not images they can identify with. What is more interesting is that Magogodi is a black South African man who happens to share the same feelings as black women spectators in South Africa. He therefore emerges as an intellectual, an academic addressing problems that concern representations of black women in cinema.

Magogodi’s worry is close to the conclusion drawn from subjects raised when women were watching *Fools*. The women call for change that will result in authentic as well as credible representations of women. The youngest of the generations of women interviewed ask, “Should we always see suffering from the side of women. Does the filmmaker imply that all that women do is suffer and fight among themselves?” They go further to ask, “Is this how he perceives his wife?” It is at this point that Magogodi asks (2003:198), “Are we therefore to conclude that female subjectivity in films directed by men are open to mistreatment?”

In other parts of Africa, films such as Zimbabwe’s *Neria* (1992) by Godwin Mawuru, and Senegal’s *Hyenas* (1992) by Djibril Mamberty as well as *The Little Girl Who Sold The Sun* (1999) are about social transformations and also designed to reposition women. Women in these films are finally avenged from their plight resulting from patriarchy and poverty. Neria is a woman whose husband dies at an early age. However, they had together achieved a comfortable life in the urban area. After her husband’s death she is forced to leave her house by her late husband’s elder brother claiming that as the head of the family, he is automatically heir to his brother’s property. Neria is told to go back to the village. She is deprived access from her home, money in the bank but worse, her children. However, this woman perseveres against all odds until justice is achieved and she retrieves all her rightful belongings.
In *Hyenas* (1992) a woman, Ramatou, who had been judged unfairly also works hard to take revenge against the society that failed to protect her at a tender age, while in *The Little Girl Who Sold The Sun* (1999), a frail girl, Sili Laam, fights poverty and deformity with such incredible strength. She comes out a winner undaunted by her gender or her leg because of her big aspiring heart. These are examples of positive and progressive representations of black women in other African countries.

Though *Fools* is a film produced in 1997, set in the late1980’s, its making can be related back to 1994 which is the year that South Africa achieved its first democratic elections. Thus, it is possible for the themes it employs to be influenced by the former political system. However, one still goes to the cinema today hoping to see change in representations of women in South African films yet unfortunately this is not the case. Looking at *Yesterday* (Darrell James Roodt), a film produced in 2004; exactly ten years after South Africa obtained its independence, the story is not representative of experiences of women living with HIV/AIDS.

The portrayal of women in *Yesterday* is very much debatable in terms of representations of black women. One witnesses the “sangoma”, traditional healer, in the village leading the rest of women villagers in stigmatisation of Yesterday and her family. The only woman who seems to be good to this HIV infected family is a teacher. Does this mean uneducated people lack humanity? And that only well-read people can feel pity and empathize with the ill? Simple human kindness of black women does not exist in *Yesterday*.

Africa has been invaded by different kinds of illnesses and black societies have always remained intact with women in the forefront of taking care of the sick while loving them. How is HIV different from other diseases? This representation in *Yesterday* continues to indicate that a lot of work still remains to be done as far
as representation of women in South African cinema is concerned. It goes further to show how little attention filmmakers pay to sensitive issues among black people. Issues that involve traditional healers are significant and its portrayal in Yesterday also raises concern. African healing in the form of herbs and spirituality is one of the cultural aspects that are profound in African societies and need to be respected. When a traditional healer is seen as a perpetrator of bad behaviour in a film, this promotes less faith in African tradition.

One can simply attribute this to the fact that our filmmakers are prone to stereotypic representations. The problem that black women suffer from rural ignorance still manifests. Looking at Fools, it is representing the experiences of women and yet it is not a woman’s film. The filmmaker, a man, has represented black women as he determines them. This is how the world constructs women not necessarily what women think of themselves.

This study reveals the dissonances between representations and experiences of black women in this country and created an opportunity to actually interpret films that represent them. However the question remains, “What does Fools and later Yesterday, teach women?” To a certain extent, films are about education, and hooks calls them “pedagogy tools” (1996). During the interviews it became clear that women are calling for representations of their rights but Yesterday repeats the same mistake committed by prior filmmakers. For example, it portrays women who know nothing about HIV and AIDS.

This film does not reflect the political and historical shifts and the changing empowerment of women in South African society. Women in South Africa are informed and examples can be drawn from the responses of women interviewed for this study. They are empowered by knowledge but Yesterday undoes it. It puts women down by portraying them as foolish people. Do black women really need white women speaking black vernacular to teach them the basics about HIV and AIDS?
Reception studies should pay attention to issues that affect black women in South Africa that could lead to the way they read their culture. This is in order to make sure that filmmakers finally understand the kind of representations that would be suitable for their audience and that need to reflect social and political changes. Furthermore, black women filmmakers in South Africa will find it a challenge enough to rise and come up with what their fellow sisters are yearning to see on the big screen. Maybe seeing women through the eyes of other women would not be such a bad idea as it is possible that they will recognise the historical shift and embrace the empowerment of women.