

## CHAPTER 7

### THE PROBLEM OF GENDER AND NATION-BUILDING IN THE MAKING AND PUBLIC LIFE OF *FOOLS*

*Mapantsula* has been discussed in relation to the question of the critical public role of films that are politically committed to national liberation. The thesis now shifts to a film that emerged after the heat of national liberation had given way to a democratic dispensation in South Africa. This chapter examines the making and public life of *Fools*, an adaptation of the Noma award-winning novella of the same name. The novella (1983) by academic, critic and author Njabulo Ndebele, is set in South Africa in 1966. *Fools* has the distinction of being the first post-apartheid film to be directed by a black South African, Ramadan Suleman.

#### Synopsis

Set against the backdrop of a late apartheid township, the narrative of *Fools* revolves around the turbulent relationship between a degenerate teacher and an idealistic youth whose sister the teacher violated. The film opens with a long shot trained on a hillock. It follows the silhouette of Forgive Me- a tramp, walking among tall aloes. He descends from the hillock, shouting a Christian refrain: 'forgive them father for they know not what they do!' Below the hill, the camera pans across a multitude of identical white houses with red roofs. Smoke slowly billows from the houses. It is a township morning. The subtitle across the screen reads 'Charterston Township, December 1989'.

The main plot begins with an intimate sequence: young lovers, Zani and Ntozakhe make love on a moving train. The train's locomotive engine ejects steam to the growing intensity of their heaving. The lovers are from a boarding school in Swaziland. Back at the township, Duma Zamani, a debauched middle-aged teacher, drunkenly watches a television news item about Afrikaner nationalist celebrations of the December 16, 1838 Battle of Blood

River, also an apartheid-era holiday. A group of local elders enters and orders him to switch off the television. The elders summarily inform him of the lifting of his suspension from teaching. The suspension, we learn later was instituted on grounds of Zamani's sexual violation of his former pupil and Zani's younger sister, Mimi Vuthela. The young lovers alight at Springs train station. At the station, Zani confronts Zamani, who spots dried out drool down his mouth. Zamani spent the night on the station benches after an overnight abortive encounter with an inner-city prostitute, thanks to his temporary impotence.

In the days that follow, an unlikely friendship develops between the two men. When Zani proposes to address Zamani's class of young learners, Zamani reluctantly agrees. On the appointed day, Zani impresses upon the young learners, the political naivety of celebrating the December 16 holiday. Zani's talk is interrupted by the humorously sycophant principal (Meneer) who calls the police. In the closing sequence, Zani tries to disrupt the December 16 holiday picnic organized by Meneer. Meneer angrily hurls a stone at him but misses and hits the car of a passer-by, an Afrikaner man. The man pulls out a whip and attacks Meneer, Zani and Zamani respectively. The picnickers flee in different directions except for Zamani. The whip lands on his skin, and strangely, he lets out a maniacal laughter. The whipping man grows frustrated, cries and whips on the ground. The crowd of picnickers slowly engulf him. Ntozakhe who was about to hurl a stone at the man, drops it.

### **Form in *Fools***

There are indications that in its form, *Fools* is enmeshed within a search for a cinematic idiom that engages profoundly with established understandings of film in general and the formal tendencies in local films in particular. The film's reprise of the critical tenor in Ndebele's literary work put it squarely within attempts at charging post-apartheid South African film culture with novel approaches and new themes. This move entailed combining a popular form (film) with the critical legacy of a literary work. It is due to the quest for formal distinction that *Fools* is easily an *auteurist* film. By this is meant that the film is

predicated upon the creative and intellectual vision of its filmmakers as relatively independent artistes. However, it also includes *Third Cinema* elements. The result is a non-linear plot that combines social realism with elements of humour, narration and allegory.

Though largely treated in a realist mode, *Fools* punctuates its narrative with non-realist motifs such as fire and the allegorical use of a chicken to represent the rape of a minor.<sup>1</sup> The sequence where teacher Zamani, after being chased from Zani's home, runs to his house only to be haunted by the preaching figure of Forgive Me is an example of the non-realist elements and generous symbolism of *Fools*. In a film culture with a fair share of dominant cinema conventions and codes, the first port of call for *auteurist* and Third Cinema resides in the formal combat with Hollywood cinematic formulae. Moreover, this quest for an autonomous film idiom is found in the dialogue with form in anti-apartheid films. Having challenged and eventually transcended Hollywood formulae in the anti-apartheid films, it is to the radically politicized form of its immediate precursor, *Mapantsula* and broadly, the revolutionary tenor of Third Cinema that *Fools* owes its rhythm. *Fools* returns the open-endedness of *Mapantsula*, the anti-heroism of its protagonist, as well as the texture of black township life to the post-apartheid screen. However, it plucks the anti-heroic trait of Panic and appends it on the character of a professional and respectable teacher. The film, in so doing addresses whatever complacent attitude there might be with regard to revered professional figures in society.

On the same score, it extends reflections around morality and ethics away from debates of political loyalty and discipline, to the terrain of 'gendered' conflicts in a new society. Still on the question of form, *Fools* uses orality. This is a stylistic device derived from African storytelling, but can also be found in other cultures. For instance, the old eccentric Forgive Me serves as a narrative suturing device and site of moral introspection for the

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<sup>1</sup> The use of fire in the film intimates the influence of H.I.E. Dhlomo. Peterson has generously paraphrased Dhlomo in this regard, 'Dhlomo had much to say about the 'human baptism', the 'strange contradiction' that lay in 'the greatness and universality of the meaning of fire'. Fire, in one of its many guises, 'is a social agent for it lays bare the evils of our economic and social caste systems'. See Peterson, *Monarchs*, 217.

protagonist, and an invitation for public critical engagement. It is precisely in its open-endedness, that *Fools* intimated and engaged a virtual public. Caught between the sheer injustice of the whipping Afrikaner and the despicable criminality- even folly of Zamani- this public must reflect on how best to deal with the ever present challenges to its search for social justice.

### **Background to Film Setting**

*Fools* foregrounds the sexual violation of a pubescent girl within a township setting. At the same time, the film's emergence and circulation coincided with the increasing reports of rape in South Africa (Dovey 2009: 64).<sup>2</sup> *Fools* also emerged and circulated in the formative years of black majority rule in South Africa. The chapter asks how *Fools* stimulated critical engagements of gender relations particularly in relation to black identity from its inception, production and extended public life. Two key concerns inform the chapter's inquiry. The first concern is about the status of the question of gender in public debates engendered through film. Thus, the chapter asks what kind of critical public engagements on gender *Fools* enables. Secondly, as an *auteurist* film that, the chapter argues, stands at a critical distance from dominant articulations of triumphalist nationalism, how does *Fools* animate public engagements?

The chapter firstly describes Dovey's reflections on *Fools* and gender discourse. It follows with a mapping of the terrain of gender discourse in South Africa. The next leg tackles the film's production history, and the cultural and political context in which it was produced. An examination of the making of the film, and of the filmmakers' reflections around it follows. The section essays an interpretation of these reflections in the light of the illuminations they offer on *Fools'* focus on gender and black identity especially as they relate to the dominant discourse of nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa. The next section charts the circulation of the film in South Africa and internationally. It is

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<sup>2</sup> See also Dovey L., 2005a. Engendering Gender Discourses through African Cinema: The Case of *Fools* (1998) and *Karmen Gei*, Paper presented at the *Writing African Women: Poetics and Politics of African Gender Research* Conference, University of the Western Cape, January, 5.

followed by an exploration of the wider public take up of the film, and its significance for the conceptions of black identity in the post-apartheid period, and the place of gender in nation-building discourses. Through engagement of the limits and the strengths of the publics of *Fools*, the film's thematic register of gender and gender relations, its form, as well as historical relations with the transition, the chapter draws some conclusions with regard to the public critical role of *auteurist* films.

According to Dovey, (2009: 63) *Fools* occupies a unique place in film history and is bound to be 'subject to a great deal of ongoing analysis'. She places *Fools* in the same historical circumstances as *De Voortrekkers* (1916) which was also 'produced at the dawn of a new nation, almost one hundred years previously' (Dovey 2009: 63). However, Dovey observes significant differences between the two. In her view, the purpose of *De Voortrekkers* was to 'glorify Boer leaders in the Battle of Blood River and to (alluded to in the beginning and end of *Fools*), promote what has been called the central constitutive myth of Afrikanerdom' (2009: 63). *Fools*, on the other hand, does not celebrate the anti-apartheid struggle heroes, nor does it depict the historical events unfolding around the time of its production namely, black independence and South Africa's fledgling democracy (2009: 64). Dovey (2009: 64) ascribes Suleman's decision not to deal with these events, to the social and economic contradictions in most black South Africans' lives, and their incongruence with national slogans.<sup>3</sup> Dovey acknowledges Suleman's alertness to the political changes taking place around the film's emergence, '*Fools* proves... that adaptation is not necessarily mutually exclusive to filmmaking on current events, and it adds a depth on these current events by historicising them' (Dovey 2009: 64).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> O'Brien also finds the choice of the period in the screenplay interesting because 'there is no hint of the ANC or the transition- which thus avoids any direct theorizing or evaluation of the transition'. O'Brien A., *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa*, Duke University Press: Durham and London: 270.

<sup>4</sup>See Suleman's original comments- also quoted in the course of this chapter- in Ukadike N. F., 2002. *Questioning African Cinema Conversations with Filmmakers*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 293.

Indeed, the film's setting in 1989, a few months before the release from prison of ANC leader and later President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, and six years shy of the formal instituting of democracy in South Africa, is an intriguing aspect of its relation to the novella. The novella was set in 1966 but written in 1983. The significance of the year of the novella's setting is not lost to scholar and activist Anthony O'Brien, who notes that it was 'a year before the Black Consciousness Movement officially began at the 1967 National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) conference in Grahamstown' (O'Brien 2001: 268). It is also interesting when viewed in relation to the period of the film's release and circulation in post-apartheid South Africa. The setting of *Fools* suggests a 'historic manoeuvre' on the part of its makers. This poses the question of the kind of public engagement that a film of this nature sets in motion especially in the light of the historical incongruence of its setting to the post-'94 period.

Dovey's focus on *Fools* issues from her interest 'in the way that the filmmakers have attempted to fuel discussion around gender not only in Africa, but- in the vein of the new currents in post-colonialism- to engage in contestatory dialogues between Africa and the rest of the world too' (Dovey 2005a: 2-4). Her interest in *Fools* is also motivated by the question of 'how African film adapters are defining and redefining *gendered* identities through the adaptation of national literature' (2005: 4). I summarize her work on *Fools* in which she addresses the question of gender and debate in the film.

Dovey's concerns with how *Fools* 'engenders gender discourse' resonates with the consideration in this chapter, of the film's stimulation of critical public engagements of gender. However, Dovey explores *Fools* as a film adaptation and her approach is predicated upon its critical relationship with the novella. Thus, her work frames the discursive purview of *Fools* to an engagement with the novella. Dovey (2005a: 9) concludes that the film's use of rape to critique gender relations distinguishes it from the novella in that the latter provides its critique through the weighing of competing epistemologies of mimesis and critique.

This thesis takes Dovey's discussion further by situating what she sees as 'African filmmakers' wish to encourage dialogue around issues of gender in Africa', to *Fools'* sphere of circulation and engagement. Through this approach, the thesis widens the discursive terrain of *Fools'*, and 'captures' more dynamically, its tendency to engender gender discourse specifically and to stimulate public critical engagement in general. It is upon *Fools'* pathways of circulation, that the thesis poses the question of its public critical potency, particularly in relation to what is arguably its principal thematic element- that of gender relations- as well as its affiliated ones, namely, violence and black identity.

Describing the making and public life of *Fools'* with respect to gender relations requires a certain level of familiarity with gender debates in South Africa. To this end, it is necessary to sketch briefly the debates in historical perspective, particularly in the periods that roughly corresponds to the film's emergence and circulation. The section limits itself to a few but telling commentaries on the question of gender especially as it relates to the pursuit of national liberation in South Africa.

From a broadly historical perspective, the African National Congress' (ANC) commitment to gender equality constitutes an important part of its recent history. In the period under discussion, the ANC's position on gender-related issues, particularly as they related to women, can be traced to a statement it issued a few years prior to the first democratic elections in South Africa: 'The emancipation of women is not a by-product of a struggle for democracy, national liberation or socialism. It has to be addressed in its own right within our organization, the mass democratic movement and in society as a whole' (in Hassim and Gouws 1998: 63).<sup>5</sup>

Hassim and Gouws have hailed the significance of this statement particularly because 'it allowed women in the progressive movement the space to organize self-consciously on

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<sup>5</sup> For original article, see ANC NEC, 1990. *Statement of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress on the Emancipation of Women In South Africa*, May 2 [Online]. Available from: < <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pr/1990/pr0502.html> > (accessed 21, June 2007).

their own terms and in their own interests' (Hassim and Gouws: 1998: 63). Thanks to the commitment to gender within the liberation movement, especially from women activists in the late 80's and throughout the negotiations for multiparty democracy in the 1990s, gender equality was enshrined in South Africa's new constitutional democracy.

However, for Andersson, 'South Africa, at independence in 1994, appeared to have a clear race-class-gender-then-the-rest pecking order of "issues", which has been put on the table by the African National Congress ...' (Andersson 2004: 42). According to Andersson, this could be made on the basis of the ANC's 'Strategy and Tactics' document, and on the focus of various annual ANC founding anniversary speeches. Thus, while the ANC in exile, and indeed the ANC in government, overtly supported the agenda of gender equality, there are strong mitigating currents concerning anxieties about black masculinity, patriarchy and racism that compromise gender equity and confound its discussion.<sup>6</sup>

The arguments presented above, signal problems attendant on debates about gender as a discourse and the quest of national liberation, as well as the uneasiness around rape and black masculinity. Therefore, the emergence and circulation of *Fools* occurred not only against the background of the increase in rape cases in the country, but also of the ideological tensions in debates around 'gendered' violence and black masculinity. This chapter engages with the question of the extent to which these struggles and anxieties around rape and black masculinity had any influence, if at all, in the public life of the film.

The discourse of a racially inclusive nationalism underwriting the new dispensation in South Africa constituted the larger context within which *Fools* was made and circulated. This nation-building discourse is a product of the non-racial ideology of the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies, and generally of the political developments that led

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<sup>6</sup> For an extended discussion about gender in the ANC, see Erlank N., 2005. ANC Positions on Gender, 1994-2004, *Politikon*, (November), 32(2), 195-215. See also Hassim S., and Gouws A., 1998. Redefining the Public Space: Women's Organizations, Gender Consciousness and Civil Society in South Africa, (*Politikon*, 25 (2), 53-76.

to the birth of democracy in South Africa. In their 'transitional pact', agreed upon a few years after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, the National Party and the ANC agreed on power-sharing under the terms of an interim constitution. The result was the Government of National Unity, which provided parties with a minimal number of seats in the National Assembly to gain one or more cabinet posts. At its dissolution, this government would pave the way for the new constitution. According to sociologist Slabbert Frederick Van Zyl (1998: 3-4), the ideology of this negotiated settlement was marked by three core principles: 'inclusive nation-building nationalism, a liberal democratic constitution, and a competitive market economy'.

Like all ideologies, the new nationalism needed legitimating. In reinforcing this newfound nationalism, and addressing the abuses of human rights that took place during apartheid, the state adopted a policy of national reconciliation. The eminent religious leader Archbishop Desmond Tutu's use of the 'Rainbow Nation' as the descriptor of the new national identity, though imported from the Civil Rights Movement of the United States, in particular from the Reverend Jesse Jackson, signifies the nation-building agenda in the new dispensation. The 'Rainbow Nation', a metaphor of a multicultural diversity, gained currency during the Nelson Mandela presidency. Under Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's successor, another nationalist rhetorical phrase 'unity in diversity', received official endorsement when it was emblazoned on the national coat of arms. Against this background, *Fools* positioned itself as a text that sought to launch new debates, which as part of its public life will show, call into question assumptions of the new dispensation.

### **Background and Production**

*Fools* was co-produced by Natives At Large (South Africa), M-Net Africa (South Africa), Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (South Africa). Internationally, the film was co-produced with France's JBA and Përiphërie Production houses, Ebano Multi-

Media (Mozambique), and Framework International (Zimbabwe).<sup>7</sup> The co-production was necessitated in the main by the difficulties of raising capital for film. *Fools* is the first film by Natives at Large.

Considering the controversial history of the word 'native' in South Africa, Suleman and Peterson's choice of the name Natives at Large, is provocative. The word was used during and before apartheid as a demeaning term for Africans, apparently to emphasise their distance from the West and supposedly, lack of modern sophistication. Elsewhere, Peterson describes the phrase after Solomon Plaatje, as a reference to the 'social inscriptions of Africans' in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Peterson 2000: 15). The ambiguity wrought in its register of colonial anxieties about Africans, and its affirmation of Africans' claims to South Africa, opened the term to appropriation and subversion by the filmmakers. 'Natives at Large' also signals a self-reflexive reference to the persistent socio-political challenges facing black South Africans even after apartheid- a reality to which the filmmakers are alert. It is no wonder then that the choice of the name was met with consternation in the film circles of Johannesburg (O'Brien 2001: 267).

*Fools* also received financial support from the South African Broadcasting Corporation, (SABC), the European Union, the Hubert Bals Fund, and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to its website, the Rotterdam-based Hubert Bals Fund provides urgent funding towards completion of films from Africa, Asia, Middle East, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. It also states that while the funding is considered on the basis of 'the financial aspects of a project, the decisive factors remain its content and artistic value'.<sup>8</sup> However, securing funding for *Fools* was not easy. According to Barlet, 'Suleman found it difficult to secure funding from producers who thought that he was too critical of Africans'

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of their co-production with Natives, the equally young Ebano and Framework had co-produced seven films between them, most of which were about African themes or history.

<sup>8</sup> See Hubert Bals Fund [online]. Available from:

<[http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/eng/about/hubert\\_bals\\_fund.aspx](http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/eng/about/hubert_bals_fund.aspx)> (accessed 21 July 2007).

(Barlet 2003: 104).<sup>9</sup> The producers' resistance is a telling signal that the film's critical outlook faced the dilemma of producers' self-censorship that stemmed from their hypothesis of audiences' reaction, which is in itself significantly informed by commercial concerns. At this point, a turn to the cultural context in which *Fools* was made must lay the ground for understanding the local circumstances of its production.

In 1994, the newly installed democratic government established a Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) for the first time in the history of South Africa. However, and in contrast to the apartheid state's interest in film, the ANC-led government did not put film at the service of state propaganda. Produced after the demise of apartheid, *Fools* was one of the first films able to address a black public directly without any pressures of political censorship thanks to the openness of engagement allowed by the South African political atmosphere.

Suleman traced the idea of making *Fools* to his student days at the London International Film School in the 1980's (Ukadike 2002: 292). That the filmmaker toyed with the idea of *Fools* in the turbulent 80's partly explains its setting in late 1989. Its distillation through the 1980's and into the 90's signals that *Fools* is a product of engaged relations with the historical signposts of anti-apartheid political struggles, the birth of democracy and the euphoria around it. While in *Fools*, the themes of gender violence and blackness are heightened, the theme of blackness alone seems to define almost every creative offering in Suleman's earlier *oeuvre*.

During his apprenticeship at the London International Film School, Suleman directed *The Devil's Children* (1990) which chronicles the harsh realities of a black boy who delivers clothes from the township to the suburbs during the apartheid era.<sup>10</sup> The film was based

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<sup>9</sup> See also Bottéon C., 1997. Interview with Ramadan Suleman, *Cinema* 590: 21-2.

<sup>10</sup> The *Devil's Children* won numerous prizes and awards including Certificate of Merit at the Chicago International Film Festival (1990), and others at the International Student Film Festival (Fifrec '90) and at the Prix Bicentenaire. (Ukadike, *Questioning*: 202, 281).

on *The Park* (1983), a short story by South African author and poet James Matthews. Matthews used poetry to articulate Black Consciousness philosophy. *The Devil's Children* reveals Suleman's fascination with literature, particularly of the kind that explicitly focuses on the dehumanisation of black people.

Suleman also worked as trainee editor on Mauritanian filmmaker Med Hondo's *Sarraouinia* (1986) and as assistant director for his *Lumière Noir (Black Light)* (1995). He was also assistant director for the Malian filmmaker Souleymane Cissé's *Yeelen* (1987), and *Waati* (1995). Thus, his mastery of African cinematic practices can be easily intimated. Suleman has since directed *Deadly Myths* (2004), a documentary about the various myths around HIV/AIDS. Other films in his career include *Sekouba* (1984) and *Ezikhumbeni* (1985). His latest feature, *Zulu Love Letter*, (2004) is about three generations of women dealing with the trauma of the apartheid past. Interestingly, in *Zulu Love Letter*, Suleman explicitly engages the political transition in South Africa, in particular the issues around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Suleman and his collaborator Bhekizwe Peterson hail from a tradition of 'black' theatre, which was broadly politicized and antagonistic towards apartheid in particular. In the 80's, they established the Dhlomo theatre<sup>11</sup>, 'one of the only two rudimentary theatres in the Witwatersrand under black control (closed by the authorities in 1983 as a fire hazard)' (Peterson 1990: 233). It is unsurprising therefore, that O'Brien (2001: 278-279) traces what he sees as ensemble casting comedy and 'black' theatre idioms in the film to the filmmakers' theatre background.

In the study, the Suleman and Peterson team has the distinction of traversing across academic work and filmmaking. This contrasts them with Sabela and Mogotlane, but

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<sup>11</sup> The reference to H.I.E. Dhlomo is telling because he was in Peterson's words 'one of South Africa's most illustrious playwrights and pioneering African critics' (Peterson *Monarchs*: 176). More importantly, it recalls resonance in *Fools* with his independent radical stance. According to Peterson, it was in times of revolution when 'patriotic poems and orations....made to give you cheer and courage that Dhlomo off' brought offerings of pain and tears' (Peterson *Monarchs*: 217).

brings them closer to the Sophiatown intellectuals of *Come Back, Africa* fame and, to Plaatje's efforts in the 1920s. Peterson's academic work largely focuses on black intellectual history in South Africa, and has a bias to those intellectuals that work through literary and theatrical forms such as Plaatje and Dhlomo. The significance in this is that their films are an outgrowth of their expert engagement with film culture in South Africa. In addition, their involvement in film patently extends the various resources of engagement at their disposal. This bridging of their intellectual work through the creative means of film is indicative of a dialogic relation between film, literature and academic work. As will become apparent in the course of this discussion, this relation constituted a tendency of high intellectuality in the publicness of *Fools*.

### **Directorial Exposition**

In an interview with Ukadike in New York City, 1998, Suleman explained part of the history and motivation for making *Fools* and his choice of Ndebele's novella. The interview and its location is an excellent indication of the film's early transnational publicness and pitching within the transnational sphere of film theory that is oriented to African cinemas. Ukadike later incorporated the interview into a book: *Questioning African Cinema* (2002), a compilation of interviews with African filmmakers. According to the author, the book is an initiation of 'discourses into African cinematic practices that will provoke other discourses' and 'to address pertinent issues that will lead to a fuller understanding of African cinematic practices' (2002: Preface). Thus, Ukadike's project recognized the capacity of African cinema to generate discourses other than those found in its professional ambit and contributed to it.

The questioning evoked in the title of the book, occurs against the backdrop of issues and problems attendant on the conditions of colonial and neo-colonial modernity in Africa. Ever alert to the ideological fixing of Africa to an eternal past, film scholar Teshome Gabriel in the foreword of the book, asserted that 'the questions that Ukadike asks...serve to disrupt Western perceptions of Africa as unchanging and monolithic'. He

continued...’neither Africa nor African cinema can be reduced to a fixed, eternal essence’. Suleman’s explanations constitute part of the film’s epitexts- an investiture of its public life. *Fools* critically revealed the dark underbelly of South Africa at a time when the world celebrated the end of her isolation and what has been called her ‘miracle’ transition. The inclusion of *Fools* in the book is important for two reasons: firstly, it revised the near exclusion of South African films from critical commentary on African cinemas, and secondarily- it constituted *Fools* as one of the paradigmatic texts in continental pursuits of critical cinemas. The interview and the book’s constitutive roles in the film’s publicness, ultimately signify the film’s high intellectual appeal.

According to Suleman the trend in South Africa, in which films were made by foreigners, was the primary motive behind the making of *Fools*. He argued that it was up to South Africans to tell their stories (in Ukadike 2002: 292).<sup>12</sup> In adapting the book, Suleman decided with Peterson to ‘provide a black perspective on what made black people tick... black people have a history, which is to say they have to come to grips with themselves before coming to grips with white people’ (in Ukadike 2002: 293). These statements suggest a return to the philosophy of Black Consciousness movement, which put emphasis on consciousness as the first site of social and political awakening.

Yet, through the character of the young Zani, the film like the novella, articulated a critique of high intellectuality reminiscent of the movement’s youthful legacy. Indeed, both the setting of *Fools* and its philosophical underpinnings relive different historical moments- a few years before the demise of apartheid, and in the late 60s’ to 70s’ when Black Consciousness flourished. Importantly, as a black-centred film, the film’s discursive register of, and dialogue with Black Consciousness was not historically contemporaneous with the philosophy’s ‘historical moment’. That the movement no longer had significant currency in the post-apartheid political atmosphere slightly detached *Fools* from the

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<sup>12</sup> Note also the interview at the Tenth Cascade African Film Festival. JBA Production, *Notes on Fools* [online] Translated and compiled by Dembrow M. Available from: <<http://spot.pcc.edu/~mdembrow/fools.htm>> (accessed 1 September, 2004).

immediate context of its circulation. Novel though it may be in local film, the film's philosophical premise raises the question of its resonance with its post-apartheid publics.

Elsewhere, Suleman extends this theme of blackness to an introspective labour among black people. This introspection, he argued, must transcend what he calls 'black and white confrontation....*Fools* will not be a film about the eternal conflict between the 'diabolical' white and the 'magnificent' black, but simply a film about the black South African people of just four years ago'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, his labours were underwritten by a quest for subversion of the fixed adversarial images in apartheid South Africa's racial imagination. The actor Patrick Shai who played the part of Zamani in the film shares this quest. According to Shai, 'the movie was a therapeutic experience because it is always a relief to engage in South African stories, which have no "Amandla"! as the rallying cry' (Shai in *The Star*, 1998, June 7). The implications for post-apartheid South Africa are pronounced: lest a questioning of simplified approaches in film was launched, mere sloganeering is likely easily to percolate into the present.

In the history of film in South Africa, the impetus for providing 'a black perspective' is not new, nor is the discomfort with foreigners making films about South Africa. However, Suleman's bias for an introspective approach by black people as historical agents seems set to expand the conceptual horizons of 'black perspective' in South African films. Interestingly, this introspection is cognisant of but not guided by the logic of racial conflict. It is therefore fitting to conclude that Suleman framed *Fools* as a study of the ethical and political challenges to the meaning of blackness in the post-apartheid dispensation.

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<sup>13</sup> See *Notes on Fools* [online] <<http://spot.pcc.edu/~mdembrow/fools.htm>> (accessed 1 September, 2004) Note the resonances with Ndebele. Ndebele bemoaned the entrapment of South African literature in political stereotypes that could not go beyond black and white oppositionality. Accordingly, mere acceptance of political alliances or enmity as the last word in appreciating society is a ground for oversimplifications. For Ndebele, such inadequacies emanate from 'anthropological approaches that see township society as debased society. Under such conditions, it is easy for sloganeering, defined as superficial thinking, to develop. The psychology of the slogan, in these circumstances, is the psychology of intellectual powerlessness'. See Ndebele, *Rediscovery*, 24-5, See also Helgesson, *Writing in Crisis*, 66. The argument for the influence of Ndebele's critical work in the film is most explicit in O'Brien's work. See O'Brien, *Radical Democracy*, 267.

Consequently, *Fools* according to Suleman, imagined a new discourse of blackness in South African film culture. This results in a profoundly radical approach, which is partially co-extensive with the 'black-perspective' in *Mapantsula* but also transcends it. The incorporation of the ethical dimension guides Suleman to scrutinize deeply historically entrenched views of 'blackness' and of what constitutes a 'black perspective' in film.

In additional interviews with filmmaker and critic, Andrew Worsdale, (1998) the scholar Olivier Barlet (1995) and myself (2004), Suleman unpacked further the focus of *Fools* and explained his choice of Ndebele's work. According to Suleman, *Fools* focuses on 'the psychological sequels of a system inscribed in a 'History' that began long before apartheid' (Interview with Barlet, 1995). I understand 'psychological sequels' to be Suleman's way of explaining the recurring negative consciousness in black people that is the result of historical injustices in the forms of colonial oppression and racial capitalism. For Suleman, 'psychological sequels' resonate in the post-apartheid era. This is an abstract, though historical explanation of the film's focus. As such, the concerns of *Fools* antedate and even post-date the apartheid system. It can be inferred from Suleman's abstraction of South African history as it relates to black people, that through an introspective approach, the film addresses itself to the historical problems, at the same time as it tries to expose and obliterate their psychological effects from the present.

In the adaptation of the novella, time and space constitute challenges of their own. The castigation of apartheid gives Ndebele's *Fools* an anti-apartheid bent. However, as a historical period and experience, apartheid had its definable moments so that the periods from 1966 to 1989, even up to 1997 were not the same. The potential of exteriorising these meanings makes historical time and space the antennae of note in any attempt at locating the distinctiveness of Suleman's *Fools*. Suleman identifies new challenges for the film in relation to its post-apartheid context:

It (*Fools*) also resurrects for me the whole question of how, today, South African politicians tell us we live in a rainbow nation. It is fine to import a fancy African American slogan, which I learned was imported by the honourable Jesse Jackson, but when I walk in Soweto, I still see poverty; I walk around the city and it is full of misery, and I feel the contradiction inherent in the so-called rainbow nation that the politicians have failed to see. ...For me *Fools* is some kind of warning to the politicians not to look for easy answers to society's problems (Ukadike 2002: 293).<sup>14</sup>

In drawing attention to the limitations of the politically symbolic catchphrases, Suleman it seems, sought to make a critical intervention into post-apartheid attempts at nation-building. Suleman's explanations relate the discourse of nation building to the question of black identity in the post-apartheid dispensation. Therefore, *Fools* engages nation-building as a discourse because it questions the assumptions of nation-building and adopts a different premise to it. If Suleman's exposition is anything to go by, *Fools* draws attention to the prior question concerning the ethico-political challenges facing black people. Suleman suggests that a meaningful reconciliation may occur and a 'rainbow-nation' come into being only after these challenges are addressed.

Explaining his choice of an author 'who focuses on ordinary folk', Suleman described his work as an attempt to broach the easy but undue rapprochement between intolerance and extremism among 'black people caught up in the poverty trap' (Interview with Barlet, 1995). Suleman projects 'simple people' as the film's primary audience, as fertile for intolerance, and lastly as agents of change.<sup>15</sup> It is notable that he eschews an elitist perspective, electing instead to begin below.<sup>16</sup> According to Suleman, the problems in black communities that Ndebele addresses are part of the problems he addresses in his *Fools* (Interview with author, 2004).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, a striking aspect of the novella that

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<sup>14</sup> The production of *Fools* constitutes the emergence of the engagement of the 'Rainbow Nation' as a problem in cinema. This was later taken up in *Yizo Yizo*.

<sup>15</sup> See also, Worsdale A., 2004. Interview with Peterson. In a catalogue of African films, compiled by Worsdale, Peterson, echoed this projection of simple or ordinary people. 'We find ourselves wanting to champion the little person's story ...'. While the catalogue post-dates the production of the film, its relevance to the exposition of the film is patent.

<sup>16</sup> Note the consistency with Edward Said's argument, namely that 'intellectuals belong on the same side with the weak [...] the small people, small states'. Said, *Representations*: 17.

<sup>17</sup> See also Magogodi 2003., Sexuality, Power and the Black Body in *Mapantsula* and *Fools*, in Balseiro and Masilela, *Reels*, 193.

Suleman sought to iterate was its critical stance in relation to black communities. Suleman felt that the novella was revolutionary for its time because it dared to criticize victims of apartheid. However, he hailed its enduring import.

When South Africa attained democracy, I felt it (*Fools*) was a well placed book that dealt with the past and the now. And I felt it was interesting and I could take it further by adapting it to the present and at the same time deal with certain aspects of the past...its like the past within the present and the present within the past (Ukadike 2002: 294).

The thesis has thus far addressed itself to Suleman's grounds for adapting Ndebele's text, and the intellectual positioning of Natives. What remains is the articulation of the issue of gender relations and the relation of the film to the historical context of nation-building discourse. The intellectual import of Ndebele's work notwithstanding, Suleman maintained a critical relation to it:

I liked the book *but I wanted to go a step further to make South Africans reflect, especially at this democratic period, about their relationships with women.* [...] I think the days are over where man decides everything. A woman in a family situation should be considered an equal partner. A man cannot do it alone. The strength and the force of that relationship in a family are based on how the couple goes about building that family. I felt those issues were important in South Africa and should be addressed in the film (Ukadike 2002: 293). (Italics my own)

Suleman sought to foreground the theme of gender relations more forcefully than he supposed Ndebele's *Fools* did. He invited viewers to consider *Fools* in the light of a rewriting of gender relations in congruence with the dawn of democracy in South Africa. To be more precise, Suleman's point of departure was to engage the certitudes of black masculinity and to debunk their undemocratic tendencies, especially in relation to the question of gender violence.

There is a whole issue in the book where Njabulo talks about rape, but he does not deal with rape as the larger issue in the book. He deals more with the relationship and dilemma between the two characters Zani and Zamani. We had a problem in adapting this part of the book because the

issue of rape is very important and needed to be addressed fully.  
(Suleman in Ukadike 2002: 294)<sup>18</sup>

Suleman's exposition makes gender relations in general and 'gendered' violence in particular, profoundly germane to the larger questions of nation-building. Accordingly, the attention to gender calls into question the meaning of political freedom and power in the new dispensation. Suleman seems to ask, what is the point of a democratic revolution without social justice between men and women? The filmmakers register a shift from literature to film and take advantage of the generic possibilities of film in order to generate critical engagements of gender relations.

By introducing debates around gender violence among black South Africans a mere five years into the post-apartheid period, the filmmakers chose a subject that was at odds with the celebratory mood around the democratic dispensation. Being at odds with and challenging of contemporary popular opinion around the new dispensation, it attracted a small take up in expert circles.

Thus far, it is evident that the publicness of *Fools* is constituted through interviews with scholars, filmmakers, critics and an actor on the film. The interviewees are all experts in film at various levels. That the scholarly interviews by Barlet and Ukadike took place, or were published invariably outside South Africa is constitutive of the transnational tendency in the publicness of *Fools*. This is a tendency marked by a critical chronicling of filmmakers' work in relation to cinematic developments, both outside their countries of origin and transnationally. The preoccupation, in these interviews with the African cinematic discourses and practices, and with the historical location of the films points to their discursive distinction from the local ones. Indeed, the local interviewees were generally silent about *Fools*' significance or the lack thereof, in relation to nationalism and transnational or African cinematic concerns.

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<sup>18</sup> See also Dovey, *Critique*, 128.

Levels of critical engagements in South Africa are at play in the comments by Shai and Peterson in *The Star* newspaper and Film Resource Unit film catalogue respectively. The *Mail & Guardian* also registered an interview. Thus, in terms of its publicness, *Fools* was generally spread across publications that targeted either academically inclined publics, and in South Africa, a largely white middle class and steadily middle to high-income black readership.<sup>19</sup> The interviews and the opinions of the protagonists indicate that the public critical potency of *Fools* was realized and realizable largely within spaces of expert commentary. If Suleman's exposition located *Fools* critically at the level of political combat with gender injustice among black people, thus far, the publicness of the film indicated that publics other than those that the film projected were addressed. However, the charge of its expert publicness is at this point only attributable to the interviews and the protagonists that these interviews targeted. A better grasp of the film's publicness and public critical potency can be attained through a delineation of its circulation.

### **Transnational Circulation**

*Fools* opened in France in 1997 where it received moderate success (Dovey 2009: 63).<sup>20</sup> In considering the film's premiere outside South Africa, the involvement of European capital in its development, and production cannot be discounted. Because of the film's partial funding by the French ministry and other European funders as well as co-production with the France-based Përiphërie and JBA, it was able to reach international audiences in European film festivals. At the level of theme, the film's international circulation was predicated on the history of the anti-apartheid struggles. The French poster of the film reveals as much. In the poster, which assumes the form of a multi-media artwork

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<sup>19</sup> By late 1998, the readership of *The Star* newspaper was roughly 60 percent black. However, even for the *Sunday Times*, the readership of which was 80 percent white in 1995, the demographics shifted to more black readers over the years. Yet, it remains a middlebrow newspaper. For these statistics, see Kenichi Serino, 2008. *The Origin of Ideas in the Paper for the People*, Master's Research Report. University of the Witwatersrand: Johannesburg, 9, 163.

<sup>20</sup> See also Barlet O., 2000. *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze* (translated by Chris Turner), London, New York: Zed Books, 251.

(watercolour painting, pieces of press clippings), a silhouetted figure of a running black youth, dominates the eye of the frame. Outlines of politically charged youthful figures loom in the background. The poster is organized around the historical theme of apartheid and anti-apartheid struggles, particularly of the 1976 Soweto uprising. The running youth wears an overall, which is symptomatic of the iconic picture of the Soweto uprising. In that picture a Soweto pupil, Mbuyisa Makhubu, holds a bloodied body of a younger boy shot by the police. In itself, the running action is reminiscent of the altercations between police and stone-throwing youth during the Soweto uprising. Written into this gesture is the privileging of '76 as a moment of rupture in the history of South Africa.

That the filmmakers' choice of the youthful uprising occurred in the wake of the new dispensation also provokes reflection of how the actions of the youth relate to contemporary national developments. The historical distance between '76 and 1994 regardless, the poster institutes a historical 'reversal' of the euphoria around the birth of the democratic South Africa. Further, it imagines in the French public, some familiarity with the highlights of South African history, and deploys this to entice interest in the film. While the inclusion of the 1976 theme may be attributed to this commercial imperative, it also indicates an inter-textual tendency. This means that the threshold of *Fools*, that is, the liminal space between its production and exhibition, is premised upon co-presence with the iconographic text of the historical intervention of the youth in South African politics. It is through this threshold that the poster invites the French to take off their gaze from the spectacle of the 1994 'miracle', and rethink their understanding of South Africa from the perspective of the earlier turbulent era.

In the background, a mélange of newspaper clippings written in French, but mostly in English are clattered over each other. Each press piece bears some relation to the Soweto uprising. This is another instance of the poster's inter-textuality. A slightly bigger line reads 'This is not Soweto'- a line uttered by Meneer in the film- when admonishing the politically active schoolchildren. The line submits the film to a double postulation- in which the

history of Soweto uprising is called upon to frame the narrative, or negated as a privileged historical background to the film. However, the visual and written references favour the historical meaningfulness of the uprising to the film. This is not without a critical subtext of national history. The image of Mimi's face embodies this subtext. Behind the press clippings, her anguished face cries out for visibility. The buried face solicits considerations of the invisibility of gender politics due to the dominance of politics of national liberation, which are masculinist.

Other references buried in the tattered press articles read, 'the language of the Boers', 'Afrikaans', 'the nationalist-led government and its moneymen', 'fear' and 'black'. Yet others retreat deeper into the history, and surface references to the introduction of Bantu education in 1953. In brief, the French poster shows that internationally, the publicness of *Fools* was predicated upon the political struggles in South Africa in general and, the iconography of the Soweto uprising in particular. The filmmakers' strategy seems to have been premised on the political energy of *Mapantsula* and the thematic elements of *Sarafina*. If the discourse of the poster largely recalled an important episode in the history of South Africa, it also drew attention to the problem of the invisibility of gender, especially as it relates to women's struggles- by dint of Mimi's half-buried face. However, the centrality of gender in the film's circulation remains ambiguous. This near absence of gender and its concomitant violence as the defining themes of the film is curious. It suggests that the problem of gender relations in South Africa fell outside the interest of its international audiences. Consequently, the public critical interventions shifted with the audiences that the film distributors imagined.

### **Festival Circuit**

*Fools* was largely circulated in international festival circuits- a trend, which underscored its incongruence with the main commercial circuits. According to Barlet, by 2003, *Fools* still had no distributor in the United States (Barlet 2003: 104). The grounds for this lack of distribution, which stymied its circulation, are not hard to find, 'for its part African cinema

remains an artisanal rather than an industrial cinema, producing 'auteur' films in place of the genre films that make up the purely commercial cinema' (Boughedir in Givanni 2000: 117). Shortly after its première, *Fools* found its way to an important international festival, the 50<sup>th</sup> Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland (1997). The festival awarded *Fools* the Silver Leopard (Leopardo d'argento). This award is given for the best film from a first or second-time director and is second only to the Golden Leopard or the 'Pardo d'oro'. *Fools* was the first South African film to receive the award. *Fools* also got the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury-Special Mention. The Ecumenical Jury is one jury among others at the festival. It is an autonomous body that includes members of the Catholic and Reformed Churches in Switzerland. This signals the film's broadly moral, particularly Christian appeal.

In 1999, *Fools* was screened at the Ouagadougou Pan-African Film and Television Festival (FESPACO), which is held every two years in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. FESPACO is the most important film festival in Africa, which started in 1969. The festival showered *Fools* with the CAP Renov Award, European Union Award, LONAB Award of Hope and the Oumarou Ganda Award for the Best First Work.<sup>21</sup> The critical recognition of the formal and narrative uniqueness of *Fools* as these multiple awards show, signals its historical significance in global film culture in general and in South African cinematic culture in particular. It also means that *Fools* was projected to festivals, and drew attention of expert judgment and commentary in international spaces. While this means that its public critical potency was enhanced, because it would occupy pride of place in transnational critical interpretations of cinema, it also signals black-centred films' 'exilic' status in the transnational public sphere. By 'exilic' I denote the constitution of the public critical

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<sup>21</sup> Other film festivals that exhibited *Fools* include, the 6<sup>th</sup> New York African Film Festival (1998), at the 'Human Rights in Film' pro-seminar, University of Iowa's Institute for Cinema and Culture, the Tenth Annual Cascade Festival of African Films in Portland, Oregon as part of a series of South African films commemorating the 1976 students' uprisings in Soweto. *Fools* is also taught in Cambridge University. It was part of the 2006/7 African Cinema and Media course at Cambridge, United Kingdom. Lindiwe Dovey, one of the foremost commentators on *Fools*, teaches the course. The sustained interest in *Fools* can also be teased out from its exhibition at the 2006 FIFET festival. Interestingly it showed alongside Suleman's new film- *Zulu Love Letter* (2005).

potency of black-centred films outside the immediate social spaces of the discourse that their narratives project. It would seem therefore, that its critical approach was not readily resonant with its non-expert publics as it was with expert ones.

### **South African Circulation**

This section explores the local circulation of the film by a reading of the South African video jacket of its VHS video and later on DVD, which have the imprint of the film's circulation in France. The jackets are overlaid with tag lines from the French press. The major French cultural magazines *Le Monde*, hailed it as 'a remarkable script...a milestone for South African cinema'. The daily newspaper, *Le Parisien* followed with the less ingenious line: 'Fools shows the force of cinema', while *Humanite* pithily called it 'a courageous film'. Though the appropriation of these accolades can be ascribed to the co-production aspect of *Fools*, it is also a telling indication of its imbrication in international film circuits and conventions of endorsement.

While the jacket serves a commercial purpose, as epitext, it assumes the role of a visual prologue to the narrative and signals its themes for the film's virtual public. Interestingly, the jacket is completely different from the French poster. In the background, the heads of the youth and the teacher are conjoined. The unhappiness and perhaps hostility on their faces, and the fact that they are looking in opposite directions- with their backs to each other, invite imaginations in the viewer, of a relationship gone badly. That the two men are not of the same age is also notable. It implies inter-generational differences and tensions. If their faces express tension, conflicting emotions and thoughts, their conjoined heads suggest alterity and psychic connectedness. At this level, their individuality gives way to a shared subjectivity. Like *Esu-Elegba* the two-faced Yoruba deity, or *Januz* his Roman equivalent, their 'shared subjectivity' constitutes a principle of ambivalence. In imitation of *Esu*, this subjectivity looks simultaneously into the future and the past- weighing the merits of both without prejudice. Therefore, the image of the two men's

heads intimates sober reflection and confusion. They provoke as they do this, equal angst in the viewer about the cause of their tension and manner of its resolution.

In the darkened spaces between their heads, a faint text of Ndebele's statement runs vertically into the large text of the title. It reads 'when victims spit upon victims should they not be called fools?' The title of the film appears in the foreground below the text. A vortex- symbolic reference to force or energy encircles its middle letter. Are the fools that the title and the quote refer to caught up in it? The jacket seems to sell the film as a narrative of men and their inter-generational conflicts. The poster proffers through bodily relation a symbolic overture to the narrative. That the tension between the two men is the only image on its front glaringly intimates a masculine narrative. Though it demands from the viewer, a pondering of the cause for the tension between its subjects, which might very well involve women, the poster pre-empts consideration of the women's presence and roles in the film. Thus, the poster easily circulates *Fools* as a narrative about the two men. Curiously, the women in the film are absent from the jacket. They only appear in the obverse.

Only in the Film Resources Unit's promotional poster for the video of *Fools* do the women gain some visibility. In its centre, the eccentric Forgive Me appears in his signature gesture, hands pleadingly held high to the heavens, as he does when he shouts his refrain. He is surrounded by the smaller images of Mimi's pensive mother and an irate Busi in the foreground and background. The fighting scene of Zani and Mazambani also beckons the viewer to the action in the video. Tall aloes, which appear in the opening sequence of *Fools*, bedecks the poster's diegesis.

In the background, the poster displays the promotional line: South Africa's First Black Feature Film. Other tag lines follow in the foreground. Meshack Mabogoane of *Tribute* magazine called it 'a fine work that will do black filmmakers proud'. First published in 1987, *Tribute* started as a lifestyle magazine aimed at the emerging black middle class. Its focus was on the achievements of black women and men. In late 1997, *Tribute* re-launched and

changed its slogan from 'Tribute to black excellence', to 'It's who you are'.<sup>22</sup> This shift from an explicit focus on black achievements indicates challenges in the magazine's focus on a black readership. However, the appearance of the magazine in the poster, and the appropriation of Mabogoane's words as a tagline, signals that the film's publicness was oriented to black filmmakers and to the invariably black readership of *Tribute*. Mabogoane's statement points to a confluence between the cinematic and the literary in the forging of a 'black public sphere'.

Barry Ronge, the veteran critic of the *Sunday Times* stated, 'I do not believe we have seen township life depicted with such honesty and cinematic beauty'. For Patrick Shai, *Fools* was 'a significant black statement on film'. Shai's statement on the poster makes him, like Nkosi in relation to *Come Back, Africa*, a textual function of the film's publicness. The imagined public in Shai's example is not only black but also familiar with his career. These taglines by local commentators and, by the actor Shai, consistently echo the filmmakers' framing of *Fools* as a black-centred film. In appropriating Ronge's remarks about its honesty, the poster marked the video's critical vitality and capacity for self-reflection. The remark of honesty is a key declaration of the video's ethical premise in relation to similar claims in public reflection on black identity. The poster is intriguing in its interactive sketching of the public engagement of black identity. In selling the film by claims to authenticity, the poster also appealed to the readers' imagination of black identity, at the same time as the new nationalism favoured a retreat from culturally exclusive conceptions of identity. It recalled as it did this, the Black Consciousness conceptions of blackness from the margins of the nation-building imaginary of black identity.

In making the above claims or critical statements, the poster projects for the video a discursive role in relation to the question of blackness. This implies projection of a critical public, but one that would focus only on the question of blackness. Yet, the question of gender relations escapes the poster's frame. The interaction between the images does not convey any sign of relations between men and women. Instead, violent action between

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<sup>22</sup> For extensive information see Vukoni Lupa-Lasaga, *Why a Black Magazine in South Africa Failed*- [online] Available from: <<http://www.journalism.co.za>> (accessed 28-July 2008).

Zani and Mazambani (Black Masculinity?) and familial tensions (Busi and her mother) have pride of place on the poster. Buried underneath the declarations of its blackness, honesty and usefulness for a part of its projected publics, 'gendered' violence seems to be a secondary aspect in the video's projections.

The thematic differences between the French and South African posters evince shifting projections of audiences, and by extension public reflections on the film. The French poster clearly raids the iconicity of the Soweto uprising and related political struggles. At the same time, it renders these struggles ambiguous by complementing them with the face of a partially visible girl. Here, the theme of gender is tacitly suggested. With their foregrounding of males in conflict, the South African posters seem to highlight black masculinity as the major theme in the film. Thus, the question of relations across gender divides is not circulated as the immediate concern of *Fools* in South Africa.

### **Local Opening**

When *Fools* opened in South Africa on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 1998, Ster-Kinekor exhibited it in its cinemas. Ster-Kinekor is a large film distribution company with theatre multiplexes around South African metropolis. *Fools* opened in *Cinema Nouveau*, Johannesburg (Rosebank) where it ran for three weeks (May 22-June 11). *Cinema Nouveau* is part of the Ster-Kinekor chain but distinct in that it shows specialised, *auteur* films. Therefore, the cinema chain's categorization of the film as *auteur* is notable. This effectively means that *Fools* was unsuitable for a largely white and increasingly middle to higher income black mass audience, which patronized Ster-Kinekor's suburban multiplexes. Thus, the film's *auteurist* approach and focus on questions of nationalism, 'race', sexuality and black masculinity, seemed to be considered out of place in the class and 'race'-defined cinema multiplexes.

The demarcation of the film's audience indicates that only by showing it at a specialised venue would the film draw interest and that it could not possibly be of commercial interest to the designated mass audiences mentioned above. By being exhibited at Cinema

*Nouveau*, *Fools* was rendered esoteric, a subject of intellectual curiosity that required effort from audiences that appreciated film primarily for its aesthetic and critical import.

However, parallel exhibitions took place in the less expensive inner city cinemas that are also part of the Ster-Kinekor chain, (Carlton, Kine Centre, and Southgate). *Fools* ran in Southgate near Soweto, and Kine in the city centre for three weeks. Its six weeks run in Carlton from May 22- July 04, was the longest. For its 2000 Launch of African Films Catalogue, Ster Kinekor, screened *Fools* in Hillbrow, at one of its Johannesburg inner-city cinemas. The screening was done in collaboration with Film Resources Unit and Ice Media. Mostly black working class people who cannot afford tickets in the suburban multiplexes frequent the inner city cinemas. This lack of resources is a historical problem going back to Plaatje's cinematic efforts in the formative years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The showing of *Fools* in these cinemas was in keeping with its projected primary viewers, mostly black and working class audiences who constituted a significant part of its publics. The film's cultural signposts were closer to these viewers' historical contexts or background. For instance, Mazambane's 80's 'kitchen boy' outfit, a pair of shorts called 'mathanda-kitchen' was reminiscent of a not-so historically distant practice, in which township men worked as domestics in the white suburbs. The film would also be of critical interest to these audiences because of its destabilization of the Hollywood staple of films shown in these cinemas. However, *Fools* was also novel in its appropriation of African cinema aesthetics- with which, by the late 90's, local audiences were only beginning to be familiar. O'Brien (2001: 279) points to the relation between the film's primary audience and what he argues is its populist theatricality. Based on his conversation with Suleman, he remarks, 'private screenings to almost all-black only audiences in South Africa drew delighted responses of recognition at almost every point, confounding the filmmakers' fears that the film might be too complex for a mass audience'. This is an important signal of the possibilities wrought in the film's exhibition in the commercial cinemas.

A broad observation of the horizon of its circulation shows that *Fools* moved from one extreme end of an erudite audience to another, a 'mixed stratum' of largely working class, and possibly students and unemployed black audiences. This means that in actual terms, the circulation of *Fools* and its public discursivity was constrained by the existing conventions of film distribution in South Africa, which dictated that it was not meant for mass consumption within certain boundaries of class, 'race' and education. Its attempt to intervene in public discourses faced the difficulty of falling outside commercial cinematic norms that matched aesthetics to audiences. Such norms suggest that *Fools* unlike a later film *Tsotsi* (2006), could not only occupy suburbia multiplexes, but was either fit for a marginal public dedicated to avant-garde film, or a large inner-city audience.

That *Fools* played for a relatively long time in the inner-city cinemas is attributable to its viewership, which was textually addressed in the film. This is also due to the conventions of distribution established by the cinema chain and as noted above, to the 'artisanal' nature of African cinema. Compounding the problem of the circulation of the film, local or international, is the few prints that *Fools* seemed to have.

*Fools* has been shown intermittently on South African Broadcasting Corporation Television and on the South African pay-tv channel M-net. However, it drew no significant commentary on the question of gender or black identity or both. In 2004, it was screened at Mogale City Film Festival (South Africa) as part of the city's '10 Years of Democracy' celebration.<sup>23</sup> *Fools* formed part of the 2007 Township Bioscope project organised by the Film Resources Unit, and the Gauteng Film Unit. Township Bioscope project is aimed at reviving the culture of film viewing in townships around Gauteng. The Film Resources Unit has since distributed it on video and later on DVD. The English Department of the University of Stellenbosch has included *Fools* in its course outline. The Department used

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<sup>23</sup>Interestingly, the showing of the film in Mogale City (formerly Krugersdorp) signals a reversal of the cultural history of the city. This is because *De Voortrekkers* (1916), the colonial war film that Dovey hints at in her exploration of *Fools*, premiered in Krugersdorp. It was shown as part of the celebrations of 'the unveiling of the Pardekraal Monument, symbolic of the stand against the British at Paardekraal on 16 December 1880'. (Maingard, *National Cinema*: 18) However, this showing also had intimations of the battle of Blood River (Ncome) on December 16, 1838.

*Fools* alongside Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, and Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society*, to illustrate the dynamic between technique and meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Briefly, the circulation of *Fools* both locally and internationally signals its ethico-political resonances with commemorations of events that mark the political shifts towards democracy in South Africa. Its exhibition in the Township Bioscope project and the African Catalogue initiative by Ster-Kinekor assign to it, both legitimacy as a text geared for indigenous film culture, and a cinematic template for the regeneration of commercial film in the townships. As the "Focus on South Africa exhibition" shows, *Fools* further served as a window, through which South African political and social conditions were mediated internationally.

In addition to the inevitable commercial drive in the circulation of the film, its presence in some of the events cited above is highly indicative of its standing as text with broad discursive effects such as human rights, and critical mediation of the geo-political entity called South Africa. By omission or commission, the institutional tendency to put *Fools* under a broad umbrella of 'democracy' and 'human rights' efface the film's privileging of black masculinity, gender and gender relations as societal problems. In so doing, the institutions concerned subsume *Fools* under the national agenda of which it is critical. However, discussions of gender and gender relations can be discerned in the film's local publicness.

According to Elliot Makhaya, South African reviewer, *Fools* was 'a controversial look by a filmmaker of the struggle generation at the realities of black South Africa in complex human terms' (*Sowetan* 1998, 15 May). Titled, 'film examines complexity of moral choices', the review highlights the film's critical surfacing of gender relations. It describes the elders' decision to lift Zamani's suspension as 'difficult' because they are 'repulsed and

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<sup>24</sup> See *Guide to Undergraduate Courses in English* at Stellenbosch University (International Office, Stellenbosch University) <[www0.sun.ac.za/international/repository/Courses\\_UG\\_Eng.pdf](http://www0.sun.ac.za/international/repository/Courses_UG_Eng.pdf)> (publication date not provided) (accessed 2004, 8 June).

angry with Zamani's act' (*Sowetan*, 1998, 15 May). The review avers that the decision 'sets off covert tensions between men and women in the community' (*Sowetan*, 1998, 15 May). Thus, Makhanya's discussion focuses on the film's examination of gender relations, and through them surfaces what it argues, is the film's complex engagement of moral choices. The review quotes Shai's intriguing reflection on power relations which also allude to gender relations in the film, 'how often is it that doctors sleep with young girls and people in power take advantage of those in the lower rungs of society?' (*Sowetan*, 1998, 15 May). Shai's question brings to the fore, the film's relevance to the contemporary challenges of gender relations. The review discussed the film in terms that invited recognition of its critical nature. This means that it challenged readers of the *Sowetan* to appreciate the film from critical perspectives that are alert to its complex treatment of gender relations within black communities. This challenge called into being a public that saw in the film a decidedly honest and critical black perspective in film. Interestingly, it uses Shai's reflection to emphasise this point, 'the film is a step forward. It says lets deal with our own situation and not paint false pictures' (*Sowetan*, 1998, 15 May).

The issues around gender are also the subject of a number of commentators, notably O'Brien, Magogodi and Dovey's reflections on the film *Fools*. In the following section, the chapter summarizes these commentators' relation of the film to the novella, that is insofar as the question of gender and gender relations are concerned. This section also extends the commentators' impressions on themes beyond the contrasts between novella and the film. It makes the observation that while their readings show some differences, they share a broad consensus with regard to Suleman's critical engagement and updating of the novella. Their readings are appreciated according to discussions of the film's perspective, sexual violation of Mimi, representation of women, and politics of sexuality.

### **From Novella to Film: Echoes and Eclipses**

The discussion turns to the question of how the film replicated the novella and registered its own autonomous voice. While some of the changes Suleman made are for filmic

purposes, others represent his reflections on the novella itself, and its implications for the post-apartheid challenges. Differences notwithstanding, both works operate within an ethico-political domain (Dovey 2009: 66-67). They also reflect on the ways in which apartheid violence, though distant and indirectly alluded to in the film, is integrated in the black community. In the film, these occur through the rape of a young girl by her teacher, and ill-treatment of and utter disrespect for women, in short, the reproduction of violence at the level of the gendered body. At the outset, I appreciate the film's difference from the novella, in terms of narrative perspectives.

According to Dovey (2009: 67), in the novella, Zamani is the storyteller, a privileged consciousness through which the plot of the novella unfolds. In the film however, he is 'devocalised'.<sup>25</sup> For Dovey, therefore, this perspective defines the film's primary point of departure and engagement with the novella. Dovey further observes that while the film retains Zamani as its primary focal point, it expands the novella's less developed characters, and introduces new ones. In the film, for example, Zamani has equally corrupt male friends- who revel in the abuse of girl pupils.

### **Sexual Violation**

For Magogodi, Suleman 'narrativizes the gendered body by politicizing the rape of Mimi, and therefore summons thoughts on questions of sexuality' (2003: 199).<sup>26</sup> This conclusion is consistent with Suleman's emphasis on rape in the film; in contrast to what he argues is its downplaying in the novella. Addressing himself to the question of heterosexual masculinity in *Fools* (screenplay and complete film), O'Brien contrasted the rape scene in the film, with its depiction in the novella. O'Brien's reflections are part of his book: *Against Normalization: Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa* (2001). The book's major focus is on South African literary culture that radically challenges what he argues is the

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<sup>25</sup> Dovey takes the concept of 'devocalization' from Genette, (*Paratexts*, 290), by which he means roughly the loss of powers of speech, or being rendered mute.

<sup>26</sup> See also Dovey L., *Critique*, 135.

'normalization of culture'. According to O'Brien (2001: 79), a 'normalized culture' panders to the model of Western market democracies, and maintains neo-colonial conditions as opposed to 'a transformative view of a culture of liberation'.

Working with the understanding that *Fools* 'reconstructs conceptions of masculinity and the gendered division of labour', O'Brien (267) contrasted the lovemaking scene between Zani and Ntozakhe, and the rape scene (Zamani and Mimi). (For him, these scenes are illustrative of 'two rival versions of heterosexual masculinity from the point of view of the two male doubles Zani and Zamani' (272). O'Brien (274) argues that in the 1996 screenplay, the scene is similar to its treatment in the novella in that it 'constructs masculinity as confusedly desirous rather than phallocratic'. However, O'Brien (275) finds the filmed scene different from the screenplay in that its representation of the two lovers is comfortable and affectionate, 'the opposite of Zamani and Nosipho's strained relations'. For O'Brien, the scene embodies egalitarian relationship between men and women, by making Zani closer to women than Zamani.<sup>27</sup> Not so the rape scene:

The gender and sexual politics of rape take a rather abrupt turn in the filmed version, away from the last vestiges of the ideology of rape as a kind of misplaced, self-confounding, male sexual rapture and towards a conception of rape as pure violence, the intense simplicity of blood (2001: 277).

According to O'Brien (277), the rape scene in the novella was characterized by glamour and voyeurism but that in the film, 'it is almost documentary, reticent, knowing'. Equally, Dovey acknowledges the significant expansion of rape and its aftermath in the film. Accordingly, Suleman opted for realistic visualisation of rape as opposed to its surrealistic depiction in the novella because he wanted to 'define rape as a terrible crime', which the novella, he suggests, poorly captured (Dovey 2009: 67). In extension, Dovey notes that while the novella represented the rape in a rationalising disembodied manner, the film represented the rape in an embodied way, 'using the visual and aural potential of the film medium to encourage the viewer to approach the scene with bodily empathy' (Dovey

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<sup>27</sup> See also Dovey, *Engendering*, 9.

2009: 76). However, Dovey is also quick to point out that the altering of the chronology of Ndebele's plot by the filmmakers also encourages rational approach to the rape (2009: 76).

While O'Brien and Dovey equally show the film's critical relation to Ndebele's text, Bester read the rape against its historical context. Bester submitted that *Fools* does not adequately deal with the 'brutality of the culture of silence surrounding rape'.<sup>28</sup> In his view, *Fools* 'treats rape with a certain indifference'. He reads in the silence of Mimi, the perpetuation of her violation and argues that she suffers a second violation in the film. In Bester's commentary, the film's relation to 'gendered' violence is manifested in terms of rape and 'the culture of silence' around it. Not only does Bester's observation bear out the film's germaneness to the problem of rape in South Africa, but it also charges *Fools* with the task of treating the problem with more depth. Bester's comments appeared in the journal *NKA*. The journal is published under the auspices of Africana Studies and Research Centre at Cornell University, USA. The journal's objective is to create a discourse for contemporary African art and African Diaspora art, which it regards as an emerging field. It is also framed as an intervention into the marginalization of African art in 'art historical debate'. *NKA*'s engagement of art-works that it considers to be outside the mainstream discourses of art history, locates *Fools* at the margins of public critical attention. Not only does the journal's attention to *Fools* signal its artistic merit, but its potential for the definition of contemporary African art. The attention is further indication of the international bias in the film's publicness.

Bester's reading disaffiliates sexual violation in *Fools* from questions of nationalism and black identity. According to this reading, rape is a terrible crime in and of itself. However, the reading also suggests that rape is linked to actual power relations whose effect is

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<sup>28</sup>See Bester R, *Fools*, and [online]

Available from: <<http://www.africanfilmny.org/network/news/Rbester.html>> (accessed 13, March 2007). See also *NKA*, issue no 9, *NKA Publications*, Brooklyn: New York, 1998, 20.

manifested in the silence around it. The example of Bester shows that in foregrounding of Mimi's rape, *Fools* did not only draw attention to the problem of gender relations in South Africa, but opened the agency of violated women to critical scrutiny.

### **Representations of Women and Politics of Sexuality**

The novella makes room for a child, the product of Zamani's rape of Mimi. However, in the film, there is an abortion. In the scene of the abortion, Mimi gets support from her immediate relatives and Nosipho. Writing in Balseiro and Masilela's *To Change Reels*, the book on film culture in South Africa, Magogodi (2003: 195) reads the scene in the light of societal degeneration manifested by the abuse of women. According to Magogodi (195), the abortion demonstrates that the persistence of violence against women leaves no room for 'forces of renewal. On the other hand, Suleman explained the scene of the abortion in terms of a demonstration of the possibility of the resolution of problems, in spite of conflicts among the women. '...we created this scene, and we put our characters into a dilemma to show how women can be in conflict, and when the struggle is over, how they are capable of regrouping and resolving these issues' (Ukadike 2002: 294).<sup>29</sup>

Dovey appreciates the empowerment of women in the film in contrast to their 'schematic' representations in the novella (Dovey 2009: 72). She notes that Mimi who is almost silent in the novella is a secondary voice in the film. For Dovey, this is exemplified by her voice-over as Zani, anxious about her situation recalls her words about the rape (Dovey 2009: 73). For Dovey, the words, captured in a letter that Mimi wrote to Zani highlight Mimi's perspective on the rape which 'prefaces and frames the events that follow' (Dovey 2009: 73). The character of Nosipho also attracts Dovey's eye. She argues that in the film, Nosipho is made a more vocal character and not idealised as she is in the novella. Dovey

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<sup>29</sup> See also Dovey, *Critique*, 137. Similarly, part of O'Brien's impressions on *Fools* is that it centres women in its narrative. O'Brien notes the film's 'detraction' from what he sees as Ndebele's 'Oedipal narrative'. He picks the example of the women's networking, in a scene played entirely by women in which the focus falls on Mimi rather than Zamani. In addition, O'Brien hails the expansion of Nosipho's role 'as an independent authoritative actor'. See O'Brien, *Radical Democracy*, 278.

provides as an example, the scene in which Nosipho refuses to play the role of a martyred wife, like the woman who washed Jesus' feet and dried them with her own hair. Yet Dovey's example of Nosipho's vocality in the film also appears in the novella with an extended register about what Ndebele argued was 'the self-righteousness' of Jesus. Dovey's bias for vocality as an antithesis of Nosipho empowerment ignores the film's visualization of her silent questioning of her husband.

While Magogodi (2003: 196) commends Suleman for challenging the stereotypical depiction of black women in film, he argues that following the lovemaking scene of Zani and Ntozakhe's characters, only Zani's character is fully developed.<sup>30</sup> According to this argument, Ntozakhe's agency is only confined to her sexuality. Magogodi (2003: 190) advances this argument in spite of his reading that *Fools* questions the 'stereotypical view that black people have untameable libidinal instincts [...] or rampant and wild sexuality'. For him, *Fools* 'present scenes of believable sexual encounters' (2003: 190). Magogodi's turn to politics of sexuality is informed by his anxieties about racial politics, which he believes have drawn the attention of much scholarship.<sup>31</sup> Arguing that *Fools* critically addresses itself to the colonial and anti-colonial discourses of black sexuality, he reads the film according to its figuration of black bodies as gendered and as loci of political metaphors.

Magogodi further makes links between the colonial and Christian morality, with the moral schema(s) informing the representations of attitudes to sexuality in the film. Taking his cue from Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Magogodi submits that in the film, Zamani's

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<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, O'Brien observes that she gets extensive screen-time and is treated as Zani's equal. See O'Brien, *Radical Democracy*, 275. For Barlet, it is the relationship between Zani and Ntozakhe that is not fully developed, see also Barlet O, *Reimagining*, 102.

<sup>31</sup> This is perhaps an auto-critique since Magogodi has also studied the film in light of its representation of black identity. In this work, Magogodi argues that *Fools* transcends homogenizing strategies and instead reveals and incisive study of black or African identities. For him, *Fools* contested the colonial and Apartheid imaginary of black identity, by imagining the black body differently. For this work, see Magogodi K., 2002. *Refiguring the Body: Performance of Identity in Mapantsula and Fools*, *Theatre Research International*, (27), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 243-258.

behaviour (rape of Mimi, sleeping with a prostitute) and political depravity operate under the moral sign of Christian civility, which eventuates into his punishment of senility. For Magogodi, the violated and violating gendered body in *Fools* serves the leitmotifs of history. He sees in Zamani's frail body and impotence, a sign of 'emasculatation'. In the main, it expresses like El Hadji in Sembene's *Xala*, his political cowardice in the face of apartheid (2003: 190).

For Magogodi, the representation of women in the film is ultimately part of gendered metaphors, which are indicative of a tendency in power relations that consign women to the biological realm. In this scenario, Magogodi argues, women are credited with nothing beyond their 'sexual power (lessness)' (sic) or partnership in African nationalism that is defined in masculine terms. Magogodi also finds the strength of matriarchs like MaButhelezi undermined by their marginal roles in the film. He faults Suleman for not inserting a female character at the centre of the narrative (2003: 195).<sup>32</sup> Magogodi concludes that even when women become united, theirs is 'a fragile form of sisterhood'.

Accordingly, Magogodi's turn to politics of sexuality and the body extends the discursive purview of the film by reflecting on its relations to the discourse of nationalism. The observation about the politicization of Mimi's rape and, the focus on the body as a locus of social and political effects are cases in point. In arguing against the consignment of women to the biological realm in the film, a tendency in the nationalist discourse that the film seems to participate in, Magogodi offers a critique of the premises of the film. Thus, Magogodi's engagement implores the reader to consider the film in relation to the political modernist tendencies prevalent in the discourses of most African anti-colonial literature and political activism.

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<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Maingard finds the centring of the narrative around Zamani limited because it 'keeps the solutions between his remit only and relegate the women to secondary positions' For this argument, see Maingard J., *National Cinema*: 168.

Interestingly, Magogodi's criticism builds on but problematises the film's critique of gender relations. It does this by exposing the dissonances in *Fools'* critical engagement of colonial discourses and their neo-colonial resurgences. Thus, Magogodi highlights the film's reproduction of the 'regressive' tendencies in African nationalist discourses. In so arguing, Magogodi destabilizes the critical groundwork upon which the film is made, and is able to demand of it, a nuanced reflection about the relation of gender, to the anti-colonial and anti-neo-colonial political discourses. Another important argument that Magogodi makes is that films directed by male filmmakers are 'not inherently disabled in progressively reviewing the gendered body'.

In summary, the commentators underscore the film's critical distance from its parent text, the novella. In so doing, they have garnered reflections on a particular site of the film's public life, which also constitute part of its critical legacy. The commentators' contrasting of the novella and the film shows that while there are disagreements pertaining to the representation of women in the film, the general impression is that Suleman critically destabilizes Ndebele's depiction of women. A significant point of consensus regarding Suleman's engagement of gender relations centres on his approach to the rape scene. Here O'Brien, Magogodi and Dovey all agree that the violence of the rape serves the purpose well because it shows its stark brutality- without privileging the perpetrator's point of view.

The adaptation of the novella has transposed to the film, the tenor of critique at the heart of Ndebele's literary and critical works. Both the film and the novella forge challenges to the agency of black people and their representation. They also consider the ethical and political contradictions within township communities without adopting a prescriptive voice about social and political action. Yet, the film critically updates the novella by inserting into the South African debates around gender, a visualization of the excesses of black masculinity. It changes the masculinity of Ndebele's men and makes it the object of judgment by the women in the film. Here, the film does not seem to excite much

discussion pertaining to sexuality and black identity. In exception of Magogodi's discussion, the engagements on sexual violence only hint at the brutal nature of patriarchal gender relations and do not explicitly relate this to black identity. It is precisely in its register of a complex and nuanced reality of gender and gender relations, that the film invites a consideration of its propensity to bring into being a public that is alive to its conceptual demands. While *Fools* called into being a public that is defined by a focus on its relation to the novella, other critical engagements of *Fools* considered it outside this schema. These engagements include some of the above-cited commentators. However, gender remained central to these other engagements.

### **More Reflections on Gender**

O'Brien extends the film's critical usefulness to the question of feminism in the post-apartheid dispensation. Focusing on 'the fiction into film process in the 1997 screenplay of *Fools*', O'Brien (2001: 267), considers the film 'as an occasion for measuring the progress of feminism in post-apartheid narratives'. O'Brien is especially concerned with the role of feminism in what he calls South Africa's 'emergent radical democracy' (2001: 267). Because of the gender of the Peterson and Suleman team, O'Brien describes *Fools* as a male feminist text. He also alludes to the problems of men who advance feminist work, but maintains that it is not altogether counter-productive. O'Brien (2001: 108-109), likens the male feminism of *Fools* to another male feminist text, the 1984 play *Gangsters* produced by the Black Consciousness playwright Maishe Maponya. Examining *Fools* in relation to the play and other radical texts of the 80's leads O'Brien to attribute significance to the post-apartheid emergence of the film.

The significance of a feminist influence in *Fools* is that it is - in the tradition of Gibson Kente's 1976 *How Long?* And Thomas Mogotlane's screenwriting and starring role in the 1988 *Mapantsula*, the first black-produced feature film made after apartheid (2001: 267).

O'Brien argues that grassroots democratic art making, from which *Fools* derives its male feminist politics and textuality, ought to constitute the most profound writing of South

African radical democracy in the future. That *Fools* is the only film in O'Brien's study sharply illustrates its 'dialogic affiliation' with the representational modes of literature, and theatre. This contributes to the critical status of *Fools*. Accordingly, *Fools* relayed the feminism of the above texts into film and historically, into the post-apartheid era. O'Brien's take on *Fools* then gestures to its sustaining of the debates on gender, and pioneering of film as a site for a feminist critical attitude towards post-apartheid liberation. The salutary lesson in O'Brien's work is that in not aligning itself to the dominant political post-apartheid nation-building agenda, *Fools* carved a marginal public discursive horizon for itself. This is a horizon of a small but important and robust engagement of social and political relations.

Significant though it may be, the marginality of this horizon suggests that *Fools* largely stimulated an expert public. Though O'Brien makes the point about the film's resonance with ordinary people, the question of how this resonance might translate into a critical appraisal of the question of gender and violence in relation to publics other than expert ones is significant. Film scholar Mamokuena Makhema's work helps broach the question of non-expert publics.

Contra, O'Brien and Magogodi, the method of Mamokuena Makhema's work attempts to broach a public that is well-defined in terms of 'race', gender and age. *Fools* is the subject of Makhema's Masters Research Report submitted to the University of the Witwatersrand in 2005. The report titled *Representation of Women in Fools* is an ethnographical study of black women's interpretation of the film. It attempts 'to reconcile the subject positions of the creators with the narrative experiences of the women they represent' (Makhema 2005: 1). In its exploration of women's responses, the thesis is alert to class and generational differences amongst the women. Makhema's thesis uses the interview method, which she undertook after screening the film for the interviewees. The ages of women interviewed approximate the ages of women represented in the film, which ranged from 20's to 60's (44-5).

Makhema observes that there are significant differences in the women's interpretations of the representation of women in *Fools*. According to Makhema, the generational differences played a major role in the different responses. For example, the younger interviewees expressed reservations about what they read as Nosipho's submissiveness and passivity. On the contrary, the older respondents were angered by her willingness to leave Zamani.

With regard to the character of Ma-Buthelezi, Makhema argues that all the spectators disagree with her behaviour (59, 62-63). She shows that the interviewees or spectators have a problem with Ma-Buthelezi's passivity with regard to Mimi's rape, and Zani's injury. Makhema interprets these readings as reflective of the respondents' embedment within a post-apartheid human rights culture, which recognizes the rights of women. Furthermore, the women in the second group see Ma-Buthelezi's religiosity as a factor in her silence (74-75). Accounting for the viewer's negative attitudes against Busi's confrontational temperament, Makhema argues that it shows the dominance of modesty as a marker of behaviour that qualifies one for a higher social class. According to Makhema, this view reflects the influence of patriarchy on the women's way of looking (65).

Makhema observes that her interviewees ultimately question the representation of women in *Fools*. She reads in their views a yearning for 'instrumental change' in their representations. Makhema argues that black women desire representations that reflect political and social changes they are experiencing (79). Therefore, the women's awareness of their rights leads to their impatience with 'dutiful behaviour of women represented in the film' (79). Further, 'representations of women should mirror the South African society [...] 'there should be structural changes resulting in authentic and credible modes of representations of women reclaiming power' (79). On this point, she submits that men make assumptions about women and that the film, which is made by men, is reflective of this tendency.

One is led to argue that Makhema's readings of the differences in women's responses undermine the assumption inherent in her methodology of the neatness of such responses. Further, her argument, reiterated by some of the respondents that male filmmakers are bound to misrepresent women, is inconsistent with the heterogeneity of the responses. However, Makhema's study, based as it is on her interpretation of her interviewees' comments, widens intimations on the film's critical potency by highlighting age, 'race', gender and gender representation as criteria of analysis.

The consideration in Makhema's work, of the meaningfulness of film for black women in South Africa is notable. She suggests that *Fools* falls squarely within the social and political discourse of women's liberation, particularly as it relates to the birth of democracy in South Africa. In itself, this assumption seems to refute O'Brien's concerns with radical democracy in relation to *Fools*. The respondents' relation of the question of gender to women's rights in the new democracy is an important one. This is because they engaged with it in relation to their immediate personal situations. Yet, the relevance of the film to the political and social discourse of women's liberation draws attention to the historical setting of *Fools* and its circulation in the new dispensation.

The feminist discursive drive running through Makhema's work especially with regard to the film's representations and its being directed by male filmmakers is notable. It evinces *Fools'* constitution of the gender debate at the level of access to women's ownership of the means of telling their stories, and the congruence of its representations with the new dispensation. Considering Magogodi's argument to the contrary, it is clear that at the level of politics of production, *Fools* certainly resurfaces a long-standing dispute about gender and representation.

Judging by the preceding analyses, *Fools*, insofar as it is critically engaged as text, has certainly attracted expert attention the most. It would seem that this critical attention is

driven and informed by the general acceptance by its publics, that it is a film with a complex critical purchase. This is explained by the noticeable extension of Suleman's framing of *Fools* as a questioning film. However, the comparatively modest critical attention to the film in newspaper reviews, especially regarding the questions of gender, sexuality and black masculinity constitutes a noticeable limit in its public critical potency. On the one level, this signals the fact that the issues it raised are not strictly cut for popular appeal. If the latter is the case, it surfaces the difficulty that *auteurist* black-centred films face in their attempt at opening a cinematic space for critical public engagements. In addition to the latter, the conditions of its circulation did not favour the enhancement of the film's capacity to animate critical engagements.

It is necessary to revisit the general conditions underwriting the film's making and circulation. As noted, *Fools* in contrast to the earlier films, *Come Back, Africa, u'Deliwe*, and *Mapantsula*, had the historical advantage of being made in a democratic period. This allowed the film wide circulation and unrestrained public engagement. However, this advantage was short-circuited by its conditions of distribution, such as limited prints for exhibition in the cinemas, and therefore circulation that was to be realized through the marginal exhibition practices of the Film Resource Unit and ICE Media. If in terms of stimulating engagement, the difficult circulation of *Mapantsula* worked to its advantage, it appears to have worked to the contrary with regards to *Fools*.

The film's timing also plays a role. Coming as it did after 1994, *Fools* can be regarded as a kind of 'killjoy' in the midst of the euphoria of black independence. The spaces of gender debates as described in the beginning of the chapter have not related to the film in anyway. It is notable that the Non-Governmental Organizations dealing with gender inequalities and violence in South Africa or elsewhere did not take up or appropriate *Fools*. Nor did the film draw the attention of feminist activists and academics in South Africa.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> It seems that Makhema is the only feminist academic to focus on *Fools*. In her latest work on South African Cinema (*National Cinema*), Maingard who is a feminist, does not give extensive critical attention to *Fools*.

This silence, particularly on the part of activists, can be attributed to what appears to be a generic bias to the genres other than film in public engagements of the significant issues such as gender.

On another hand, the lack of deliberation on the film's meaningfulness for feminist activism, or gender organizational agendas seems to stem from the incongruence of its thematic perspective on black masculinity with the tendency in these organizations to think of gender issues as women's issues. At the same time, its visualization of rape in a black community might have contradicted attempts at the discursive reversal of tendencies to stereotype the sexuality of black men. In not relating to gender-oriented organizations, *Fools* is different from *Mapantsula*, which actually galvanized liberal and leftist organizations to engage it. In relation to the local silent rejection of the film by the political establishment, O'Brien's take on *Fools* is telling in its attribution of the film to the radical tendency in the global anti neo-liberal political activism.

## Conclusions

The chapter set out to describe the making and public life of *Fools*, with a focus on the film's relations to public engagements of gender relations. It placed *Fools* firmly within ongoing debates on gender in the progress towards the watershed elections in 1994 and after. The chapter has also foregrounded the filmmaker's attention to gender, and its affiliation to nationalism and what Suleman calls the 'psychological sequels' of history.

That the engagements of *Fools* were largely confined to expert publics highlights its tightly curtailed critical import. Yet, the relative lack of critical engagements outside expert spaces suggests attenuation in the public critical potency of *Fools*. The reasons for these tendencies can be discerned through appreciation of the film's form, content, timing, and conditions of circulation. Quite importantly, it is in its bold step at launching a new debate about gender and violence in the manner that it did, that *Fools* guided its own publicness, and public critical potency.

In the annals of black-centred films in South Africa, *Fools* is a distinctive text in terms of form and content, in that it foregrounded reflections on gender relations and violence among black people, without recourse to dominant film conventions. Because of this, it occupies a marginal space in South African film culture typified by subtle conflicts with dominant cinematic trends, and in the face of bold depictions of black masculine violence, minimal critical public engagements. This constitutes a paradox for *auteurist* African cinema within a neo-colonial film culture. The more autonomous this cinema is- in terms of form and content, the more demanding its publicness. The effect is that public engagements of blackness become embroiled in the tension between the historical 'othering' of blackness in colonial, apartheid and Hollywood texts; and the filmic depiction of the underbelly of black societies in the neo-colonial moment. Though layered against a critical discourse with significant implications about 'post'-repressive social and political relations among black South Africans, the focus on rape in the black community registers an ambiguity in the cinematic publicness of black-centred films. This ambiguity destabilizes certitudes about blackness in the film's publics. In this scenario, *Fools* carries the burden of serving as a limit case for the public critical potency of black-centred films. Against the legacy of epistemic violence underwriting cinematic constructions of blackness, the publicness of *Fools* is testament to the public critical limits of *auteurist* films. Consequently, their potential for striking a balance between the pleasures of cinema, and its ruthless but considered public reflection is hindered.