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Motsaathebe, Thatayaone Gilbert

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Presence as Absence: A Black Feminist Analysis of the Depiction of Black Women in Three Post-Apartheid South African Films (2004-2008)

By

Thatayaone Gilbert Motsaathebe

A Thesis

submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for

the degree of

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University of the Witwatersrand

Supervisor: Dr Haseenah Ebrahim

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DECLARATION

I, **Thatayaone Gilbert Motsaathebe**, declare that *Presence as Absence: A Black Feminist Analysis of the Depiction of Black Women in Three Post-Apartheid South African Films(2004-2008)* represents my own unaided work, and that the thesis has not previously been submitted for academic examination towards any qualification. Furthermore, it represents my own opinions and not necessarily those of the University of the Witwatersrand.

Signed:……

Date:……

DEDICATION

For millions of Black women across the world who “carry six mountains on their back,” to use Molara Ogundipe-Leslie’s (1993: 107) phrasing.

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ABSTRACT

Presence as Absence: A Black Feminist Analysis of the Depiction of Black Women in Three Post-Apartheid South African Films (2004-2008)
Thatayaone Gilbert Motsaathebe

Using feminist film criticism and semiotic analysis, this dissertation evaluates how Black women are portrayed in post-apartheid films in South Africa. Three high-profile feature films, namely *Yesterday* (Roodt, 2004), *Tsotsi* (Hood, 2005), and *Jerusalema* (Ziman, 2008), produced during a five-year period between 2004 and 2008, were examined for their portrayal of Black female characters in terms of nuance and complexity. The study draws on cultural studies, Black feminism and Gramsci's theory of hegemony to unravel the position of Black women in contemporary South Africa. It also explores the inequalities and power relations that characterised both the colonial and apartheid eras and the way various aspects of that hegemonic imperative have continued to be reproduced and re-envisioned in post-apartheid South Africa through various public discourses. The study focuses predominantly on the portrayal of four key Black female characters, namely Yesterday (in *Yesterday*), Lucky's mother (in *Jerusalema*), Miriam (in *Tsotsi*) and Pumla (in *Tsotsi*). Gendered modes of portrayal identified include objectification, voyeurism, motherhood, domestication and single parenthood. It was found that some of the patterns that characterised the cinema of apartheid continue to persist in post-apartheid films. One of the major concerns with the reviewed films is their tendency to confine Black women to 'the home' through a naturalist frame which presents them as being naturally equipped to bear difficulties. For example, in the domains of domestic work and parenting they are

portrayed as superwomen – self-sacrificing, loving, forgiving and always labouring for the good of others, in spite of the circumstances pitted against them. In the Gramscian sense, such depiction functions to ensure that these women do not question the injustice of their position because they are constantly shown as being naturally equipped to deal with any kind of hardship. However, there are a few exceptions where a counter-narrative challenging the traditional representation was evinced, although this is only limited to character portrayal. Overall, the study found that the corpus of films examined struggles to render a nuanced and dynamic representation of Black women, especially with regard to the roles and statuses ascribed to them. The study concluded that the South African cinema during colonialism and apartheid established a multiform, racist and sexist narrative (to use Foucauldian terms), while the new wave of post-apartheid films struggles to provide an equally multiform, anti-racist and anti-sexist counter-narrative.

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Why is it that feminist film criticism, which has most claimed the terrain of women's identity, representation, and subjectivity as its field of analysis, remains aggressively silent on the subject of blackness and specifically representation of black womanhood?(hooks,1999:315)