

**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

Doctor of Philosophy

At the

Wits School of Arts

University of the Witwatersrand

Supervisor: Dr Haseenah Ebrahim

November 2013

This thesis may not be published either in part (in scholarly, scientific or technical journals), or as a whole (as a monograph), without a written permission of the author.

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 Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie’s (1993: 107) phrasing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a PhD thesis is a formidable task and its completion is never an effort of a single individual. As such I am deeply indebted to:

- God without whose sustenance I believe this would not have been possible;
- My supervisor Dr Haseenah Ebrahim for her dedicated supervision throughout the years of my registration at Wits;
- The Readers at the University of the Witwatersrand, Professors Pumla Dineo Gqola, Jyoti Mistry and Bheki Peterson, for their initial comments during the proposal stage of this study.

Further, I would like to acknowledge the generosity of SEPHIS for the financial assistance, which enabled me to spend twelve months as a fellow at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS) in Bangalore, India, while working on this study. I thank CSCS for providing space and resources and most importantly the intellectual stimulation during the many academic sessions at the centre.

One of the pleasures of working on this topic has been the number of people with whom I have come into contact, and here I want to thank especially Professor David Kerr (University of Botswana), Dr Cynthia Kros (University of the Witwatersrand), Drs S.V. Srinivas, Milind Wakankar, Kakarala Sitharamam, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Tejaswini Niranjana and Lakshmi Arya (CSCS) for their

incisive insights on some of the issues that I raise in this study. Lastly, I thank my former employer the Cape Peninsula University of Technology for giving me time off my hectic teaching schedule to take up the SEPHIS-CSCS fellowship in 2011.

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.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENT	PAGE NO.
Title Page.....	i
Copyright Page.....	ii
Declaration.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vii

CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Aims of the Study	6
1.2 Rationale and Disciplinary Origins	7
1.3. A Brief Plot Summary of Selected Films	11
1.4 A Brief Overview of Cinematic History in South Africa	13
1.4.1 The Colonial Phase (1652–1948)	16
1.4.2 The Apartheid Phase (1948–1986)	22
1.4.3 The Pre-Democratic Phase (1986–1993)	32
1.4.4 The Post-Apartheid Phase (1994 Onwards)	37
1.5 Current Literature	44

1.6	Scope and Delimitation of Study	48
1.7	Definition of Key Concepts	49
1.8	Organisation of the Study	52

CHAPTER TWO

2.	LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING	55
2.1	Black Feminist Epistemology	56
2.1.1	Black Feminist Defined	63
2.1.2	Black South African Women and the Black Consciousness	68
2.1.3	Problems Encountered Within the Black Women's Movement	76
2.1.4	(Re)-Theorising the Black Woman in South Africa	79
2.1.4.1	The Pre-colonial Context	79
2.1.4.2	Contemporary Black South African Women	96
2.2	Intersectionality	103
2.3	The Notion of Representation and the Concept of Stereotyping	107
2.4	The Theory of Hegemony	115
2.5	The Colonial Gaze and the Male Gaze	117
2.6	Key Findings on Representation of Black Women	119

CHAPTER THREE

3.	METHODOLOGY AND BROAD ANALYSIS	130
3.1	Semiotics	131
3.2	Broad Interpretation of the films	143

3.2.1	<i>Yesterday</i>	144
3.2.2	<i>Jerusalema</i>	150
3.2.3	<i>Tsotsi</i>	163
3.3	Setting and Classification according to Genre	165
3.4	A Brief Background of the Directors	173
3.5	The Main Characters	176
3.6	The Symbolism of Naming as a Filmic Device	179
3.7	The Everyday Life	181
3.8	Focus of Inquiry: Scenes, Characters and Elements of Analysis	183

CHAPTER FOUR

4.	MODES OF REPRESENTATION	186
4.1	Delineation of Gendered Themes	187
4.2	Disjunctures and Signs of Dynamic Representation	215

CHAPTER FIVE

5.	PORTRAYAL OF STATUS, OCCUPATION AND BEHAVIOUR	219
5.1	Class, Status and Occupation	220
5.2	Behavioural Characteristics Ascribed to Black Women	250

CHAPTER SIX

6. CONCLUSION	261
6.1 A Study in Retrospection	262
6.1.1 Single Parenthood/Motherhood	264
6.1.2 Domestic/Presence as Absence	267
6.1.3 Sisterhood/Women Solidarity	270
6.1.4 The Nurturing Woman	271
6.1.5 Voyeurism, Fetishism and the Male Gaze	272
6.2 Class, Status and Occupation	276
6.3 Final Conclusion	277
FILMOGRAPHY	281
REFERENCES	288
VITA	307

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)