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Representation of woman in fools

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aim of the Study

Fools (1997), a film by Suleman Ramadan, is one of the first feature films that is made post 1994 about the apartheid regime. It is set in 1989. It portrays two generations of black women constructed through five characters who each represent different classes and ideological positions. The aim of this research is to conduct an ethnographical study of women's interpretation of *Fools*. Jacqueline Bobo's model in Black Women as Cultural Readers (1995) will be used in order to discover how black women in South Africa read film according to class, gender and race.

1.2 Rationale

The original story *Fools* was written by a black man, Njabulo Ndebele in the 1960's though it was only published in 1983. Two black men, Suleman Ramadan and Bheki Peterson, wrote the film script. The director, Suleman Ramadan, made the film in the 1990's, after the first democratic elections in South Africa. A film written and directed by black men, which reflects in part the experiences of black women. The analysis attempts to reconcile the subject positions of the creators with the narrative experiences of women they represent.

The story is about one man's struggle to redeem himself in the eyes of his community after an act, which has destroyed his family and devastated his community. Teacher Zamani rapes Mimi, his former student, at his house when she is sent by her mother to take him a present.

Although the story centres on a male character, the situation in this film very much affects the female characters. The following five female characters are important:

MIMI is a teenage schoolgirl who is raped by her teacher, Zamani. She arrives at his home to deliver a gift from her mother for helping Mimi with her schoolwork. After the rape incident she is both ashamed and scared to discuss the possible consequences such as pregnancy with her mother. She is embarrassed by her sister's open aggression towards teacher Zamani.

BUSI, Mimi's sister, is very angry and contests what Zamani has done to her little sister. She is in her 20's and unable to contain her anger. She also takes out her anger on Nosipho, Zamani's wife.

NOSIPHO, Zamani's wife, is a nurse and does not have children, which brings her husband's verbal abuse. She is a very sad woman whom most of the time bears the consequences of her husband's behaviour. Her sadness also closes doors to any discussion that could save her marriage.

MABUTHELEZI is Busi and Mimi's mother. She is a widow who is struggling to raise three children. She also has a son, Zani, who is studying in Swaziland instead of South Africa, with a hope of giving him better education. She is almost always very calm about bad things happening to her family. She treats Zamani with respect when he comes to her house despite what he has done to her daughter.

NTOZAKHE is Zani's girlfriend who also studied in Swaziland. She is very passive though she had a chance of studying out of the country and has obtained equivalent education to Zani. At the Dingaan's Day celebration when the white man continues beating Zamani, she is the first one to pick a stone to defend Zamani but soon drops it when the man stops beating Zamani.

In conducting an ethnographic research using *Fools* as a case study, I will explore how black women as spectators read representations of black women in South African cinema. In this way the research creates space for women to articulate their interpretation thus connecting the experience of the world with how they read cultural representations. In a way this research will convey the factors that affect how South African women read films that represent socio-political changes in South Africa as it pertains to women and their rights.

Although there are writings and readings around black female spectatorship, they are American not African. A lot of work has been done with representations but there has been a failure in looking around female spectatorship in South Africa, which makes this research important. For example, though Kgafela oa Magogodi has a desire towards representation of women, he only reads it through a theoretical paradigm. Magogodi's paradigm in his essay, "Sexuality, power and the black body in *Mapantsula* and *Fools*", seeks alternative representations and more engaged representations by women for women (Balseiro, I. and Masilela, 2003).

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The following theories were reviewed in carrying out the research

1. Psychoanalytical Feminist Film Theory
2. Post modern Film Theory
3. Spectatorship theory
4. Reception Theory
    - Reader Response Theory
    - Dehabitualisation Theory
5. Cultural Theory

Feminist film theory became a large and flourishing field in the past fifty years and Laura Mulvey initiated the question of interpretations and experiences of women with her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). Laura Mulvey is a psychoanalytical feminist film theorist and in her book Visual and other Pleasures (1989), she highlights that the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure. The point Mulvey was putting forth is that the sexual inequity has resulted in women looking at things around them according to the ‘male gaze’, thus coming across as passive. The psychoanalytical theory became eminent in the 1920s put forth by white women in the west fighting sexual imbalances that leave women as mere bodies without voices.

The post-modern film theorists continue to fight sexual imbalances by coming up with interesting theories such as “The Oppositional Gaze”. However, they bring alternatives to the highly regarded but general psychoanalytical theory of feminist writing. I refer to this theory as general as it fails to acknowledge individuality that is brought about by the issues of race, socio-economic state and historical background of the subject. The post modern theorists question the concept of human identity based on the categories of bodily integrity, race, ethnicity, class position, or even gender. According to hooks Reel to Real: race, sex, and class at the movies (1996), a post modern film theorist, the psychoanalytical framework privileges sexual differences but actively suppresses recognition of race and racialised sexual differences. This could only indicate that drivers of this theory are white women whose concern is eradicating sexual imbalances not giving thought to black women who are experiencing both sexual inequity and racial discrimination.

At the same time, the postmodern film theorists are themselves overlooking the factors that affect women located in different parts of the world. Women’s lives in other parts of the world i.e. Africa, Asia, far East etc are impacted on by matters of religion, poverty, diseases and many other terrible issues that are not necessarily a priority for women like hooks who live in developed countries. Black

women in Africa will possibly have different perspectives from black women in other parts of the world. This means the way they reflect on their emotions can be different. African Feminist Ifi Amadiume offers an alternative ideology from both psychoanalytical feminists and black feminists' theorists in the United States of America.

It is at this point that the aspect of African Feminism versus Western Feminism arises. Amadiume uses her country of origin, Nigeria, to conduct a case study in supplying facts that socio-economic impacts differ according to the Diaspora, which emphasises on individuality. She looks into; child labour, trade in children, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, abortion, and abandoned babies. All these are the results of poverty that is prevailing in Africa. These are problems that take priority in the lives of women living in this particular region of Africa. While for a woman like Mulvey is imperative to fight sexual discrimination, or a woman like hooks to fight both sexual and racial discrimination, for a woman in Africa, it is important to find means of fighting hunger. Poverty in certain parts of the world is so prevalent that talks about sexual imbalances come through as luxury.

It is therefore essential to consider all above defined feminist theories and combine the thoughts to come up with the best ideology that can be applied in answering women's crisis. The spectatorship theory also forms an important part of this study. It allows women as individuals from their different parts of the world to watch films that represent them. They act as spectators and finally have voice to talk back and interpret what they see according to their being, diverse cultures, diaspora, socio-economic experiences, race, gender and many other issues that could surface as a result of what they see.

Reception theory, also key, is applied during the analysis stage of the research. This is the chapter that contains an analysis of the women spectators' reception of *Fools*. Reception theory refers throughout to a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader. This somehow forces one to also

consider the reader response theory. Reader response criticism also refers to a general shift in attention from the author of the work to the text and the reader. In reader response theory, the role of the recipient is of primary importance. The response of the reader automatically removes the object from its normal perceptive field through the theory of dehabitualisation.

Cultural theory is also relevant in this study and the theorist that has been looked at is Stuart Hall. Cultural theory strives to explain how people relate to each other and/or the surrounding environment. In his theory Stuart Hall states that the ideology that emanates from the reformation of ideologies in a discourse "transforms a people's consciousness and awareness of themselves and their historical situation" (Bobo, 1995:39). Although this ideology explodes culturally, "It does not constitute itself directly as a social or political force." Hall continues, "When it becomes connected to a social movement or a movement that is in the process of social formation, then it has the potential to be a social force. The potential becomes a reality when the group presents itself as 'collective subject within a unifying ideology.' Then the group becomes a unified social force." (Quoted in Bobo, 1995:39). This signifies the bringing together of women as spectators talking back to the film they have watched, in the case of this research, *Fools*.

As already mentioned, the above-defined theories have been functional in carrying out the research, "Representation of women in *Fools*", and each of the above has added an important value. In addition to the theories a lot of texts in the form of books, essays, articles etc were also read and interlinked to my study.

African Experiences of Cinema edited by Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham has articles relevant to my research such as "Images of Women" by Farida Ayari. This article deals with African feminism. Ayari indicates that, "The images of African women in African cinema remain essentially that created by men (Bakari and Cham, 1996: 181).

This is the case with *Fools* as I have mentioned that it is a film made entirely by men. Ayari continues to highlight this about women in African films

> These are women fabricated within the imagery of the men who make the films, regardless of how close to reality this imaginary maybe… the image of women in African cinema is the result of a male gaze at a mostly male society and the representation remains a male one (Bakari and Cham, 1996: 181-182).

bell hooks in Reel to Real (1996) agrees with Ayari as she writes,

> Major early black male independent filmmakers represented black women in their films as objects of a male gaze…the black male gaze had a different scope from that of the black female (hooks, 1996: 200).

The following quotation from Ayari's essay reflects the situation in *Fools* as well, "It is worth noting that nine times out of ten female characters in African films meet a sorry fate. There are almost no positive heroines (Bakari and Cham, 1996:183).

Teacher Zamani rapes Mimi in *Fools* and the elders choose to forgive him though this act negatively affects almost every female character in the film. This scene shows the exclusion of women from important community matters.

Still in the same edition of African Experiences of Cinema, Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike in his essay "Reclaiming Images of Women in Films from Africa and the Black Diaspora" feels that, "African cinema has done considerable work in

privileging women's issues, particularly the creation of female subjectivity," (Bakari and Cham, 1996:207).

However, Ukadike recognises that there remains much to be done in promoting and problematising representations of women and Oa Magogodi expresses similar conform

> Mabuthelezi's household in *Fool*s provides another example of matrifocality; as a widow, she is in charge of the family. These are independent women who are portrayed as self-sufficient, but their roles are marginal compared to those of the males in the stories (2003:199).

This is where need for spectatorship arises. At this point critical black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of domination.

It is easy for a person from another part of the world to interpret a film differently from what the filmmaker had the intention of portraying. The reason is lack of understanding of the cultural background of that particular film. Julie Dash, the director of *Daughters Of The Dust* (1991), says

> When a work is so densely seeded within a black culture, a lot of people who are not from the culture will say that they find the film inaccessible or that it is not engaging. What they are saying is that they do not feel privileged by the film. So they choose not to engage or allow themselves to become engaged (Bobo, 1999: xii).

In short, how the world reads representations of black women in South African cinema might not necessarily be the same as how black women interpret their

films. So, allowing these women to comment on *Fools*, as a case study, will create an opportunity to theorise issues such as the one Julie Dash raises above. bell hooks says there is power in looking, meaning spectatorship theory offers people, in the case of my research women, power to offer interpretations of the way they are represented.

1.4 Methodology

As I have indicated before, Jacqueline Bobo's model of Black Women As Cultural Readers will be followed. However, not all of her aspects will be used. With this methodology I will clarify which of her aspects I will adapt and which I will not apply and why.

Like Bobo, through interviews with selected groups of black women, I am going to analyse black women's responses to *Fools*. To achieve my aim, there will be a screening of *Fools* in order to conduct an ethnographic study. I will use sample groups consisting of black South African women with different classes and age groups. The women will comment freely as they watch the film, *Fools*. Then they will respond to five similar questions that I have already formulated. (The questions appear towards the end of this methodology.) The interview will be conducted in different places suitable to the candidates. A recorder will be used to capture their responses.

Names of the candidates, age, occupation and level of education will be considered and recorded during the interviews. This will be followed by data analysis.

The difference is that, Bobo concentrated on 'a small group of Black middle class women' and discussed both novels and films with them, while I intend on dealing with women of different generations and classes to discuss the film not the text.

However, as with Bobo I give the women an opportunity to interpret the representations of women raising the issues of race and sex.

QUESTIONS

1. What is your opinion about women in *Fools* as portrayed in private places, such as their homes and never in public places such as work or school?
2. Do you identify with the characters or not? If yes, which characters do you identify with most closely and why?
3. Do you empathize with them or not? How do you relate to their story or not?
4. How would you react in their positions?
5. How do you view the image of women in *Fools*?

In her interviews, Jacqueline Bobo selected a group of black women only belonging to the same class to interpret texts and films she was using in order to find out how experiences and background determine spectatorship. These women would almost certainly understand situations not so differently and would probably utter similar responses to the representations in the films. In the same way, I am going to interview groups of black South African women only, though the women I am going to interview belong to different classes and ideological positions because of the difference in generations. I probably have a similar purpose to Jacqueline Bobo's by applying reception theory by conducting an empirical study of the spectator.

1.5 Organisation of the Study

Chapter 1

This chapter basically introduces the research report and contains the aim of the research followed by rationale. It also highlights the theoretical framework as well as the method to be carried out in achieving the aim.

Chapter 2

It outlines the theoretical framework of the research itself. This is the core of the paper as the theories applied in achieving the aim appear on this part. From this follows the analysis.

Chapter 3

Methodology chapter indicates how and what steps were followed in carrying out the research.

Chapter 4

The analysis chapter comprises of the reception theory in preparation to analyse the comments of spectators interpreting *Fools*. My analysis of the film as a case study on representation of black women in South African films also surfaces in this chapter.

Chapter 5

This is a concluding chapter where the findings of the research are made apparent.