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South African chick lit and the ghost of the township: Cynthia Jele's happiness is a four-letter word

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2017

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/24541

Chiriseri, Zoe Tessa Takudzwa (2017) South African chick lit and the ghost of the township: Cynthia Jele's happiness is a four-letter word, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <https://hdl.handle.net/10539/24541>

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Abstract

This research reads the popular literature genre, chick lit, as a site for the elaboration of new forms of womanhood in post-Apartheid South Africa and through an analysis of the novel Happiness is a Four-Letter Word seeks to discover how new constructs of black female identity in the genre of chick lit disrupt as well as extend earlier representations of female experience in South Africa.

The literary aspect of this research is essentially a genre study that attempts to identify how we recognize genre. Chick lit was initially read as a homogenously white normative genre, it was imagined, theorized and researched through the western gaze to the exclusion of other races and classes. This research rejects this essentialism of gender and as such recognizes that when addressing gender in Africa not only race and class need to be contextualized but further historical and cultural contexts are fundamental when constructing the black woman's subjectivity.

Postfeminism is understood as a modern social sensibility declaring that women are 'now empowered,' and celebrating and encouraging their consequent 'freedom' to return to normatively feminine pursuits. There is a growing field of research around postfeminism and chick lit pertaining to black African women and this is where this research locates itself. By positioning existing western literature, on chick lit, in dialogue with scholarship around chick lit in Africa, a transnational analytic and methodological approach to the critical study of chick lit and postfeminism can be made.

Chick lit signals a transition for black women living in post-Apartheid South Africa, one of upward social mobility. This research looks at the contradictory space that black middle-class women occupy in this transition. There is a spectral 'other' that restricts black women in fully expressing their agency in the private sphere despite the progress made for women on a national scale. This I have called 'the Ghost of the Township.'

I explore the extent to which the narrative opens up alternative avenues for writers to represent women's interests. The author, Cynthia Jele, like other authors writing chick lit

about black African women, illustrates how women writers can rethink and reposition the roles of women as they continue to live in patriarchal societies that marginalize and oppress them. In this research, I endeavor to explore if and how these new roles for women create contradictory zones for women by at once empowering and oppressing them. I also ask to what extent things have changed for black women and examine the effects of these changes.