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Epistemic Responsibility and Community Engagement in Sindiwe Magona's *Beauty's Gift*

ABSTRACT

HIV/AIDS has pervasively affected the health and well-being of South African women, as evidenced by their exacerbating mortality rates over the decades. Sindiwe Magona's *Beauty's Gift* (2008) is a critical intervention in this regard because, in focusing on the death of a young black woman owing to her infection with HIV/AIDS, it critiques the overarching and ingrained patriarchal ideologies that are hindering the treatment and prevention of this disease. The article seeks to examine Magona's text as uncovering the lack of appropriate knowledge about HIV/AIDS, and the silencing of South African women in the articulation or dissemination of this disease-related knowledge. The article argues that Magona's text emphasizes the delinking of taboos and highlights the necessity of the South African community's engagement at micro and macro levels regarding HIV/AIDS. This engagement reflects an epistemic responsibility that is crucial to reducing the dreadful impact of this illness from both cultural and structural perspectives.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, epistemology, responsibility, awareness, community engagement

Epistemična odgovornost in angažma skupnosti v romanu *Beauty's Gift* Sindiweje Magona

IZVLEČEK

Virus HIV in bolezen AIDS sta močno zaznamovala zdravje in usodo južnoafriških žensk, kar je razvidno iz porasta njihove smrtnosti v zadnjih desetletjih. Roman *Beauty's Gift* (2008) Sindiweje Magona opisuje smrt mlade temnopolte ženske zaradi AIDS-a in kritizira vseprisotne in globoko ukoreninjene patriarhalne ideologije, ki onemogočajo zdravljenje in preprečevanje te bolezni. V članku se osredotočam na avtoričino razkrivanje pomanjkanja znanja o virusu HIV in AIDS-u ter onemogočanja južnoafriških žensk, da bi to znanje ubesedile in delile. Moj namen je pokazati, da roman teži k detabuizaciji bolezni in da osvetljuje nujnost angažmaja južnoafriške skupnosti v zvezi z virusom HIV in boleznijo AIDS tako na mikro kot na makro ravni. Ta angažma zrcali epistemično odgovornost, ki je nujna za zmanjševanje grozljivih posledic te bolezni tako s kulturnega kot strukturnega vidika.

Ključne besede: HIV/AIDS, epistemologija, odgovornost, zavedanje, angažma skupnosti

1 Introduction

Sindiwe Magona, a prominent writer, activist, and public intellectual in South Africa, writes out of a deep sense of dedication and affection towards her country and its people. The author's literary works convey potent themes that advocate for personal agency and assertiveness by challenging prevailing cultural standards. Her writings not only confront societal barriers but also demonstrate her courage in vocalizing personal experiences. It is notable that Magona was the first author to produce a collection of literary works for children in the Xhosa language, and she holds a unique position as a South African writer in serving as a mediator between the academic community and public. Magona's literary contributions have been influenced by her personal encounters of subjugation and impoverishment within the context of apartheid in South Africa. Among all her works, the novel *Beauty's Gift* assumes much significance in its profound exploration of the social and cultural implications of AIDS in the lives of South African individuals, particularly black women and their families. As an intense, socially committed writer, Magona's investigations into the adversities of HIV/AIDS started with her short stories "A State of Outrage" (1999) and "Leave Taking" (2004). In continuation with these works, in *Beauty's Gift*, Magona registers a critique of the entrenched patriarchal ethos that needs to be questioned and curtailed to reduce the impacts of HIV/AIDS. The pervasiveness of HIV/AIDS has been alarming in many African countries, especially with "South Africa [having] the highest number of people with HIV/AIDS in the world" for decades (Fassin and Schneider 2003, 495). According to global statistics on HIV/AIDS in 2021, the eastern and southern African countries are reported to have especially high mortality rates (UNAIDS 2022), and "South Africa has the largest national HIV epidemic globally, with an estimated 7.9 million persons living with HIV" (Palanee-Phillips et al. 2022, 2). The 2023 epidemic update by the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) presented an estimation that the global population of individuals living with HIV in 2022 was around 39.0 million (with a range of 33.1 million to 45.7 million). Since the initiation of the epidemic, it is estimated that around 85.6 million individuals (with a range of 64.8 million to 113.0 million) have been infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). This exacerbation of HIV/AIDS in South Africa signifies a few crucial issues, such as the lack of health awareness, public acceptance, hegemonic moral attitudes, and overall, the systemic cultural inadequacies to address it.

The relationship between AIDS and the LGBT population has been studied in various cultural contexts, including South Africa, where it is closely intertwined with racialized ideas. LGBT groups are commonly regarded as socially marginalized due to their departure from prevailing society norms about sexual behaviour, and the association with AIDS infection frequently results in stigmatization and feelings of shame. People living with HIV and/or AIDS have historically faced and continue to face stigmatization, as they are often seen as being contaminated by a disgusting and self-inflicted condition. There exists a widely held belief that HIV/AIDS is a result of engaging in sexual behaviour deemed inappropriate by society. Therefore, HIV/AIDS is often perceived as a manifestation of punishment for these offenses (Cameron 2005, 52). In South Africa, although constitutional protections have been established in the post-apartheid era to guarantee equal rights for individuals irrespective of gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, the prevailing societal attitudes remain predominantly

conservative, resulting in a lack of open discourse around matters pertaining to HIV/AIDS. The social and literary interventions surrounding HIV/AIDS have been extensive and diverse, and Magona's novel effectively contributes to the ongoing discussions by highlighting the importance of addressing the underlying causes of the disease, exposing its deleterious impact on South African women, and fostering community involvement as a means to significantly reduce its impact in South Africa.

Magona's *Beauty's Gift* enunciates the concerns associated with HIV/AIDS, pinpointing the necessity to approach the disease not merely as a sexual malady but as a socio-cultural one. Centralizing on the death of a young black woman named Beauty due to HIV/AIDS, the narrative uncovers how social stigmatization, taboos, and collective silencing have become so common that the root causes of this fatal disease remain unidentified and unheeded. In being transmitted through unprotected sex, HIV/AIDS has become a metaphor "for moral and physical contamination", in which the individuals diagnosed with HIV/AIDS are condemned as spoiled and morally responsible for carrying this infection (Nzioka 2000, 2). In countries such as South Africa, with families steeped in patriarchal strictures, this stigmatization and moral burdening have affected HIV-infected black women in very negative ways. In most cases, their vulnerabilities and victimization have been neglected, resulting in cultural apathy towards conversing about or mitigating HIV/AIDS. As such, the enduring consequences of stigmatization related to AIDS can be classified into five distinct categories: societal rejection, internalized insecurity, impact on confidence, implications on close relationships, and rejection experienced by individuals inside the South African community (Santana and Dancy 2000).

Magona's novel depicts the need to decipher the intrinsic factors behind the grip of HIV/AIDS and explore the structural, cognitive, and behavioural changes required to mitigate it. In this frame of thinking, the text embodies a pedagogic move in highlighting how South African society must dismantle the cultural silence that prevails around HIV/AIDS and engage in a conversation on it. The normalization of this silence has entailed an overwhelming ignorance about what causes HIV/AIDS and what remedies or precautions are available. The article thus studies Magona's novel as a decisive commentary to demystify this silencing, as that is an elementary step to overcoming the ignorance of HIV/AIDS. Notably, this article departs from the conventional approaches to this novel from the representations of the female body and subjectivity in connection with HIV/AIDS. Instead, it analyses how the novel serves as an exemplification of the role that literary narratives play in deconstructing established hermeneutical and epistemological constructions on this disease. Magona critiques the conservative ethos that is not only instrumental in spreading HIV/AIDS in South African society, but also responsible for perpetrating "epistemic injustices" (Fricker 2007) on South African women. Most South African women and their families consider speaking about HIV/AIDS shameful and adopting any preventive or curative measures as hazardous, thereby unwittingly perpetuating a culture "dominated by secrecy, silence, and denial" (Soldati-Kahimbaara 2012, 166). The article studies how this silencing becomes detrimental to propagating appropriate knowledge about the disease, prohibiting infected individuals from sharing their experiences or testimonies and, in turn, perpetuating "epistemic injustice" (Fricker 2007) in various guises. The article marks its departure from existing readings of the novel in bringing to the foreground how it can be examined as an enunciation of the

embeddedness of HIV/AIDS and “epistemic injustices” in South African society. In addition to this, the article also contends that Magona’s writing implies a critical literacy in terms of “thinking beyond the text to understand issues” and the layered ideological underpinnings (McLaughlin and DeVoogd 2004, 13). Critical literacy seeks to bring awareness to the underlying ideologies and involves analysing the power dynamics, norms, and representations within texts, while also providing opportunities for promoting socio-political action that promotes equity (Comber and Simpson 2001; Morrell 2009)

This article reads the text as an attempt to establish critical literacy and unravel epistemological potential, pushing readers to connect fiction with their lives and produce culturally responsive pedagogy to probe meaningful social action in everyday encounters. Literature can be utilized to facilitate comprehension of the narratives of South African families, women, and same-sex couples who are grappling with this distressing ailment that is frequently overlooked, and can be created as a medium to exemplify epistemic responsibility as a primary step to counter the ramifications of HIV/AIDS. The article argues that Magona’s narrative pertains to this in showing the power of literary texts “to critique and reconstruct the social fields” (Luke 200, 453). Magona’s novel emphasizes countering the “deep-rooted fatalism” that HIV/AIDS harnesses (Woods 2013, 319), debunking the racialized stereotypes that it is associated with, and triggering a critical literacy to understand AIDS through a more pragmatic lens. There is a need to defamiliarize and delink normative thought processes and cognition, as only that can aid in not only pushing the people of South Africa to become aware of the repercussions of this disease, but also motivate them to evolve a sense of fellowship with those afflicted. The article maintains that Magona accentuates community engagement with the discourses on HIV/AIDS, as without that, it would be difficult to stimulate a sense of collective responsibility to either disrupt the taboo or vanquish the plague of HIV/AIDS. Magona’s rigorous take on the necessity of collective epistemic responsibility aligns her stance with prominent South African human rights activists such as Simon Nkoli, Edwin Cameron, and Zackie Achmat – all of whom have spoken or written on discriminatory practices against HIV/AIDS patients and evoked the ethics of inclusion and humane care-giving. In so doing, the article finally posits that Magona also evidences the role of writer-activist and public intellectual, who, through her writing, endeavours to unfold cultural discrepancies, envisage optimistic ways of approaching the disease, foster a renewed epistemology, and develop a democratic and critical literary environment in South Africa.

2 Epistemic Injustice and South African Women

Magona’s novel centres on the lives of a group of five close friends referred to as FFF, and commences with the funeral of one of their friends, Beauty. The unexpected demise of Beauty, a professional educator and exemplary spouse, has left her acquaintances in a state of astonishment and confusion as they struggle to discern the underlying causes of her premature death. The story of Beauty serves as a poignant representation of the marginalized status of HIV-positive women, who are among the most ignored segments of society. The human rights framework concerning the issue of AIDS policy, specifically the concept of “stigma and discrimination”, has predominantly neglected to address gender-specific violations that women encounter (Mthembu 2022, 24). This notion of negligence becomes apparent when

the family members of Beauty refrained from disclosing her illness to her acquaintances and maintained a discreet demeanour regarding the matter during the funeral. Nosisa, the eldest sister of Hamilton, presented an obituary on behalf of Mamkwayi, Beauty's mother, where it was mentioned that Beauty had passed away due to tuberculosis. Nosisa expresses grief over the fact that "[tuberculosis] has already advanced to such a stage" (Magona 2008, 10), causing significant loss of life. Her friends remain entirely unaware of the real cause of Beauty's death for days until Amanda, one of the FFF, reveals that Beauty had told her that she has been suffering from AIDS, given to her by her husband, Hamilton. Hamilton is promiscuous without consideration for the potential negative consequences on his health, family, and marital relationship, displaying a lack of responsibility and empathy as a husband. Upon discovering that Beauty has been diagnosed with HIV and is exhibiting physical deterioration and immobility, Hamilton maintains a complete avoidance of her, and his failure to provide care or medical assistance results in his wife being left to her fate. Hamilton even restricts Beauty from engaging in any form of communication or disclosure regarding her declining health, including interactions with her most intimate acquaintances.

The poignant portrayal of Beauty's suffering and eventual demise due to HIV/AIDS in the novel serves as a striking moment that sheds light on the patriarchal culture of South Africa. This culture is characterized by hegemonic masculinities and adherence to heterosexual norms, and the novel reveals the alarming tolerance and acceptability of such behaviours at a communal level. The correlation between Beauty's contraction of the disease and her failure to comprehend the gravity of her situation or assert herself is indicative of the entrenched societal norms that equate sexual authority, aggression, and control with masculinity. The phenomenon of suppressing discussions on HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases needs to be analysed within the framework of a culture that is heavily influenced by masculinity, wherein women's expressions and depictions of their bodies are regulated by established conventions of matrimony, domesticity, and submissiveness. Studies indicate that South Africa has a significant incidence of female homicide, with the majority of victims being killed by their male intimate partners (Abrahams et al. 2009). The availability of rape statistics in South Africa is notably inadequate, with numerous instances of non-consensual or coercive sexual activity occurring within the context of marital relationships (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002, 1232). According to recent investigations, the number of reported rapes in 2019/2020 was 42,289, while the number of reported sexual assaults was 7,749, which translates to an average of approximately 115 rapes per day (Gowes 2022). The prevalence of violence within a given culture can lead to a lack of opportunities for open discourse and knowledge acquisition regarding sexual diseases and related issues. This dynamic contributes to the highly gendered nature of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa, where women bear a "disproportionate burden of the illness and HIV care" (Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger 2012, 14). As a consequence, South African women are unable to effectively express or engage as active agents in the process of interpreting their own experiences, utilizing their power in relation to HIV/AIDS, and generating knowledge on the subject matter, thereby becoming victims of epistemic injustice.

Epistemic injustice occurs when an individual or group is wronged in their capacity as a knower. Epistemic injustice pertains to inequitable treatment that is associated with matters concerning knowledge, comprehension, and involvement in communicative activities. These

issues encompass a diverse array of subjects involving unjust treatment and disproportionate structures within the context of knowledge production and meaning-making practices (Kidd, Medina and Pohlhaus 2017, 1). Fricker (2007, 1) notes that this is a “distinctively epistemic kind of injustice” in which someone is wronged “specifically in their capacity as a knower”, and this can occur in two ways: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. In the case of Beauty, her vulnerability and inability to resist Hamilton stem from the acute hermeneutical injustice that the male-oriented South African social parameters put on women. Hermeneutical injustice generally occurs “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker 2007, 1). Similar to numerous South African women, Beauty, who has been socialized to romanticize family and marriage owing to her middle-class background, experiences an intermittent failure to critically evaluate her harmful circumstances or challenge Hamilton’s cruelty. Beauty’s limited access to resources for interpreting individual rights pertaining to bodily autonomy, sexuality, and the safeguarding of life resulted in her being marginalized and unable to effectively consider her own welfare. The discussion of male sexual deviance and sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV, is subject to great scrutiny in South Africa. As a result, Beauty, who is suffering from advanced AIDS, struggles to articulate her thoughts and emotions, as there is a “lacuna in the biased conceptual resources available” (Langton 2010, 459). Beauty’s death evinces how society is highly gendered, characterized by persistent moralization and widespread violence, which presents significant challenges for women in formulating counter-discourses to HIV/AIDS due to the lack of epistemological avenues or cohesive “hermeneutical resources” (Townsend and Townsend 2021, 153). Marginalized women, such as Beauty, are susceptible to cognitive disadvantages due to the lack of logical structures available to describe the difficulties they encounter. Conversely, those in positions of power, like Hamilton, benefit from the absence of discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS.

Magona’s novel provides a persuasive account of how hermeneutical injustices lead to the perpetration of testimonial injustices on women, hindering their epistemic credibility and authority. Testimonial injustice refers to a situation where a speaker is not given adequate credibility by a hearer after conveying information, due to a prejudiced stereotype held by the hearer (Fricker 2007). This culminates in the speaker’s exclusion from epistemological structures, which encompass activities such as questioning, responding, conjecturing, and thinking, due to diminished perceptions of proficiency (Hookway 2010). Beauty’s subjection to hermeneutical injustices mitigates her confidence to elaborate on or share her turbulence with her friends, culminating in a loss of her testifying or articulative capacity. This becomes evident at Amanda’s 35th birthday party, where Beauty’s frail body, “grotesque face”, and “raw-steak lips” (Magona 2008, 58) elicit agitation and shocked expressions among her acquaintances. Amanda, Beauty’s closest confidante, endeavours to uncover the truth behind Beauty’s deteriorating physical condition. While Amanda asks Beauty about herself, encouraging her to share if anything is worrying her, Beauty’s lack of credibility in forming opinions and minimal epistemic agency prevent her from constructing an honest testimony. This observation underscores the impact of impoverished epistemological circumstances, wherein unequal relations result in the exclusion of individuals from social participation, hence causing cognitive and moral harm (Goldstein 2022, 1862). Beauty deliberately chooses to be silent, pleading with her friends to respect her privacy. Beauty’s avoidance of

speaking is significant as it corroborates the fear of “testimonial injustice” that encumbers South African women from asserting their identities or channelling their grievances against the deep-set gendered prejudices. The prevalent epistemology on HIV/AIDS, while inditing South African women for their supposed ethical violations, offers unjustifiable support to men for their extravagant masculinist displays. Confounded by the gendered hegemony of South African society and its cultural disavowal of AIDS on moral grounds, Beauty’s epistemic vulnerability arises from her fear that her “testimony will most likely be ignored or treated with suspicion” (Heggen and Berg 2021, 3), subsequently fragmenting her “matrimonial bliss” with Hamilton (Magona 2008, 57).

Beauty’s subjugation to testimonial injustice also manifests when Amanda later meets Beauty in her maternal home. Perceiving Beauty’s degeneration to a “shrunken and skeletal” form with growths and “oozing sores” all over her body (Magona 2008, 91, 93), Amanda becomes extremely worried and upset. But to Amanda’s surprise, MaMkwayi – Beauty’s mother – prefers to “keep mum on exactly what Beauty’s illness is” (Magona 2008, 94), as if displaying a strange conformity to the overriding neglect of HIV/AIDS. Beauty’s intolerable physical suffering, emotional trauma, and despondency are not given due consideration by close family members, such as her mother or husband, as they remain there only as passive bystanders. They comply with the dominant structurization and actively refute Beauty’s experiential discourse both as an AIDS patient and a close relative. Denied the scope of enunciating herself as “communicatively intelligible” (Fricker 2007, 162), the testimonial injustice inflicted on Beauty shows how often patient testimonies are excluded in cultures and institutions on the grounds of irrelevance and insufficiency (Carel and Kidd 2014, 532).

However, Magona’s narrative also encompasses a transformative epistemological trajectory in highlighting Beauty’s recuperation of her epistemic agency vis-à-vis her final words to Amanda, highlighting that “epistemic agency and therefore epistemic justice are fundamentally about propositional knowledge and verbal communication” (Radoilska 2020, 705). In her final moment, Beauty confesses her illness to Amanda, telling her that she, like many other South African women, has fallen prey to AIDS and enunciating that the looming silence on HIV/AIDS is no less dangerous than the disease itself. An advanced-stage AIDS patient, Beauty, tells Amanda not to “die a stupid death, like [she is] doing! Live!... Live until every hair on your head turns grey” (Magona 2008, 108). Beauty’s dying statement elucidates a South African woman’s fight against the epistemic injustices unleashed by the physical dominance, emotional aggression, and sexual betrayal of a corrosive, patriarchal culture. Her vocalization towards Amanda serves as a compelling denunciation of the “weaponized” (Shober 2013, 228) African cultural machismo. This act of speaking up signifies Beauty’s epistemic re-signification and rejection of the testimonial neglect she had previously experienced. Her message of celebrating the vitality of life registers “an epistemic space for the lived experience of illness” (Kidd and Carel 2017, 186) – a domain that needs to be acknowledged and incorporated into the social and communal discourse on AIDS in South Africa. In overcoming her “credibility deficit” (McKinnon 2016, 439), Beauty emerges as an agent stimulating an epistemic awareness and reinforcing a keen sense of responsibility in her friends in exposing the cultural deficits of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. What María Lugones (2003) defines as “hard to handle anger” has been adopted by Beauty as a valuable source of

insight into the mechanisms by which oppressive practices are constructed and exerted upon women in South Africa. The expression of Beauty's anger, as conveyed in her final words, highlights the encounter with epistemic injustice experienced by marginalized communities. It also emphasizes their collective endeavours to engage in epistemic resistance and facilitate "powerful, evocative and transformative modes of engagement with traumatic experience" (Thomas 2014, 5), specifically in relation to HIV/AIDS.

3 Epistemic Awareness and Responsibility

Driven by Beauty's compelling testimony, which emphasizes an individual's inherent right to a healthy existence, her four companions disregard the covert pretence of cultural and epistemological contentment. Amanda, Edith, Cordelia, and Doris have acquired a new epistemological understanding regarding the necessity of exposing and addressing the systemic marginalization and societal condemnation of individuals affected by HIV/AIDS. Their newly gained epistemic awareness that "there is no stigma to fighting to stay alive" (Magona 2008, 120) motivates them to cultivate solidarity against the callous and unabashed temperament of their male partners, families, and society towards the horrifying reality of AIDS. Magona's narrative thus serves as a valuable illustration of how an individual's epistemic agency can work as a catalyst for promoting epistemic awareness, autonomy, and revitalization, among other things. Beauty's words, "ukhule ukhokhobe", implying a long life, offer a vision to her friends, helping them garner a profound and intricate epistemic understanding of the deep-rooted malaises that need to be curtailed to alleviate the problem of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. Beauty recognizes that the inability of marginalized groups in the field of global health to comprehend their experiences due to a lack of shared interpretative resources, as well as the disregard for their interpretive frameworks results in the infringement of their dignity and the violation of their basic human rights (Bhakuni 2023). As such, she acknowledges her limited understanding and accepts the consequences of her actions as she strives to save her friends from experiencing a "similar fate" (Magona 2008, 109), and motivate them to embrace life with heightened epistemic awareness.

Epistemic awareness designates an individual's or a group's understanding and accumulation of specific epistemic justifications that they use to conform to various truths. It pertains to a particular way of becoming conscious of decision-making processes, including a close examination of the facts, plausible interpretations, and constructions of truth (Clyde and Wilkinson 2019, 172–77). Epistemic awareness emphasizes "realizing the validity of one's information" (Fernández-Fernández 2021, 21) and providing a rational assessment of the choices or truth claims that are made. In other words, epistemic awareness conforms to reasoning and interpreting capabilities in any given situation or context and thus correlates with the development of epistemic autonomy and responsibility. The awareness that HIV/AIDS is not a "black disease" (Magona 2008, 106) but one related to gender asymmetries and cultural ignorance drives Beauty's friends to embark on a mission to "fight to live" and "fight for [their] lives" (Magona 2008, 112). Their battle starts at the micro-level, by countering their partners' sexual whims, authority, and demands, and gradually emerges as a symbolic enactment of the women's contestation of the masculinized norms of society. Each of them shows an astounding determination in establishing their epistemology – that sex is not safe without HIV tests, and intimate partners must be responsible

for each other's safety. Beauty's gift, therefore, metaphorically contributes to reinforcing in her friends the substantial importance of an evaluative capacity in administering their conjugal relationships and outlook on life. This engenders in them an epistemic independence, which is contingent upon their volition and inclination to articulate the capacity for cognizance (Matheson and Lougheed 2022, 2).

The epistemic awareness and autonomy exercised by Beauty's friends incite wrath and annoyance in their husbands. When faced with a challenge to their dominance, men often resist the requirement to undergo HIV testing. For instance, Amanda's husband, Zakes, expressing his fury and becomes resentful of Amanda's request. Luvo, Edith's husband, becomes aggressive at such audacity and instead accuses her of infidelity. Vuyo, Cordelia's husband, shows his belligerence by physically abusing then angrily deserting her. Doris's fiancé, Selby, agrees to the test, but surprisingly, after receiving a negative result, he breathes a sigh of relief, as if he had been worried about testing positive. Discovering Selby's duality, Doris calls off their engagement. These women exhibit epistemic autonomy by being aware of their knowledge and convictions, and by maintaining a steadfast stance on the importance of safe intimacy and relationships. This serves as a crucial prerequisite for effecting "positive social change" (Hale 2007, 189) in a country that is grappling with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Upon witnessing Beauty's fear, distress, vulnerability, and subsequent demise, these women comprehend the manner in which a psychological occurrence, when it reaches a pathological state, significantly hampers the cognitive autonomy of those who suffer from pervasive fear, thereby "limiting their ability to respond to evidence, and substantially limiting their epistemic horizons" (Puddifoot and Trakas 2023, 1). As such, they effectively reject the traditional gender roles that require them to submit to male desires and disregard the societal norms that discourage open discussion of sexual health. By conveying a direct message of "no test and no unprotected sex" (Magona 2008, 113) to their partners, they demonstrate agency and dismantle the inhibitions of social outrage and ostracization. Herein, Magona's novel can be interpreted as a powerful affirmation to South African women that, unless voices are raised against the hideous patriarchal notions of society, reducing HIV/AIDS would be impossible. This is further evidenced in Amanda's stand against Zakes's family when they try to explain their son's extramarital affairs as normal and legitimate. Contrary to their assumptions, Amanda stays firm in her decision. After discovering that Zakes has two "grass children" (Magona 2008, 111) born out of wedlock, Amanda rejects her husband. Amanda's repudiation of her husband's recklessness delineates her vehemence against the "traditional and cultural sanctions that [restricted] their full participation in decisions affecting their lives" (Kemp et al. 1995, 144–45). These "sanctions" construct the hegemonic epistemologies of gender subordination and oppression and strengthen biases, which in turn constrain the creation of alternative epistemologies and ways of introspecting on various difficult social issues. In affirming their awareness, Beauty's friends enunciate a "fundamental epistemic responsibility" (Mudd 2013, 153) towards themselves and society. They strive to bring forth a reformed knowledge and consciousness so that women are not restricted to "conditional belonging" – in which they are identified as members of a political collectivity, but simultaneously confined to gendered epistemological structures and attitudes (Yuval-Davis 2009, 9). It is imperative to uphold the epistemic responsibility of promoting a socially equitable and conscious environment, which is precisely what Beauty's friends are striving to accomplish.

4 Community Engagement and De-Linking the Taboo

Disparities in power arising from specialized expertise and education, as well as variations in circumstances, frequently result in community engagement where individuals proactively disseminate the knowledge necessary within a community. This bottom-up approach entails beginning with the community to recognize the issue, which may involve individuals living with HIV, patient advocates, and healthcare professionals. This approach involves the community in the gradual development of remedies or addresses and encourages the community to combat AIDS with increased epistemic agency (Karris, Dube and Moore 2020, 144). Likewise, Magona's novel delves deep into the psychosocial and epistemological metamorphosis of Beauty's friends as they embark on dismantling social apathy and reinvigorating an ethos of critical perceptiveness. Discrepancies in addressing the ingrained causes of HIV/AIDS characterize South African society, with a lack of epistemic awareness and responsibility that is related to the cultural absence of critical thinking and epistemic cognitive skills. Critical thinking here implies harnessing processes of exploring, evaluating, and inferring connotative meanings beyond the apparent (Abrami et al. 2015; Facione 1990). These processes are analogous to optimal epistemic cognitive abilities that assist individuals in discerning, assessing, and construing the formation of a specific body of knowledge pertaining to HIV/AIDS, rather than simply accepting it based on conviction or unfavourable circumstances. Realizing that collective emancipation from HIV/AIDS is not feasible without collective awareness, Beauty's friends and some like-minded community members start criticizing the normalized perspectives on disease and death, demonstrating their collective critical thinking by engaging the community. Here they rely on "the knowledge creation perspective" (Paavola and Hakkarainen 2005), which denotes learning occurs through ongoing collaborative endeavours that are focused on generating new insights through engaging with common resources. In this perspective on learning and collective awareness, the premise of epistemic agency is deemed to be of utmost importance as it empowers learners to actively seek shared epistemic objectives (Muukkonen, Lakkala and Hakkarainen 2005). Their first attempt to disrupt society's conventional and complacent attitudes comes through their questioning of the funeral ceremonies of AIDS patients. The discomfiting silence on HIV/AIDS at funerals is accompanied by gaudy outward exhibitionism. For instance, at Beauty's funeral MaMkwayi represents herself as unaffected by the "long painful death" of her only daughter, and Hamilton assumes a self-conscious "commanding presence" in his "beige silk suit and brown suede shoes" (Magona 2008, 43), showcasing customized expressions of grief. Hamilton's lavish expenditure on Beauty's funeral is juxtaposed with his failure to acknowledge his responsibility and disregard for her unfortunate passing. The procession included a white Mercedes-Benz limousine hearse, accompanied by a fleet of ten gleaming white Mercedes-Benz cars carrying family members and close friends (2008, 51). This highlights the inadequacy of the present health ecosystem in South Africa and its governing framework in relation to Beauty's life, and its inability to effectively tackle contextual issues as an essential component of health. Beauty's funeral, marked by a profound "hush" on her illness, enrages Beauty's friends, reflecting the community's deep-seated "active ignorance" (Medina 2013) towards HIV/AIDS.

Active ignorance occurs when an individual actively holds on to his or her ignorance, covering it with certain epistemic vices such as closed-mindedness, arrogance, and inadaptability. The

challenge in overcoming this ignorance lies in reconstructing epistemic beliefs, approaches, and habits (Medina 2013, 39). Magona's text shows that cultural silence and not acknowledging the reality governing AIDS are the most decisive factors in perpetuating active ignorance in society. According to the South Africa HIV Stigma Index Study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council and other collaborating partners, a notable proportion of HIV-positive women (7.6%) reported being subjected to coerced sterilization, while the number of HIV positive women in South Africa exceeds four million (Simbayi et al. 2015). Mothers like MaMkwayi, because of their enmeshment in the beliefs of social taboo and stigma, fail to develop appropriate epistemic awareness or exert the autonomy that is essential to diminish the incrementality of social strictures in aggravating HIV/AIDS. The encompassing threats of moral indignation obstruct their efforts to overcome their ignorance, and they continue to comply with the "actively held false outlooks" (El Kassar 2008, 300) on AIDS to bolster the status quo of the domestic and heterosexual orders of respectability. Moreover, stigma is a potent form of social branding that undermines an individual's self-perception and impacts how they are perceived by others. Individuals who experience stigmatization are frequently perceived as deviating from societal norms, resulting in the attribution of shame and subsequent social exclusion, discrediting, rejection, or punitive measures (Alonzo and Reynolds 1995; Berger, Estwing Ferrans and Lashley 2001). Beauty's friends thus recognize that the fundamental step in repudiating stigma and cultural ignorance is the community's engagement with a sense of epistemic responsibility, developing a propensity to accept, speak about, and recognize the perversities and casualties of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. This community engagement symbolizes that the active ignorance of communities can only be assuaged through valorising collective practices of epistemic responsibilities, denouncing derogatory and biased perspectives, endorsing open-minded and revisionist approaches, and valuing others' knowledge and expertise (Lehrer 2000, 124).

The novel shows that despite being educated and affluent, many families are ignorant of the adversities of patriarchal hegemony, unprotected sex, and women's right to safety. The exploitation of cognitive and metacognitive assessment abilities is essential in considering any fundamental transformation, as implied by Magona's text. Within this particular context, the novel can be interpreted as a deliberate exercise in community engagement regarding appropriate courses of action or belief systems when faced with serious concerns such as HIV/AIDS, considering the pertinent contextual factors. As an exemplary manifestation of community engagement, the funeral that the Sonti family organizes on the death of their twins, Lungile and Lunga, is indeed thoughtful. In contrast to Beauty's funeral, the Sonti family refrains from staying silent over their sons' deaths and captures the funeral as a meaningful platform to organize an AIDS awareness campaign, inviting parents, activists, and NGO personnel to speak on and educate others on HIV/AIDS. Besides declaring their sons' deaths from this disease, the family takes up a few promising initiatives, such as distributing pamphlets on HIV and AIDS, organizing speakers to talk candidly on the experiences of either being HIV patients or witnesses to them, and eliminating the pervasive misinformation on the disease. Nomtha Langa, a member of Vukani, a local NGO, recollecting her "ten-year journey of living with HIV", attests that aversion towards HIV tests must be curtailed, and the community needs to delink HIV from notions of fatalism, moral condemnation, and racialized baggage. Mrs. Mazwi, a retired teacher and respected

community leader, comes to the forefront here, urging the community to take up a serious call on HIV/AIDS, discarding inhibitions with regard to “early detection” and sex education to control its spread (Magona 2008, 119). Beauty’s friends participate in this campaign, heartily applauding the efforts taken to reinstate the collective epistemic awareness of HIV/AIDS. Affirming love, mutuality, and compassion, Beauty’s friends protest the social tolerance of male philandering and the harmful tendencies of castigating women for bearing “outside” or “grass children” (Magona 2008, 111), and they start endorsing the essentiality of delinking to achieve a more equitable epistemological space for accommodating voices and discourses on health and survival. This process of collective awareness and community engagement enables individuals to critically evaluate their mental and social norms through a variety of creative and therapeutic approaches (Bennie et al. 2021). This, in turn, leads to a transformation in how individuals perceive the world, respond to their own impulses and wellness issues, and eventually culminates in a more holistic embodiment of themselves (Pant et al. 2022). The community engagement and collective efforts of Beauty’s friends effectively demonstrate their shared epistemic agency, which is a particular type of epistemic agency that arises within collaborative endeavours focused on generating shared knowledge bodies. This argument underscores the ability of individuals to go beyond being passive recipients of knowledge and become “productive participants in the knowledge-laden, object-driven collaborative activities and to be in charge of their own knowledge advancement” (Damşa et al. 2010, 146). The dissemination of knowledge as a “gift” through Beauty’s death and the ideological commitment of her friends effectively communicates the evolution of a crucial social pedagogy that promotes logical analysis and thorough examination of issues such as HIV/AIDS from the grassroots level and from a comprehensive standpoint.

5 Conclusion

Beauty’s Gift can be interpreted as a significant contribution to South African literature and culture, as it offers a critical analysis of the prevalent “massive denial” (Magona 2008, 24) that has permeated the community’s ability to communicate, reflect, and combat the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS. Magona’s work centres on the victimization of a middle-class professional South African woman due to AIDS, highlighting the urgent need for the masses to become aware, take responsibility, and engage the community in possible ways to combat the prolonged consequences caused by this disease. Her assessment of the demise of Beauty and the ensuing introspection serves as a critique of the present-day societal and cultural conditions in South Africa. It can be said that Magona’s repudiation of the systemic inadequacies in South African society aligns her with the stance of societal transformation as proposed by radical feminism. Radical feminism, which developed as a movement during the 1960s and later evolved as a cultural process, aims to confront the fundamental origins of patriarchal oppression rather than solely focusing on legal or economic reforms (Willis 1984, 92). In evaluating the prevalent epistemological convictions pertaining to HIV/AIDS and their potential consequences, Magona’s novel attests to the political aspect of radical feminism, that the challenges arising from sexism should not be confined to the realm of personal matters. These concerns extend beyond individual and private domains, as they impact women collectively due to their association with a patriarchal societal structure (Ward 1995, 873). The dynamics occurring within a partnership or family are inherently political in

nature and warrant discussion within the public domain. In this context, Magona's *Beauty's Gift* endeavours to extend the arguments offered by radical cultural feminism in deliberating how the questions of emancipation from HIV/AIDS and one's authority over health are essentially structural and epistemological. Therefore, in order to empower women in South Africa to express themselves, enhance their understanding and capabilities, and engage actively in their local and global communities to defeat the issue of silence surrounding HIV/AIDS, there is a need to stimulate critical literacy and epistemic awareness.

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