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Women and witchcraft practices in South Africa: An intersectional analysis of selected isiZulu fiction

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Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, the article closely reads the interplay of race, gender and class in shaping female identities and experiences with witchcraft in selected isiZulu creative literature. We use a qualitative research approach in conjunction with thematic analysis as a data collection tool to extract recurring themes from the chosen novels. The study identifies overlapping themes regarding the representation of black South African women and witchcraft practices as depicted in the novels under examination. These themes illuminate the intersection of race, gender and class in constructing black female identities within cultural discourses.

Contribution: This study contributes to scholarship on the literary works of B.J. Dube, Mandla Nxumalo, Christian Msimang, Langalibalele Mathenjwa, E.D.M. Sibiya, M.J. Mngadi and Mjajisi Wanda. It further adds to post-structural feminism in the field of African literature studies by analysing how race, gender and class converge in shaping the lived experiences of South African black women accused of witchcraft in isiZulu novels. By examining these themes, the study highlights how social power structures influence the construction of black female identities within South African cultural landscapes.

Keywords: identities; intersectionality; Kimberlé Crenshaw; South African women; witchcraft.

Introduction

This article analyses creative isiZulu literature by employing an intersectional praxis to closely read how the chosen novels portray the representations and identities of women in connection with witchcraft practices within the framework of South African cultural discourses. Within the cultural context of South Africa, the term *umthakathi* [witch] carries a heavy social stigma, because the derogatory label is an accusation that is weaponised in stripping women of their humanity while exposing them to physical violence and even death in some cases. Diko (2024) suggests that the blend of indigenous belief systems and Christianity in the sociocultural tapestry of South Africa significantly shapes how witchcraft is perceived and dealt with within black communities. This is to say, this fusion of cultural elements fuels a deep-seated fear of sorcerers, which leads to real-world consequences for those accused. For example, the tragic case of Jostina Sangweni, a 58-year-old mentally incapacitated woman from Soweto in Johannesburg, highlights the real-life ramifications of witchcraft accusations in modern South Africa and how they affect the perception and treatment of women. In April 2021, a mob comprising members of Sangweni's community beat her to death and then proceeded to set her corpse on fire as a consequence of accusations from neighbours. Sangweni's case is not an isolated incident but in fact resonates with research that interrogates how witchcraft accusations are a serious psychosocial problem across the African continent. Nkrumah-Pobi (2024) and Ballah (2024) explore how women in Ghana and Liberia, already marginalised by poverty and race, are targeted and brutalised based on accusations of witchcraft. Cultural texts which portray ostracised and brutalised women accused of witchcraft expose the patriarchal power dynamics at play. These narratives reveal how deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs silence women, strip them of their humanity and justify violence against them. This analysis of isiZulu literature explores how creative literature depicts women accused of witchcraft to reveal the intersection of gender, cultural beliefs and patriarchal oppression in South Africa.

In Southern Africa, intersectional studies illustrate how social inequalities like race, class and gender combine to create conditions rife for the persecution of women accused of witchcraft, beliefs often stemming from social causes, surrounding economic hardship and cultural anxieties about modernity. Dube, Musili and Owusu-Ansah (2024), Mothoagae and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2021) and Mothoagae and Mavhandu-Mudzusi's (2021) articles

highlight the significance of intersecting systems of oppression, gender and class which force women to navigate sociocultural and economic landscapes shaped by historical and ongoing colonial legacies.

Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) theorises intersectionality as a framework for analysing how various forms of oppression and discrimination intertwine in shaping the experiences of women. This is to say, intersectionality is a feminist concept which acknowledges how social and cultural factors can intersect and end up creating unique experiences of marginalisation as a result of categories like race, class and gender. For example, Mokotso (2015:209) notes the rise of targeted witch killings and ritual murders in Lesotho since 1999 among Basotho youth as a result of the intersection of 'patriarchal structures, poverty and social exclusion'. In countries such as Lesotho, witch killings targeting marginalised women illustrate how social inequalities like race, class and gender combine to create unique mental health burdens.

De Jong and ka Menziwa's (2022) study reports that elderly women in the AmaZizi chiefdom in South Africa's Eastern Cape province are also often targeted for witchcraft-related violence because of a combination of their social isolation and the prevalence of witchcraft beliefs. The vulnerability of elderly black women in rural South Africa is such that interlocking social, cultural and economic power dynamics make them vulnerable to abuse, both verbal and physical, and even murder. In contrast, this study adopts intersectionality as a theoretical tool in reading how isiZulu novels portray the brutalisation of women accused of witchcraft against a sociopolitical background of race, gender, class, sexuality and disability.

In an article titled 'Witchcraft, female aggression, and power in the early modern community' (2002), Bever notes that accusations of witchcraft in European medieval societies tended to affect married and important women, rather than peasants and working-class women, because of intracommunal rivalries and the distribution of malicious rumours as a weapon by the former against the latter. Within the European context, the convergence of large populations in overcrowded conditions provided a backdrop to how the persecution of witches became an outlet for 'increasing economic inequalities', which descended into a struggle for the 'control of and access to resources'. Bever's (2002) study focuses on examining how witch trials from the Duchy of Württemberg in Germany reflect the evolving role of women in societies experiencing large political, economic and agricultural transformations. In Africa and elsewhere, accusations of witchcraft paradoxically personify the anxieties and power relations that underpin the intersection of race, gender and class.

Within the Zulu cultural context, the term *umthakathi* (plural *abathakathi*) describes someone who dabbles in and uses occult, mystic and malevolent superpowers to advance their interests or position in society (Eshowe.com). This is why Pieterse (2014) submits that South Africa's cultural and literary landscape continues to be fascinated by (and suspicious of) men and women who practise witchcraft and sorcery to seek personal and economic agency. Pieterse argues that, despite the term 'witch' being a social label and identity associated with Western cultural contexts, South African popular culture also reflects how occultism is associated with warped moral panics, prejudices, cultural differences and violence, which are performed on persons accused of undermining the moral fabric of society.

Niehaus (2001), Ndiyane (2014), Obiwulu (2019) and Bond and Diale (2016) submit that the category 'witch' has a long history of being a social weapon in many South African communities, where it continues to be a derogatory label to identify and ostracise South African citizens who are the victims of economic and political inequalities, inadequate legal processes, mass paranoia and religious fervour. Africanists such as Jean and John Comaroff conceptualise how occult practices in postcolonial South Africa reflect the metaphorical and metonymical reality of political and socio-economic exploitation. In their seminal book titled *Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony* (1999), the Comaroffs (1999) emphasise: 'It is no coincidence that the most spirited witch finding occurs where conditions are most straitened and, also, where raw inequality has become most blatant'. This article will use intersectionality to thematically present the ways in which cultural discourses around witchcraft practices in South African isiZulu fiction portray female identities in relation to hierarchies of power and class.

Writers often employ socio-onomastic techniques embodied in naming practices in order to represent the complexity of occult practices or witchcraft and how they intersect with the production of female identities. A name is onomastically more than just its definition, because it carries historical baggage, cultural understandings and the intentions of the namer. Croft (2009) highlights how J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling both use onomastic strategies to depict how the power dynamics surrounding evil characters in their fantasy worlds interact with the names of evil beings, revealing their perceived power relationships with these forces. Similarly, in the realm of occult narratives, isiZulu names serve as symbols which onomastically reflect the complex interplay of power, gender, societal expectations and roles. Names such as Jabhisa, Gagamela, Ncengani and others from the chosen texts exemplify the phenomenon of how isiZulu names carry specific cultural and historical connotations which shape the characters' identities within each narrative. In Dube's novel *Inkinga Yomendo* (1961), Jabhisa's name means 'to make someone angry', and this hints at how this female character is prone to provoking conflict because she possesses a fiery temperament. Dube suggests women with the name 'Jabhisa' often challenge societal norms through confrontation. The name Gagamela, which translates to 'he stared', intriguingly focuses on the male gaze rather than the woman herself, and

this could be Dube's way of suggesting a female character is defined by external perceptions. Conversely, Ncengani from Msimang's novel *Akuyiwe Emhlahlweni* (1983), whose name means 'pleading for something', is a character in a submissive and vulnerable position which reflects the societal expectations placed on Zulu women. In South Africa, isiZulu authors leverage the power of names by employing socio-onomastic techniques to represent the complexities of occult practices and witchcraft in the construction of female identities.

African literature has a long history of portraying witchcraft, the mystical and the supernatural. In African literature, witchcraft is presented as having a deep and meaningful connection to the cultural and spiritual values of a community and is woven into the text in a way that shows the deep spiritual and cultural significance of the practices. For example, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the protagonist, Okonkwo, is faced with supernatural forces and experiences that shape his life and the lives of those around him. Okonkwo's fear of a character named The Oracle and his belief in witchcraft and the power of ancestral gods are presented as integral aspects of his life in the social fabric of precolonial Igbo society, and Achebe examines the occult in a way that shows the complexity of these beliefs and their importance to the Igbo people. In other novels, such as Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (2008), witchcraft is presented as a powerful force for both good and evil. Emecheta's protagonist, Nnu Ego, relies on occult powers in order to bring her son back from the dead, and the depiction of occultism in Emecheta's novel is contrasted with the power of traditional medicine and modern medicine within Nigerian societies. In fact, Annin (2022:335) reads how *The Joys of Motherhood* documents the social conditions where 'female characters are made second-class citizens'. African authors such as Achebe and Emecheta depict the multifaceted relations between local African communities and witchcraft.

South African novelists portray the complex identity formations and intra-group rivalries related to witchcraft practices in works of fiction written both in English and other official South African languages. In English novels such as Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) and Njabulo Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories* (1985), the intersection between oppressive colonial-era institutions and identities is explored using witchcraft practices. Head's novel shows how the power dynamics between the African and European characters are affected using witchcraft, while Ndebele's collection of short stories examines the different characterisations of witchcraft between different African communities and how these relations manifest in their diverse interpretations of witchcraft. Similarly, works such as Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) explore how witchcraft practices affect the lives of Xhosa communities in postcolonial South African rural and urban areas. By depicting the complex and often conflicting identity formations related to witchcraft practices, these works offer an important insight into the complexities of South African society after the end of apartheid.

South Africa's literary landscape is rich with depictions that focus on the complex relations between female identities and witchcraft practices. The above-mentioned literature suggests the identities of women that are produced in relation to witchcraft practices under conditions of precarious socio-economic environments, religious intolerance and social upheaval seldom empower or provide women with agency.

Research methodology

This is a qualitative analysis of the interplay of witchcraft practices and female identity formations in selected isiZulu novels that focus on the supernatural and occult. We draw on Crenshaw's (1995, 2012) theorisation of intersectionality to examine the broad-scale system of domination that affects the lived experience of black women as a class in postcolonial African contexts. As a theoretical lens, intersectionality enables a nuanced analysis of the specific conditions and social practices that contribute to the production of identities which results in the persecution and alienation of women accused of practising witchcraft. Intersectionality unveils the conditions and contexts within which toxic and culturally alienating practices take root where naming and categorisations are weaponised. This study uses a qualitative research methodology in unpacking the themes emerging from the relationship between witchcraft practices and female identity formations as depicted in the chosen isiZulu novels under analysis.

A thematic analysis of data gathered from novels such as isiZulu fiction forms part of qualitative research methodologies by providing researchers with a deeper understanding of the text and its meaning. Thematic analysis allows researchers to uncover patterns and relationships between characters, themes and plot points, as well as other elements of the novels under examination. A thematic analysis also helps researchers to identify patterns in the texts, which in turn can be used to draw conclusions about the texts and their meaning. Furthermore, the data collected from a thematic analysis can be compared to other texts or to existing research as a way of providing insight into the texts' broader context and implications.

Theoretical framework

Intersectionality is a theoretical prism which describes how different forms of oppression and discrimination overlap and interact at the complex intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and other identity politics. Crenshaw (1995:19) advances 'intersectionality' as a concept which describes how race, class, gender and other individual characteristics 'intersect' and overlap with one another in intensifying the marginality. Intersectionality is an appropriate theory for analysing the experience of black women and witchcraft practices because the concept explains how patriarchal cultural discourses and gendered

representations, as depicted in isiZulu cultural texts, persist in oppressing black women. Moreover, the study adopts intersectionality to highlight how female identities in the chosen isiZulu fiction become embedded with witchcraft practices and how the selected literary novels represent the ways in which women use witchcraft practices as a form of distorted empowerment. The study also explains how the intersectional experience of black women shapes the way witchcraft is performed, understood and practised in the selected isiZulu literary texts.

Data presentation and analysis

This section provides a synopsis of each selected isiZulu-authored novel used in our analysis of representations and identities of women in relation to witchcraft practices within the context of South Africa's cultural discourse. Each of the novels under consideration was purposefully chosen because of the artistic ways each author portrays the identities ascribed to women who are accused of practising witchcraft.

Inkinga Yomendo (1961)

Dube's novel *Inkinga Yomendo* [*The Riddle of Marriage*] (1961) explores the interplay between societal expectations, gender roles and the lengths women will go to in pursuit of love. The novel dramatises the love triangle between Jabhisa, a female character who is madly in love with a male character named Gagamela, who is in love with another female character named Dora Mkhwanazi. Both Jabhisa and Dora resort to witchcraft in order to try to monopolise Gagamela's love and affection for themselves. Jabhisa and Dora's desperation for marriage stems from the deep-seated importance placed on marital status within Zulu traditional customs.

In *Inkinga Yomendo*, witchcraft manifests in the novel through the use of *iziphoso* [love charms that are thrown] by Jabhisa and Dora in order to win Gagamela's love. Jabhisa gets the *iziphoso* from an *inyanga* [traditional medicine man] named Pelepele, while Dora gets hers from a spiritual healer named Dludla. Both women are desperate for marriage and are willing to use any means necessary to get their man. In the end, Gagamela chooses to be with Tozi Ximba, who does not use witchcraft. Dube suggests that Gagamela's decision to settle with Tozi represents her rejection of societal pressures and a desire for genuine connection, as the latter completely rejects using manipulation or deceit. In *Inkinga Yomendo*, Jabhisa and Dora are facing the intersection of their gender and cultural expectations as Zulu women. Their desperation for marriage is heavily ingrained in isiZulu tradition, and this pressure to conform compels them to use *iziphoso* [love charms] as a means to manipulate men. *Inkinga Yomendo* depicts how the social pressure to be in a marriage within traditional Zulu culture creates competition, such that Jabhisa and Dora use *iziphoso* to attack their mothers-in-law.

Ikusasa Alaziwa (1969)

Nxumalo's novel *Ikusasa Alaziwa* [*Tomorrow Is Not Known*] (1969) portrays the corrupting influence of greed and opportunism with the context of a family dynamic. The novel centres on two brothers named Mthobisi and Mxolisi Nxumalo from a fictional township named Ndumo. Mthobisi, the eldest brother, attempts to escape his criminal past in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, while the youngest brother Mxolisi, who is a teacher, embodies a more upstanding path. Moreover, *Ikusasa Alaziwa* portrays how Mthobisi's girlfriend, named Zodwa, tries to eliminate Mxolisi through *umuthi* [poison] because of the web of witchcraft within the Nxumalo family. Zodwa's characterisation exemplifies how Zulu women face societal pressure to secure their future within the patriarchal social structure, which inadvertently fuels greed and opportunism by this intersection of gender and cultural expectations. The novel portrays how witchcraft manifests when *umuthi* [poison] is used by characters in order to advance their own interests against their rivals.

Witchcraft manifests in *Ikusasa Alaziwa* through Zodwa's use of *umuthi* [poison], such as *isidliso*, to try to kill Mxolisi and ensure that Mthobisi becomes the heir apparent of the clan. Zodwa seeks to manipulate the inheritance within the Nxumalo family, and she befriends a character named MaMkhaliphi, a woman known for using charms and poisons. Through MaMkhaliphi, Zodwa acquires *umuthi* [poison] from a character named Ndulini, who is a traditional healer. Zodwa convinces Mthobisi to participate in her devious plan to poison his brother Mxolisi by claiming the *umuthi* will only disable him. However, Mthobisi mistakenly drinks the poison himself. In the ensuing investigation, Ndulini is sentenced for his role in the attempted poisoning, while Mthobisi recovers only to separate from Zodwa and marry another girl named Thembisile. The narrative portrays Zodwa's reliance on witchcraft negatively by highlighting the unhappy ending she faces as she is banished from the Nxumalo clan. However, *Ikusasa Alaziwa* suggests that witchcraft also becomes a tool of compensation for the limited agency of women, who lack socially sanctioned paths to advancement. Despite Zodwa trying to subvert this gendered system, her methods are ultimately punished, which highlights the fallacy of using unethical means to achieve social mobility.

Akuyiwe Emhlahlweni (1983)

Msimang's *Akuyiwe Emhlahlweni* [*Let Us Go to the Diviner*] (1983) illustrates how the pressure to bear male heirs in a polygamous family can lead to witchcraft and familial dysfunction. MaSibisi embodies the tragic consequences of societal pressures within a polygamous family. Trapped in a household with the other sister-wives of a patriarch named Thwala, MaSibisi desperately desires a male heir to secure her position as queen. This yearning stems from a patriarchal system that values male offspring for inheritance and status. MaSibisi's anxieties are heightened when the other wives, MaNzuza and MaMkhize, bear sons for Thwala while she

remains childless. Consumed by fear and insecurity, MaSibisi embarks on a destructive path, as she believes that the other wives are using witchcraft to sabotage her. She seeks out an *inyanga* named Zangaza for assistance in overcoming her barrenness. However, Zangaza manipulates MaSibisi's desperation by fuelling her suspicions and providing her with lethal concoctions disguised as cures. The tragic climax unfolds as MaSibisi accidentally poisons her own beloved daughter, named Ncengani, instead of the sons of MaNzuza and MaMkhizi whom she intended to harm. Even after this devastating loss, MaSibisi clings to her misplaced trust in Zangaza, further highlighting the destructive power of societal pressures and manipulation.

In *Akuyiwe Emhlahlweni,* Thwala's polygamous household exemplifies a breeding ground for female competition. The pressure on a woman to secure a male heir, which is essential for inheritance and status within the patriarchal system, is what fuels insecurity and distrust among the sister-wives. Furthermore, Msimang explores the destructive power of manipulated cultural beliefs, as seen by how MaSibisi's anxieties are amplified by the very system that should offer guidance. Zangaza the *inyanga* preys on her vulnerabilities; instead of providing solutions, he exploits her fear of witchcraft, twisting traditional practices into weapons. By convincing MaSibisi that her sister-wives are using witchcraft, Zangaza fuels the flames of competition and mistrust in Thwala's household. Sibiya illustrates how this cynical manipulation highlights how cultural beliefs, when weaponised within a patriarchal structure, can have disastrous consequences for women.

Ithemba Lami (1994)

Ithemba Lami [*My Hope*] (1994) by Mathenjwa tells the story of a woman named Nokulindela from KwaHlangakazi in KwaZulu-Natal and her fight for love and compassion in the face of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and societal prejudice. Nokulindela navigates a challenging situation with her boyfriend named Sandanezwe, who is HIV positive. He believes his medical condition is the result of being bewitched. *Ithemba Lami* unfolds as another male suitor named Zabalaza enters the picture, only to reveal his prejudiced views when he blames Sandanezwe's condition on girlfriends from Durban, which highlights the harsh social reality of the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS. Nokulindela demonstrates her strength through her unwavering loyalty to Sandanezwe and her suspicion of Zabalaza's motives. Nokulindela confronts Zabalaza about his unwanted sexual advances, and she accuses him of using witchcraft to weaken Sandanezwe: '*Sengiyasola ukuthi nguwe ophonsa uSandanezwe*' ['I suspect that you are the one who cursed Sandanezwe'] (Mathenjwa, 54). Nokulindela's accusation foreshadows the destructive path Zabalaza takes while being empowered by sorcery. Mathenjwa's novel *Ithemba Lami* depicts witchcraft as part of the exploitative social forces that exploit vulnerability; this dynamic is embodied by men like Zabalaza, who use witchcraft to manipulate women like Nokulindela and weaken HIV-positive men like Sandanezwe, which reflects how societal stigma and prejudice can exacerbate suffering.

Ithemba Lami uses Nokulindela's fight against HIV and AIDS as an allegory for the intersection of social stigma and illness in South Africa. Zabalaza, who wields power within the community, attempts to control Nokulindela through witchcraft, by exploiting the fear and ignorance surrounding HIV and AIDS. This manipulation reflects how societal anxieties are weaponised to isolate and harm the affected. However, Nokulindela's resilience shines through when she is eventually healed by another *inyanga* after experiencing hallucinations because of Zabalaza's concoctions. Nokulindela confronts Nomgedla for his part in the treacherous plot, in collusion with Zabalaza. The *inyanga* apologises and says, '*Ngiyaxolisa ngilingekile mama ngavuma imithi engiyinikwe uZabalaza*' [I apologise, Mother, I was tempted to use concoctions that I was given by Zabalaza], which underscores the destruction caused by Zabalaza's actions (Mathenjwa, 101). Nokulindela's journey in *Ithemba Lami* is a testament to the human spirit's ability to overcome adversity, especially when met with compassion and respect.

Kungasa Ngifile (2002)

Sibiya's novel *Kungasa Ngifile* [*Over My Dead Body*] (2002) tells the story of a woman named Zanele who fiercely opposes her son, Senzo, marrying his girlfriend, known as Nokuthula. The novel unfolds in Bethamoya, a rural village near Bergville in KwaZulu-Natal. Zanele's disapproval of Nokuthula stems from her hidden past, as Senzo is the result of a secret affair which Zanele had during her youth with a famous soccer player called Dumisani Zondi. Despite marrying an upstanding man named Mhlungu and having him raise Senzo as his own son, Zanele's fear of the truth being exposed fuels her prejudice against Nokuthula. Zanele resorts to manipulative tactics rooted in patriarchal norms because she views Nokuthula as a threat to her carefully constructed family narrative and uses accusations of witchcraft to undermine Nokuthula's relationship with Senzo. Zanele Memela embodies the dangers of women in a society where traditional beliefs can be twisted to suppress female agency. *Kungasa Ngifile* depicts the interplay between tradition, love and the weaponisation of witchcraft beliefs in rural South Africa.

Kungasa Ngifile particularly uses situational irony as a trope to expose the weaknesses of prejudice and the power of genuine love. The irony of Zanele's actions lies in their ineffectiveness because of her reliance on seeking out an unreliable *inyanga* to acquire *isichitho* [to flush away waste], intending to metaphorically 'flush away' the relationship between Senzo and Nokuthula. She also acquires *umandangaphakathi* [the love that grows within], which is the charm the *inyanga* mistakenly gives to Zanele, which ends up causing the opposite effect, namely strengthening the

couple's bond. This comedic twist exposes the absurdity of Zanele's prejudice and the power of true love to overcome societal pressures. *Kungasa Ngifile* concludes with the revelation of Nokuthula's parentage and the couple's triumphant wedding, which underscores the ultimate triumph of love and truth over fear and manipulation.

Ngacishe Ngazibambezela (2006)

Sibiya's novel *Ngacishe Ngazibambezela* [*I Almost Held Myself Back*] (2006) highlights the constant competition for attention and affection in a polygamous household, which consequently breeds insecurity and distrust among family members. *Ngacishe Ngazibambezela* is set in Mkhuze in KwaZulu-Natal, and the story revolves around a character named MaMdlalose, an insecure and suspicious matriarch who is competing with a younger sister-wife, MaNhlengethwa, in the household of a powerful male patriarch, Nkosi, the husband of both. MaMdlalose accuses MaNhlengethwa of using witchcraft to control their husband, Nkosi, and to estrange her from own daughter, Ntombenhle. MaMdlalose's accusation sparks a fight between the co-wives, which turns physically violent and ends up leaving MaMdlalose injured. MaMdlalose seeks advice from her sister, Cokani, about MaNhlengethwa and the latter tells MaMdlalose to use a potion called *umandangaphakathi* [the love which comes from within] to gain Nkosi's recognition and respect. However, MaMdlalose's attempts to manipulate Nkosi's affection backfire, as she is exposed and publicly humiliated by MaNhlengethwa, who beats her in full view of other community members. Sibiya's novel portrays how constant competition and suspicion can exact a heavy emotional toll on women, and MaMdlalose's journey exemplifies the jealousy, insecurity and powerlessness that arise in such a patriarchal social setting.

Ngacishe Ngazibambezela illustrates the interplay of patriarchy and female competition within isiZulu social structures by using MaMdlalose's journey as a lens. In fact, MaMdlalose embodies what Zungu (2019:90) describes as the 'double-edged sword of powerlessness and oppression', which characterises women who are trapped in polygamous marriages. Firstly, MaMdlalose submits to Nkosi, the head of the household, and this reflects the inherent power imbalance within polygamy. Secondly, as Nkosi's first wife, Nokulindela feels pressure to compete with MaNhlengethwa, the younger wife. Thus, Zungu (2019:90) suggests that younger wives often hold an 'elevated status' within polygamous marriages. This is why the competition inevitably fuels MaMdlalose's insecurity and desperation for recognition, which are evident in her desire to use a love portion called *umandangaphakathi*. Sibiya thematically emphasises how traditional structures like polygamy, when combined with a patriarchal society, actually restrict women's ability to find self-worth and fulfilment, and this ultimately leads to public humiliation and the loss of agency. *Ngacishe Ngazibambezela* presents witchcraft as a tool that women use to navigate the power dynamics of polygamous households.

Imiyalezo (2008)

Mngadi's novel *Imiyalezo* (2008) [*Scared Message*] is a tale of manipulation and the dangers of seeking external control over love. The plot of *Imiyalezo* focuses on Zenzile Annabel Cebekhulu, who is from Kuphumeleni in Ladysmith, KwaZulu-Natal, and is grappling with love and betrayal. Initially, Annabel experiences a pure and innocent love for a male character named Vusi, a boy from a neighbouring town. However, their connection is shattered by a disapproving teacher who enforces the societal notion that school is not a place for romance. Annabel ends up entering into a new relationship with a character named Jazzman Jiyane, the school's star football player. However, this relationship soon turns sour, as Jazzman's affections prove fickle. Annabel is heartbroken after Jazzman chooses another female character named Joyce, whom he marries. Despite this, Annabel remains in love with Jazzman, and in an attempt to win him back, she seeks help from a *sangoma* [traditional healer], Ali Kamanga. The *sangoma* offers Annabel a charm known as *umandangaphakathi* [the love which comes from within] to bring Jazzman back. However, Kamanga proposes a sexual relationship to Annabel in exchange for his charms, which causes her to steal the charm from Ali. Mngadi explores the conflict between free will and manipulation through Annabel's tragic quest to control love through witchcraft, which backfires, highlighting the dangers of defying societal expectations and the importance of self-acceptance.

Annabel's journey in *Imiyalezo* illustrates the manipulation and challenges which young Zulu women can face when societal expectations clash with their desires. She seeks control over Jazzman's love through witchcraft, but it backfires because the *umandangaphakathi* potion creates a false reality. In fact, Annabel's choices are fuelled by heartbreak and a desire for control, which leads to her death by suicide after she burns herself. The fire symbolises Annabel's internal burning desire for affection and the destructive power of unchecked emotions. However, *Imiyalezo* challenges negative stereotypes of witchcraft, as Annabel uses charms and portions for love, not evil, but the negative outcome shows that true love cannot be forced. *Imiyalezo* uses Annabel's tragic fate to underscore the importance of self-acceptance and the need to navigate love with maturity, even when faced with disappointment.

Kunjalo-ke (2008)

Wanda's novel *Kunjalo-ke* [*That's How Things Are*] (2008) centres on how a female character, Dumazile Kheswa, a learner at Zenzele High School in Mbumbulu in KwaZulu-Natal, is primarily motivated by self-preservation and maintaining relationships with men who can provide for her. Through Dumazile's story, *Kunjalo-ke* explores how societal expectations regarding female sexuality limit their choices, as the young girl is expelled for having a sexual relationship with a teacher named Jeffrey Zitike Moloi. Her expulsion eventually forces Dumazile to navigate a world where her value is tied to male attention, as seen by the transactional

relationships she engages in. However, she begins a relationship with an older married man only indicated as Sithole, who falls madly in love with Dumazile and who eventually buys Dumazile a house and car. The affair comes at the cost of ruining the marriage of another female character, MaNzimande, Sithole's wife. She disapproves of his relationship with the young woman. Moreover, Dumazile uses a love portion called *isigqabo*, which has the effect of ensuring that her bosses and colleagues become very attracted to her and want to be physically intimate with her, despite the fact that she is married to Zuma. The *isigqabo* makes Dumazile's suitors very jealous of Zuma, and they want to be intimate with her, even though each man is already in a relationship and is much older than her. One of the main ways in which witchcraft manifests in *Kunjalo-ke* is Dumazile's use of *isigqabo*, which is a type of charm used to attract and keep the attention of a desired suitor, such as Sithole and other male suitors.

In *Kunjalo-ke*, Dumazile uses witchcraft to manipulate her encounters with men and gain control in her relationships. However, the novel does not portray witchcraft as a solution but rather reflects Dumazile's desperation and limited agency. Dumazile navigates a series of relationships marked by power imbalances and manipulation, which push her to use charms and incantations to maintain relationships with older men like Sithole, whom she leaves for the younger Mthovovo Mkhize, a driver at the hospital where Dumazile works. She eventually marries a character named Mtalaselwa Zuma, an ambulance driver at the hospital. Despite accusing another female character, Mtalaselwa, of practising witchcraft at work, Dumazile uses charms to strengthen herself and gain favour with her bosses. However, *Kunjalo-ke* ends tragically with all of Dumazile's lovers – Sithole, Mthovovo and Mtalaselwa – succumbing to HIV, which they had contracted from her. *Kunjalo-ke* portrays witchcraft as a reflection of Dumazile's desperation rather than a path towards empowerment in light of how her choices and reliance on manipulative tactics tragically lead to devastating consequences for herself and the men in her life in the form of HIV and AIDS.

Findings

The following section discusses how the chosen isiZulu-authored novels depict the representations of black female characters in relation to witchcraft and occult practices. The data are thematically presented according to how witchcraft is construed within the discourses of female resistance, destabilised power relations and familial rivalries.

Witchcraft as an unethical means to seek love, security and a genuine connection

Kunjalo-ke, *Inkinga Yomendo*, *Ikusasa Alaziwa* and *Imiyalezo* each explore the interplay between witchcraft, societal expectations and female agency within Zulu culture. However, Dumazile, Jabhisa, Dora, Annabel and Zodwa's endorsement of witchcraft and occult charms reinforces misogyny and ambient sexism because of their dependence on men for security and status. These narratives highlight the self-perpetuating nature of a gendered system as a consequence of the dangers of using manipulation as an unethical means of securing a relationship.

Kunjalo-ke illustrates how Dumazile uses *isigqabo* [charms] to control her relationships with powerful men, and her focus on material wealth ignores the larger patriarchal structures which limit women's agency. Her actions do not challenge the root causes of how gender and class are interconnected but are instead a desperate attempt to navigate a social system which is rigged against Zulu working-class women. Similarly, Jabhisa and Dora's use of love charms in *Inkinga Yomendo* exemplifies how vulnerable Zulu women, trapped in a system where marriage is paramount, resort to *iziphoso* [love charms] to manipulate men. Both novels employ themes of desperation, manipulation and the tragic consequences of relying on witchcraft to underscore the interplay between gender, culture and the limited agency of women.

Witchcraft in *Imiyalezo* and *Ikusasa Alaziwa* is also a double-edged sword, because while its tools offer women a semblance of control, it often stems from a place of desperation, and this results in tragic consequences for each character. Annabel and Zodwa are each driven to use *umuthi* [traditional medicine] and *umandangaphakathi* [black magic] to secure love and eliminate their rivals, but the narratives paint a picture of the resulting internal conflicts and devastating consequences. Both Annabel and Zodwa become entangled in a web of their own making, which highlights the insidious nature of the misogyny in traditional cultural contexts which fuels such desperation. The above-mentioned novels illustrate the limited agency which some women possess within a patriarchal framework where marriage is paramount. Consequently, the narratives act as cautionary tales by depicting the dangers of manipulation and the ultimate backfiring of witchcraft as a tool of securing romantic bliss.

Witchcraft as a tool in polygamy and its illusion of empowerment

Akuyiwe Emhlahlweni and *Ngacishe Ngazibambezela* grapple with the destructive nature of witchcraft in a social system that pits women against each other. In Msimang's novel, the societal pressure to bear male heirs leads MaSibisi to inadvertently use *muthi* [lethal concoctions] against her own daughter because of the emotional warfare within Thwala's household, which breeds insecurity and distrust. Ironically, MaSibisi, in seeking to sideline her sister-wives MaNzuza and MaMkhize through *muthi*, is manipulated by the very *inyanga* [traditional healer] who reinforces a patriarchal system that imprisons her. The novel is a horrifying illustration of how witchcraft and its tools in the service of a patriarchal agenda can be wielded to devastating ends.

Ngacishe Ngazibambezela portrays a similar struggle for power among co-wives within a polygamous marriage. Sibiya

depicts how MaMdlalose's endorsement of witchcraft ultimately reinforces the very system that restricts her choices. MaMdlalose resorts to using *umandangaphakathi* [black magic] to control her husband, Nkosi, because she is grappling with insecurities caused by the latter's roving eye. However, MaMdlalose's attempt to carve out agency within the patriarchal structure through witchcraft backfires, which exposes the limitations such methods offer. Characters like MaSibisi and MaMdlalose believe they are taking control in a competitive social space, but their actions are ultimately self-defeating as they play into the hands of a system designed to limit female agency. Msimang and Sibiya's narratives highlight the illusory nature of empowerment through witchcraft by portraying women who are conditioned to believe in the importance of male heirs and marital security.

Witchcraft, societal stigma, internalised patriarchy and the weaponisation of tradition

Ithemba Lami and *Kungasa Ngifile* highlight how deeply ingrained beliefs in witchcraft and superstition shape societal understandings of illness in Zulu culture. Women such as Nokulindela and Zanele in these narratives are positioned as both victims and perpetrators within the realm of superstition and witchcraft. In *Ithemba Lami,* Nokulindela becomes a target of suspicion because of her relationship with Sandanezwe, who is HIV positive. Zabalaza exploits the community's fear of a warped association between HIV and witchcraft. He accuses Sandanezwe's girlfriends from Durban of infecting him with HIV, which advances the sexist stereotype of black women as vectors of disease.

Kungasa Ngifile explores the weaponisation of tradition and the association of women with uncontrollable occult forces. Sibiya's narrative underscores the underlying belief system that allows Zanele to weaponise the traditional trust between parent and child in the first place. Zanele's fear of exposure because of her past affair feeds her prejudice against her son's girlfriend. She resorts to using *isichitho* [charms for severing ties] obtained from an *inyanga* [traditional healer] to sabotage the relationship. The irony lies in the ineffectiveness of her actions, as the *isichitho* strengthens the bond between Senzo and Nokuthula. Sibiya portrays how internalised patriarchy distorts the parent–child relationship because Zanele's fear and insecurity of another woman, rooted in societal expectations, lead her to view Nokuthula as a threat. She becomes a manipulative force by weaponising witchcraft in an attempt to control her son's destiny. The very existence of *isichitho* and Zanele's casual acceptance of their use in such a context speaks volumes about the cultural acceptance of manipulating relationships through witchcraft. Sibiya's novel reinforces the notion that women, particularly mothers, are culturally expected to maintain the family order, even if it means resorting to charms and manipulation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article traces how selected isiZulu novels depict the representations and identities of women in relation to witchcraft practices within the context of South African cultural discourses, based on an intersectional analysis of the characters depicted in each text. The gathered data corroborates three themes in relation to the intersectional experiences of female characters within the context of witchcraft practices, namely the self-defeating nature of using witchcraft as a tool for love and security, the limitations of witchcraft as a tool for empowerment within systems designed to restrict the choices of women and the intersection of internalised patriarchy with societal stigmas.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theorisation of intersectionality is useful in examining how some women's decisions in the selected isiZulu novels to resort to witchcraft are shaped by the interplay of their gender, societal expectations and the limitations imposed by a patriarchal system. Female characters such as Dumazile, Jabhisa, Dora, Annabel and Zodwa all turn to witchcraft as a means to secure love and safety. However, *Kunjalo-ke*, *Inkinga Yomendo*, *Ikusasa Alaziwa* and *Imiyalezo* ultimately portray the self-defeating nature of this approach, as the deceit backfires and reinforces the very sexist structures they are trying to navigate. Characters like MaSibisi, MaMdlalose and Zanele all face social pressures to obey patriarchal ideals. An intersectional lens enables the reader to appreciate the complexities of these characters' choices and the limitations placed upon them by a society which simultaneously restricts women's agency while offering witchcraft as a culturally sanctioned, yet ultimately self-defeating, tool for achieving their desires.

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