

**Young African Writers in the Digital Space: Counter-storytelling in short stories from
Wattpad, fundza.mobi and *JAY Lit***

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Abstract

In the digital space, contemporary young Africans are writing stories reflecting how they navigate their worlds in the 21st century. Some write with the desire to break from the past, and present themes of change, healing and hope, while others continue to write stories that connect contemporary issues to the past. Using Young Adult literature (YAL), digital literature and counter-storytelling as the basis for the study, this thesis will explore the unique voices, subjectivities and ways of writing found online. I analyse a short story by Ibrahim Babátundé Ibrahim titled “When the Sun Is Up” from *The Journal of African Youth Literature (JAY Lit)*. Framed by disability studies and affect theory, I show how Ibrahim’s unique writing contributes to an understanding of the complexities of disability. As a counter-story, it portrays a character with albinism and shows the effects of psycho-emotional disablism while critiquing and challenging the non-disabled imaginary. I then analyse the short story “Inter-Tribal Union” from the anthology *The Song of Us* by Mercy Kalu from *Wattpad*. I read it as a counter-story in its representation of an interfaith relationship and sacrificial love. While *fundza.mobi* can be regarded as a counter-storytelling platform, not all of my chosen stories for analysis necessarily reflect this characteristic. Firstly, I argue that while “The Hard Life” by Philane Ndabe and “Reneilwe” by Mogale Kgashane inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes about young women in the city, Zukiswa Phakama’s “I Will Find My Way” offers a counter-narrative of hope and empowerment that subverts common tropes. Secondly, I conduct a close reading of “In Search of Greener Pastures” by Oyama Comba and argue that she subverts the fairy-tale romance trope to highlight the pervasiveness of violence in South African society. Lastly, I show how “Unlocked” interrogates internalised misogyny and benevolent sexism in romantic relationships through Akhona Mlenga’s writing style and characterisation. In addition to analysing writing online, I explore the relationship between text, reader and writer by analysing the comments under each story. *Wattpad* and *fundza.mobi* demonstrate how online reader interactions become a part of the text and augment the reading and understanding of the text.

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Chapter One: Exploring the World of Digital Literature in Africa

1.1 Introduction

Digital literature is a rapidly evolving field, with new forms of storytelling and artistic expression that have emerged in response to technological advances over the past few decades. From interactive fiction and hypertext to virtual reality and social media-based narratives (see Bell 2013; Ensslin and Rustad 2014; Akinbobola 2015; Adenekan 2021), the boundaries of what is considered literature have expanded far beyond the printed page. Stephanie Bosch Santana observes that "digital methods of literary creation, circulation, and consumption are playing a more central role in producing African literatures on the continent and beyond" (439). The dynamics of "creation, circulation and consumption" are characterised by new and unique writing styles, collaboration between readers and writers through real-time feedback in the form of comments, circulation through social media-like interfaces, and serialised storytelling among other features. Digital methods of writing and publishing are becoming increasingly influential because they allow both writers and readers to shape the literary landscape. African

writers are making use of these new methods in the digital space to “create, recreate and disseminate new images of Africa in inventive and socio-culturally conscious ways” (Bisschoff 261). Young African writers especially, are creating alternative narratives with unique subjectivities and reclaiming African stories for themselves using digital platforms.

This study explores both Young Adult Literature (hereafter YAL) and young African writers’ representations of youth and young adults in digital fiction. By young writers, I mean writers younger than thirty-five years old. The study will focus on short stories selected from three online platforms: *Wattpad*, *fundza.mobi* and *The Journal of African Youth Literature* (hereafter *JAY Lit*). These platforms mark a shift in digital literature where writers go beyond using online platforms to promote their published work in print. Rather, writers are using online platforms as their primary or sole publishing method. My choice of the three platforms enables me to investigate the representation of young writers on three distinct levels. *fundza.mobi* allows for the exploration of an online platform on a national level. As a local platform, *fundza.mobi* was created by The FunDza Literacy Trust (hereafter FunDza), a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving literacy levels in South Africa for teenagers and young adults. Young adults and teenagers can submit their work through their sub-platform *LoveWriting*. There are also thousands of stories written by professional authors and the FunDza Fellowship Programme. From this platform, I will examine five short stories: “In Search of Greener Pastures” by Oyama Comba, “Unlocked” by Akhona Mlenga, “Reneilwe” by Mogale Kgashane”, “I Will Find My Way” by Zukiswa Pakama and “The Hard Life” by Philane Ndabe. *JAY Lit* provides an example of what an online platform looks like on the continent, since young writers from all over Africa can submit their writing. Their main goal is to “promote Pan-Africanism among a new generation of African peoples who want to make a decisive break from the often-painful histories of Africa” (*JAY Lit* para. 5). “When the Sun Is Up” by Ibrahim Babátúndé Ibrahim, available in the first issue of *JAY Lit* will be the focus of my analysis. *Wattpad* is a global writing platform where writers self-publish their work and connect with their readers through comments and social media. As an international platform, it illustrates how young African writers and readers are carving out their place in the world. The story I will analyse from *Wattpad* is “Inter-Tribal Union” from the anthology *The Song of Us* by Mercy Kalu.

In my observation of the literature from the platforms I have selected, young writers are presenting a balanced image of Africa. While they write about hardship, there is also an increasing focus on creating more stories of change, healing, innovation and success. Common threads in the texts are counter-storytelling, retelling, and reimagining what has come before.

Shola Adenekan explains that African writers are not interested in responding to the West but rather “re-orientating fellow Africans towards African aesthetics that speak to the complexity of their societies, to a complex history and to cultures that continue to evolve in an everchanging world” (35).

Going forward, it is important to remember that young writers are not necessarily writing back or writing against the West but combining history and the present to represent their worlds. As Adenekan claims, “The goal is to write fiction and poetry that target African readers first and the rest of the world second” (10). While each platform has an agenda of its own, all three allow young African writers to develop their writing and express themselves through storytelling. Some write with the desire to break from the past with themes of change, healing and hope; some write about life as it is; others write stories that connect contemporary issues to the past.

Online writing may have started as a way for established writers to promote their work, but it has brought out new ways of doing literature. I intend to show how online writing inspires these new ways of doing. I am also interested in how young African writers navigate the digital space and how stories about young Africans represent their lives in the twenty-first century. Previous studies of digital literature from Shola Adenekan, Yemisi Akinbobola, Stephanie Bosch Santana, and Lizelle Bisschoff discuss the history and development of digital literature in Africa and provide significant insight into digital fiction in Africa as a whole. In this thesis, I build on their research by exploring stories for and about young African adults online. Young African writers are doing something differently from their predecessors, and this difference is characterised by their creative use of online platforms and representation of contemporary themes.

This chapter provides a foundational framework for the thesis by establishing the key definitions, contextualisation, and theoretical perspectives employed throughout the study. The chapter begins with a concise historical overview of digital literature in Africa, which serves as a necessary precursor to the subsequent analysis. Next, I explain the concepts of social authorship and reader-writer interaction, which are essential for understanding the analytical approach employed in examining the comments sections appended to the texts from *fundza.mobi* and *Wattpad*. Finally, I outline the concept of counter-storytelling, which forms a crucial component of the thesis’s analytical framework.

1.2 Digital Literature in Africa

Digital literature has been gaining traction globally as technology advances and more people have access to digital platforms. However, the genre has a particularly interesting history in Africa, where it has been shaped by the continent's unique cultural, social, and political contexts. From early experiments with hypertext and interactive storytelling (Bisschoff 2017; Ajah 2022) to contemporary works that explore themes of identity, community, and social justice (see Bosch Santana 2018; Yékú 2020; Adenekan 2021), digital literature in Africa has evolved in response to the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital age. In this discussion, I define digital literature and trace the development of digital literature in Africa from its beginnings in the 1980s and 1990s to the present day. By engaging with the ideas of Shola Adenekan and Helen Cousins, Stephanie Bosch Santana, Lizelle Bisschof, James Yékú, and Yemisi Akinbobola, I show where this discipline has come from, discuss the debates around digital literature, and outline my research focus.

According to Adenekan and Cousins, the emergence of digital literature in Africa dates to the 1990s – when authors wanted to draw more attention to their published works by sharing stories and poems on the internet. Writers would distribute their work through “personal blogs and on listservs such as Krazitivity and Ederi hosted by the likes of Yahoo and the now defunct Geocities” (Adenekan 12). These works subsequently appeared on African websites such as *Nigeria.com*, *Africanwriting.com*, *Chimurenga.com*, *Africanwriters.com*, *odili.net* and *Nigeriavillagesquare.com*. Established literary magazines realised the potential of growing online audiences and asked writers to submit short stories and poems that would appeal to an online audience. At the same time, writers who wanted to have more control of their work began to publish creative writing on personal blogs and online collectives (Adenekan 11). Bosch Santana adds to the list of platforms where African online writing emerged. Literary websites like *African Writing Online* and *Storytime* came into existence, signalling the countless platforms created by organisations and writer collectives to promote their work and grow their audiences. Santana also mentions *Saraba Magazine* and *Brittle Paper* (439).¹ Presently, African digital writing is thriving, and digital platforms continue to increase in influence. Although single-author blogs have declined, literary magazines and collectively owned platforms continue. As demonstrated by *Brittle Paper*'s list below, African writing online has grown significantly over the past three decades. Additionally, writers are also using

¹ *Brittle Paper* still publishes articles, blog posts, reviews, writer profiles and literary works like poems and short stories. While *Saraba Magazine*'s website still exists, they last published in 2019. *African Writing Online* and *Storytime* are now defunct.

social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and the social reading platform *Wattpad*. *Brittle Paper* gives a list of 49 online magazines and journals that are currently active: *Adda Stories*, *AFREADA*, *Africa in Words*, *African Writer*, *Afritondo*, *Agbowo Art*, *Ake Review*, *Akuko Magazine*, *A Long House*, *ArabLit Quarterly*, *Bakwa Magazine*, *Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*, *Best Of Africa*, *BKO Magazine*, *Brittle Paper*, *Dgëku*, *Doek!*, *Down River Road*, *FIYAH*, *Flash Fiction Ghana*, *Imbiza Journal*, *Isele Magazine*, *Iskanchi*, *Jalada Africa*, *Kalahari Review*, *Kikwetu Journal*, *Kweli Journal*, *Lolwe*, *Minority Africa*, *New Contrast*, *Olongo Africa*, *Omenana*, *Poda-Poda*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Pree*, *Short Story Day Africa*, *Strange Horizons*, *Sultan's Seal*, *Tampered*, *The Johannesburg Review of Books*, *The Single Story Foundation Journal*, and *Wasafiri* (*Brittle Paper*). It is important to note that although I use the terms “Africa” and “African” in most of my contextualisation and discussion of digital literature, this study focuses on South African and Nigerian writers. By focusing on Nigeria and South Africa, this project examines two of the most robust and influential digital literary landscapes in Africa, providing a rich basis for analyzing how young people are reshaping the literary imagination. Both countries have well-established and globally recognized literary histories, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how new platform cultures intersect with and diverge from traditional canons. My research does not pose as a representation of digital literature across the continent but may have relevance and resonance with literary trends and discussions in various African regions.

Defining the ‘digital space’ (interchangeable with the ‘online space’) here is essential. The ‘digital space’ refers to a delocalised digital expanse found on the internet through smartphone and laptop screens and experienced through online platforms. The online space allows for multimodality, flexibility and accessibility. Users can produce and publish texts at any time, and readers can access them instantly. On some platforms, writers can create multimodal texts with pictures, videos and sound to enhance their work. Several definitions exist for digital literature and a review of the scholarship on digital literature reveals a variety of terms used to define the genre. Terms such as digital literature, electronic literature, and online literature are used with similar or identical definitions. Because the core characteristics of these works, such as their existence online, allowance for interactivity and dependence on computational processes are consistent across these labels, I use them interchangeably to maintain the flow of my discussion.

According to Bosch Santana, “Strict definitions of electronic literature emphasise its “birth” and continued existence in the digital realm, maintaining that the true test of electronic

literature is that something is “lost” if it is removed from its original digital medium” (441). Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Kristian Rustad give another definition:

Digital fiction, as defined by the Digital Fiction International Network, is “fiction [that is] written for and read on a computer screen [and] that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium” (Bell et al. 2010). It is fiction whose structure, form, and meaning are dictated by, and in dialogue with, the digital context in which it is produced and received. (4)

The platforms and texts I analyse do not fall strictly under the above definitions because my chosen short stories would retain their essence if published in print. What qualifies them as ‘digital’ is their position online and the context in which they are produced and received. The short stories from *Wattpad* and *fundza.mobi* feature semiotic signals from “likes” or “votes” and comments associated with social media and digital platforms. As Yékú points out in his discussion about the materiality of text, “questions of form and physical elements are significant considerations in terms of the materiality and form of the text of African writing in the age of the internet” (19). Without the comments, the texts could still be published in print, but they would lose features essential to the reading experience. This will be clearer in chapters Three and Four when I use readers’ comments to augment my analysis of the short stories from *fundza.mobi* and *Wattpad*.

I lean towards Bosch Santana and Bisschoff’s thoughts on digital art in my understanding of digital fiction. Bisschoff argues that digital art “...is impossible to define as a single phenomenon but instead includes changing and fluid sets of artistic techniques, technologies and concepts” (262). As is characteristic of the online space, the platforms – especially *Wattpad* and *fundza.mobi*– have changed over the years, with developers or organisations adding or changing features as technology advances. Thus, the best way to describe the chosen texts in this thesis is that they are “digital born” or born-digital as defined by N. Katherine Hayles (99). Hayles defines digital-born literature as “created on a computer and meant to be read on it” (99). I would include smartphones in this description since mobile phones are the primary way people access the internet on the continent (Galal).

Although stories with images, music, and hyperlinks can be found on *Wattpad* and pictures and illustrations on *fundza.mobi* and *JAY Lit*, the texts relevant to my study only contain prose. I differentiate between digital-born literature and multimodal digital literature because these versions require different kinds of analysis. Bell, Ensslin and Hans Rustad observe that “recent digital fiction also investigates the borders between different modalities

and art forms, such as the borders between literature, music, graphics, and photography” (9). These modes are combined in multimodal literature, which “tests the interpretative traditions and methods of close reading that have been inherited from print literature” (9). Multimodal literature challenges traditional ways of analysis and understanding developed through studying print literature. While close reading may be sufficient for printed texts, multimodal digital literature requires interdisciplinary analysis examining digital elements like interface, use of emojis, likes or hyperlinks. A multimodal approach requires investigations that involve visual theory, discourse analysis and semiotics theory. While I am interested in the multimodality in some forms of digital literature, it is not possible to investigate this in my research thoroughly since I primarily focus on literary analysis of the platforms and texts.

It is important here to briefly address the challenges of studying online literature and the importance of this exercise. Besides digital literature being a diverse field, there is the issue of ephemerality. Bosch Santana draws attention to the fact that,

Studying the online literary terrain poses many challenges because of [the] constant innovations and development: producers and consumers move to new platforms and abandon old ones; generic evolution can happen at lightning speed; and websites can disappear at any moment... What is more, new digital forms often exist within their own media ecologies and can be difficult to locate online if you are not part of their immediate, targeted audience. As a result, digital literatures necessitate new scholarly reading and archival practices. (440)

Over the years, both the *Wattpad* and *fundza.mobi* platforms have been updated to suit readers’ changing needs as the internet evolves. I detail and outline some of the platform changes in each relevant chapter. As Bosch Santana states, it can be difficult if you are not part of their media ecologies to keep up with all the changes. However, my experience and interest in these platforms have allowed me to study them. I first encountered *Wattpad* in high school through a friend, and one of the first books I read was *White Stag* by Kari Barbieri. During my undergraduate studies, I wrote about FunDza and explored the *fundza.mobi* platform in a Journalism Education module with high school learners in Makhanda. My investment in these platforms has aided my understanding and helped me keep up with most of the changes. In some cases, things do change and disappear. For example, *Wattpad* used to have forums where writers and readers could create communities around genres or interesting topics. This has since been discontinued. Another example is from Derick Matsengarwodzi’s article about Southern African writers who publish stories on Facebook and WhatsApp. Most of the writers he mentions have stopped writing and distributing stories online. For example, Sanele Shongwe

still has stories on his Facebook page but stopped writing in 2023, Pride Mawedzere's last post was in 2022, and Morgan Tatenda's Facebook page has gone from a writing page to a personal page. While he still engages with his followers extensively, it does not look like Tatenda writes anymore, and his writing website has been deleted. The disappearance of his work online highlights the importance of preserving online writing in some way.

Considering the difficulties associated with defining digital literature, Bosch Santana points out that "it is perhaps more useful to focus on what it does" and that we should think of digital literature as "network, rather than object" (191). Her argument extends to the connections between virtual and material space. In many instances, African digital literature is connected to print literature. This connection exists for several reasons. The digital divide in most African countries means people will continue moving from digital to print. Digital literature is also often used by writers as a stepping stone to establish themselves and build a readership before publishing in print (Adenekan and Cousins 139). While Bosch Santana frames the movement from digital to print and vice versa as a 'connection,' the digital divide and publishing practices surrounding the transition from digital to print form part of the debates around the politics of online literature.

Overall, 37% of the African population had internet access in 2023, according to the International Telecommunication Union Development Sector (Ecofin Agency para. 1). Although readers from Africa have access to my chosen platforms, statistics surrounding Nigerian and South Africa are also helpful since the stories I analyse originate from writers that are South African or Nigerian. South Africa has an internet penetration rate of 74.7%, while Nigeria's penetration rate stands at 45.5% (Galal). In comparison, Europe and the Americas recorded between 87% and 91% of internet access in their populations. The barriers to internet connectivity include high costs and a lack of the necessary telecommunications infrastructure (Ecofin Agency para. 7). For people in low-income households, these high data costs and digital illiteracy affect internet accessibility. This means limited accessibility to digital literature unless one has a smartphone and data or internet access. Thus, as Bosch Santana argues, digital platforms and traditional/print publishing will remain connected for a long time due to the digital divide and low internet penetration rates in some African countries (Bosch Santana). Interestingly, one of the reasons that initially made FunDza attractive before my research was their commitment to making their digital library accessible to everyone. They provide free digital content in partnerships with zero-rated platforms like Free Basics by Facebook and Moya Messenger. The organisation also provides free literacy courses and writing opportunities on *fundza.mobi* for anyone with access to a smartphone. This means that

underprivileged individuals and youth can learn more, read more, and create their own stories. This will be explained in more detail in Chapter Four.

In the introduction, I mentioned that authors initially used digital literature to draw more attention to their already published works. With digital-born literature, each writer has their own reasons for writing online. However, some become so popular that they become published in print. There are many digital-born texts that have transitioned to print or into film, with their original online versions used as advertisements for books or movies. Some popular examples of this included Mike Nkululeko Maphoto's literary blog *Diary of a Zulu Girl* which was published in print by Bula Buka in 2015; Kari Barbieri's *White Stag* on *Wattpad*, which was published in 2019 by the Macmillan Imprint of Wednesday Books and Beth Reekles's *The Kissing Booth* series which was published in print by Penguin Random House and adapted into Netflix movies. These examples demonstrate the ease of starting online - once a writer has accrued a readership, they may move into print. For Yékú,

the transition of literary texts from their original digital domain to print is symptomatic of a larger practice in African digital literary culture: the persistence of print in the imaginaries of cultural producers, one that is probably undergirded by an unstated capitalist impulse to circulate print copies and recoup investments. (11)

When it is clear that a text is popular, there will be profits once it is published in print. Authors often change the story slightly, add more details and extra chapters or change some of the content to suit print publishing. So, while the text may have originated online, it becomes a different text in print. For cultural producers, partnering with writers on online platforms can be a financially advantageous arrangement, as it provides a source of revenue. Furthermore, individuals who have experienced success with their digital content are more inclined to seek publishers using the same platforms, due to their established comfort and familiarity with those platforms.

Considering the trend of digital texts being adapted into print, many younger writers tend to prefer online publishing as a starting point. There are more opportunities to be seen and recognised without subscribing to specific ways of expression. For example, the author of *The Song of Us* on *Wattpad* introduces the anthology by saying, "Instead of writing the usual Independence story about colonial rule and fight for freedom. I decided to do something different" (Kalu). Her intentions with the text indicate the desire to turn from the kinds of stories that are often told or popularised around Nigeria's independence. While narratives about "the fight for freedom" (Kalu) are important, she wants to commemorate Nigeria's

Independence by narrating the everyday lives of Nigerian citizens in her writing. Adesokan outlines the ‘specific ways of expression’ that I mentioned above in his paper titled “New African Writing and the Question of Audience.” He argues that because “postcolonial criticism is heavily invested in a set of authors whose works the poetics of anti-colonialism most resonate” (6), narratives with features and plotlines that align with these poetics have become the gold standard, which tends to overshadow other kinds of narratives. He further argues that postcolonial novels in new African writing are shaped by the market’s expectations, which can blur the line between the novel as a cultural object and as a commodity. When the novel becomes a commodity, writers might begin to produce literature in a way that will see it become popular and widely read, which means focusing on specific themes or methods of representation. According to Adesokan, Western readership remains the primary context of reception, and this readership is “invested in the representation of contemporary Africa as a site of perennial political and humanitarian emergencies” and “a place where nasty things happen” (3). In his discussion on the political issues connected with the production process, publishing and reception of African literature, Aliyu Sakariyau Alabi demonstrates that in the past, the most visible books from Africa globally were produced by western publishers with ideas about Africa that work against “Africans’ own self perceptions” (29). I would adjust Adesokan’s argument to say that *if* the West remains the primary context of reception, Africa will continue to be represented as a site of conflict and crisis and a region plagued by adversity. Young African writers have recognised the need to shift the primary context of reception, and in response, they are writing with a new audience in mind: young Africans like themselves. By doing so, they are creating counter-narratives that challenge and subvert traditional representations of Africa, offering fresh and alternative perspectives that reflect their own experiences and realities. As Zahra Nesbitt-Ahmed argues, the explosion of new technologies “enables creators and consumers of African literature to reclaim—and then reframe—their own narratives” (qtd. in Yékú 4). While humanitarian emergencies, corruption, adversity, and crises exist, young African writers want to show all sides, with stories of success, joy, healing and change. All stories are important, and the online space ensures a space for all to share theirs.

Bosch Santana observes that “African writers continually [seek] out the spaces that allow for the greatest control and self-definition in addition to visibility” (440). While traditional print publishers still have influence, they are no longer the only gatekeepers of written culture. With online publishing, African writers can break free from the politics of postcolonial literary production that Adesokan discusses. Writers can find an audience online that resonates with their work instead of tailoring their narratives to the market at the time. As

Adenekan observes, in the old media, book publishers and broadcasters influenced what readers consumed based on what was sold in the past, but in the new media, online readers and bloggers can select texts and digital material that cater to their interests (20). Unlike print publications, public forums allow anyone to publish their work without censorship. While there are ‘guarded’ online publications owned by companies and groups, there are many ‘unguarded’ websites in the form of blogs, self-publishing platforms and social media pages where writers publish their work and have hundreds to millions of readers follow their writing. Both Claire Parnell’s and Melanie Ramdarshan Bold’s research on *Wattpad* shows that writers are also increasingly relying less on traditional publishing houses because self-publishing online is cheaper, more accessible and gives greater freedom and control of the whole process. Some texts do end up in print, while some stay online. I am most interested in the stories that have stayed online. These stories provide a rich field of research, which has significantly influenced my decision to undertake the study of digital literature for and about young African adults.

In addition to the accessibility and affordability of publishing online, various challenges within Africa’s publishing ecosystem/landscape contribute to writers preferring the online route. Alabi cites an unfavourable economic climate, deteriorating standards of education and a decline in the production of raw materials for publishing as some of the issues in Nigeria specifically (31). For the rest of Africa, one of the primary concerns in African publishing is the industry’s heavy reliance on textbook publishing as a revenue stream (see Bgoya and Jay 2013; Ojeneyi 2016). This commercial approach to publishing is underscored by Alabi, who notes that “Publishing, unlike literature, has traditionally operated as a business and is governed by the need to recoup returns on investment” (24). However, this poses a significant challenge for publishers seeking to support new and innovative writing. As Akoss Ofori-Mensah highlights in the Africa Publishing Innovation Fund (APIF) podcast, the biggest hurdle for African publishers is securing funding for their businesses. While foreign funding can provide temporary solutions, the lack of strategic planning often leads to business failure once funding projects conclude. This raises a pressing question for independent publishers and those focused on non-textbook authors: how can they access the necessary funds to sustain their publishing ventures and nurture emerging African writers? Publishing stakeholders across the continent contend that a sustainable book industry can only be achieved with positive government support (see Nyariki 2018; Snaije 2023; Zell 2024). In an interview at the 2019 International Publishers Association (IPA) African Seminar series, Ghanaian publisher Elliot Agyare emphasised the importance of governmental support, advocating for “support in the same way that [countries] prioritise the building of hard infrastructure” (qtd. in Zell 68). A robust

publishing infrastructure has the potential to alleviate the need to rely on foreign donations or funding. Unfortunately, literature outside of textbooks is often overlooked. As a result, budgets are allocated to other areas. Most contemporary independent publishers, or publishers who prioritise fiction over textbooks and educational material have had to secure funding through donors or other means. For example, the founders of Parrésia, after struggling to get funding, were only able to get a bank loan through a personal connection (Alabi 32). They also use a pay-to-be-published system for their Origami imprint, which publishes literary prose such as “poetry, religious fiction, educational and academic texts, plays, science fiction, fantasy, biographies and autobiographies” (Alabi 28). While Parrésia has found ways to be successful, others are not as fortunate, notably Weaver Press who announced their closing on the day of their 25th anniversary (Mushakavanhu para. 2). The small independent publishing house that was co-managed by Murray McCartney and Irene Staunton closed after 25 years. In his book, *African Literature in the Digital Age*, Adenekan expresses that writers are reluctant to go with publishers because “established local publishing houses often ask writers to finance the publication of their work” (11) and, in some cases, pay a royalty or a substantial percentage from books sales to the publisher.

While there are independent publishers with practices that benefit both author and publisher, these are just some examples and issues that account for some writers preferring online publishing. As stakeholders and publishers contend with governments or try to find ways to fund independent publishing, the desire to publish remains, especially among youth and young writers. Online communities are flourishing, and digital literature offers an immediacy that policy changes and governmental support cannot match. This highlights the potential of digital platforms to fill the gaps in the traditional publishing landscape.

1.3 Social Authorship and Reader-Writer Interactions in the Digital Age: An Overview

When African writers started disseminating some of their texts using blog posts and other online sources, they did it to gain more readers and draw attention to their already-established work. Ramdarshan Bold calls this social authorship: existing and emerging authors accrue social capital to raise awareness around themselves and their work (120). Although social authorship seems a new phenomenon, it has roots in sixteenth-century England with manuscript circulation. According to Zeynep Tenger and Paul Trolander, writers circulated their handwritten manuscripts among chosen readers – family members, friends, and publishers – who would make revisions, alterations, or respond to manuscripts in letters (1037). In some places, poetry placed on notice boards in salons would get letters of reply in return. People

would also use manuscript circulation to get more people to read what had already been published in print. For example, John Donne published some texts in print but also kept most of his verses in manuscript. He also chose his audience by circulating his verse to a select few (1038). The literary circles around him and the authors also “first circulated their works in manuscript, then actively assembled available manuscript copies to prepare for print or stage performance” (1039). Writing was not a solitary process, and the final products included input from other people through manuscript notes. Digital platforms facilitate a more immediate experience of this process.

On platforms like *Wattpad*, *JAY Lit* and *fundza.mobi*, writers can share their narratives, form networks and interact with readers in a similar way that manuscript authors used to. Bold argues that

Just like manuscript publishing, readers on *Wattpad* are involved in both the production and the consumption of the text because it is not fixed, it is fluid. Readers can be editors (beta readers) and can increase the circulation of the text through their own networks: accentuating the role of the reader in social authorship. (121)

With the rise of digital literature comes the increase of visible real-time interactivity, which allows for new dynamics of conversation, review, feedback and community building that challenge traditional notions of readership and literary engagement (Pianzola). Below, I outline Digital Social Reading (DSR) and reader-response theory. My outline draws on scholarship from Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, Cagri Tugrul Mart, Zenep Tenger and Paul Trolander, Simone Rebora and Federico Pianzola and Lizelle Bisschoff.

My analysis of the comments on *Wattpad* and *fundza.mobi* is framed by reader-response theory. According to Mart, reader-response theory defines meaning-making as “constructed through a transaction between the reader and the text within a particular context” (Mart 78). This approach is based on the premise that literature takes place in a mutual relationship between reader and text when the reader demystifies literature and relates it to their own individual experiences. Although the readers of the text have not experienced what the characters are experiencing, they interpret it from a point of their own lived experiences and how the narrative might look in their lives. While reader-response theory is primarily used in classroom literature, it is relevant to my research.

Readers engage with texts in two primary ways, constructing meaning through either an aesthetic or an efferent stance (Schieble, qtd. in Mart 81). The aesthetic reader engages deeply with the text, appreciating the nuances of emotions, ideas, situations, and characters that

emerge, and actively participates in the dramatic arc of the narrative, experiencing the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions as they unfold (81-82). Analysing this type of reader engagement involves examining the reader's personal experience and emotional connection to the text. The efferent approach provides a framework for readers to construct meaning, guiding them to extract a clear and definitive interpretation from the text. For example, in most *fundza.mobi* texts, there are questions for readers to answer at the end of each part or chapter. Analysis of efferent readers involves extracting the knowledge, associations, and connections that readers bring to and take away from the reading process.

Digital platforms offer insight into the reader's experiences in real-time, and as a result, analysing comments can aid in demonstrating how readers can influence the process and outcomes of online writing. My analysis of comments on *fundza.mobi* and *Wattpad* demonstrate that in digital literature, the reader becomes an integral part of the text. The reader is not separate from the environment (the text), but the reader and the text act as a "total event" (Mart 79). In this way, comments add another layer to the text. When new readers encounter the text, it is not just the author's words they are reading; readers can also interpret the text with other readers' responses in mind. This is the digital version of social reading. Federico Piazola defines social reading as "the encounter of thoughts, impressions and opinions of another person in relation to reading activity" (para. 2). While social reading has always existed – in the form of book club discussions, browsing reviews to find a new book to read or reading companions for complex texts, the digital aspect adds a new layer of understanding. Piazola argues that social reading is not just about discussions or reviews, it "is [also] about the influence that someone's experience of reading a book (or a specific part of it) can have on another person's reading experience" (Piazola para. 2). For example, On *Wattpad*, "Writers can submit their book in a piecemeal way and receive feedback on each chapter or part" (Bold 120). Writers may consider readers' opinions on the plot, character development or direction of the story as they write new chapters and upload them. This impacts how readers who come across the story later will encounter it. As noted by Bisschoff, "digital technologies have further broken down the boundaries between artist and audience and often promote a form of interactivity" (263). Readers contribute to the text in ways that can change it completely - becoming 'wreaders' as coined by George P. Landow in his book *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*.

At the heart of understanding online readers is Digital Social Reading (hereafter DSR). In the introduction to his book *Digital Social Reading*, Piazola defines DSR as the practice of reading and sharing thoughts, impressions, and opinions about texts using digital technologies

and platforms such as websites and social media. This includes activities like reviewing, rating, annotating, and commenting on texts. While the term ‘DSR’ does not fully capture the extent of online writing and self-publishing, it highlights the importance of social interactions and sharing around reading experiences (para. 3). There are several studies that either theorise DSR or demonstrate using DSR as a framework for analysis. Simone Rebora et al. outline such studies. Lauer, Kraxenberger, Gasser and Sorrentino explore DSR by examining how *Wattpad*, *Archive of Our Own* and *Fanfiktio.n.de* facilitate social interactions around reading. They also conducted surveys to understand reader’s “practices, motivations, and social interactions with each other” (ii241). Herrmann, Messerli and Rebora assess LovelyBooks, a large-scale review platform to show the relationship between users’ written reviews and their corresponding star ratings. Their analysis challenges positivity bias in online reviews by revealing a non-intuitive association between sentiment and ratings; with positive sentiment being overrepresented in five-star reviews and underrepresented in lower-rated reviews (ii240-ii241). Kuijpers, Rebora, and Lendvai’s research explores DSR using a tool developed in empirical literary studies to annotate Goodreads reviews and investigate the experience of story world absorption. Story world absorption is a multi-faceted experience that includes deep attention, emotional engagement, and mental imagery. The researchers used manual annotation and machine learning to analyse a corpus of 1,025 reviews and found that different genres (fantasy, romance, and thriller) elicited different dimensions of absorption, with romance novels evoking the most emotional engagement and thrillers evoking the most attention and mental imagery. The study demonstrates the potential of combining methods from natural language processing and empirical literary studies to extend research on topics like absorption and provides a new approach to studying reading experiences in a data-driven way (ii243-ii244). In 2018 Rebora and Pianzola used a sentiment analysis software called Syuzhet to analyse comments collected across multiple classic and teen fiction texts. Their goal was to determine whether readers were responding positively or negatively to certain parts of texts. Using Rosenblatt’s theorisation on transactional reader-response theory, they looked at the connection between textual features or specific parts of texts and the readers’ responses. In 2020, Rebora and Pianzola, along with Gerhard Lauer, conducted a further study. This research collected additional data to explore how reader engagement varied across genres (comparing total reads, votes, and comments in Classical literature versus Teen fiction), the emotional responses of readers, and their thematic interests. They also looked for “variations in the engagement with the stories over time” (3) and tracked different users to see how much they were reading and if they were engaging with the same users across different books. Analysing the comments in this way helped them to gain

a better understanding of the reasons why certain texts were popular. The data collected comprised 381,473 readers (Rebora, Pianzola and Lauer 6), compared to the 32 users or reader comments I will analyse from both *Wattpad* and *fundza.mobi*. This is important to mention because it shows the difference in the scale of data that I have available.

My goal with this study is to demonstrate how readers interact with texts meaningfully as individuals. Analysing individual comments also allows me to add to my investigation of how young people represent themselves online. Even if the comments are short, they reveal something about the readers and their engagement with the texts. The comments also reveal how writers and readers might interact with each other online.

1.4 Counter-storytelling in African Literature for Young Adults

The phenomenon of counter-storytelling moves marginalised youth from being side-lined and misrepresented in mainstream fiction to being the focal point in narratives about youth and young adults. In this section, I define counter-storytelling and outline how I will develop the concept in my thesis. I argue that, by their very existence as multicultural narratives that represent the experiences of young adults in Africa, the texts I have chosen are a form of counter-storytelling.

Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso define counter-storytelling as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (26). The concept was introduced by Richard Delgado as part of critical race theory. His main argument is that counter-stories “quicken and engage the conscience,” stirring the “imagination in ways in which discourse that is more conventional cannot” (qtd. in Hughes Hassell 215). Counter-stories aim to challenge accepted premises or myths, especially those held by the majority. They offer perspectives that help readers to understand what life is like for others and invite the reader to enter an unfamiliar world. Most importantly, counter-storytelling benefits readers from races and cultures who previously have not seen themselves represented in YAL.

Throughout my analysis, I will refer to four purposes of counter-storytelling listed by Sandra Hughes Hassel. Multicultural literature serves as a counter-storytelling tool to do the following:

1. It gives voice to teens whose voices have gone unheard and whose lives are at best underrepresented, but more often misrepresented, in the mainstream discourse.
2. It challenges the single story, providing “a powerful space of affirmation” and validation (Buehler 2010, 43).
3. It presents the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation.

4. It challenges readers whose lives have been shaped by race and privilege to consider how the world looks to groups of people that have traditionally been marginalized and oppressed, raising awareness of the inequalities those individuals face on a daily basis. (215)

I have adopted these counter-storytelling purposes as a framework to analyse how young Africans write about their experiences and lives. Counter-stories contribute to discontinuing “the single story” that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke about in her 2009 TED talk, “The danger of a single story”. With a single story, young readers would “not know that people like [them] could exist in literature” (Adichie), but with counter-stories, they see themselves and their experiences in literature, which validates and affirms their lives. The creation of counter-stories also creates room for more stories that defy stereotypes, pre-existing ideas and misrepresentations. In his essay, “How to write about Africa”, Binyavanga Wainaina describes simplistic and reductionist representations of African people. These kinds of representations are damaging and erase the diversity and complexity of African experiences. Counter-stories, then, by representing and highlighting the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation, do the work of better representing African lives and experiences. They also challenge writers and readers whose lives have been shaped by privilege to engage in introspection and interrogate their assumptions, privileges and biases.

Counter-storytelling also disrupts prescriptive storytelling. In the editorial note of *JAY Lit*’s second issue, Bronwyn Bowles-King shares an anecdote that speaks to moving beyond prescriptive storytelling:

For this issue, I received some odd submissions. One was a collection from a person from a ‘developed’ nation (unconvinced of this ‘developed’ notion, but you get the idea). It was well-intentioned, but we must make it clear what this Journal is for: preserving African youth identities as they are. We are not interested in sermons on how African youths ought to comport themselves. We are interested in what youths want to tell us through their creative works rather than what they ‘should’ be told. We also welcome encouraging, positive pieces that speak to current youth concerns in creative ways. Please talk to us, not at us. (Bowles-King)

JAY Lit’s motto is to preserve African youth identities as they are. This means allowing a range of stories from different African countries, perspectives and experiences. The journal is about showcasing young adults’ lives and experiences creatively, in a way that inspires conversations about how youth experience life here and now. Implicit in the person’s submission is an attitude of privilege and the assumption that they know better; firstly, in representing themselves as a person from a ‘developed nation’ and then in writing in such a way that tells African youths

how they should conduct themselves. By choosing to omit these collections and writing about them, Bowles-King and her editorial team were able to reiterate the importance of conversation, positive representation, and a nuanced understanding of what it means to be a young adult in Africa.

Young writers have flocked to the internet because it is a place where they can speak and tell their stories on their terms. These stories range from narratives that focus on their own experiences to narratives that intertwine the past with their current experiences. In an essay about the *Agenda of African Literature in the Digital Age*, Adenekan argues that literature in the online space presents the African artist as “a reporter of events and recorder of history, without neglecting the fact that he or she is also an entertainer” (141). Although his discussion focuses on Nigerian and Kenyan writers, I would argue that his words are true for writing by and for young adults on *Wattpad*, *JAY Lit* and *fundza.mobi*. Adenekan argues that online literature can serve as “reliable evidence of some of the changes and challenges facing contemporary Africa” (61) since fictional characters represent these themes in their statements and behaviours, as well as in the writer’s positions as cultural ambassadors of emerging literary voices—whether they claim these positions themselves or whether the position of ambassador is implicit in their representation of certain characters and themes. *JAY Lit*, *fundza.mobi* and *Wattpad* are platforms where the writers implicitly record history and represent contemporary Africa in ways that fulfil the purposes of counter-storytelling.

In the introduction, I mentioned that this study explores representations of youth and young adults in digital fiction written in Africa. This study takes a dual approach, examining YAL in the specific context of South Africa while also exploring the literary works of young writers from Nigeria. It is, therefore, important to define what I mean by “young adult literature” and “young writers”. Michael Cart describes young adult literature as “a notably restless art, a dynamic, risk-taking literature that grows and changes as its context – culture and society – changes. It is, accordingly, a happy exercise in innovation -- and evolution” (para. 1). As a genre that caters to and reflects the lives of young adults, YAL is inherently dynamic and responsive to the changing needs and experiences of its audience. Like digital literature, it is subject to ongoing evolution and transformation. However, one enduring characteristic of YAL is its commitment to addressing the issues and concerns that are most pertinent to the lives of young people. Here it is important to define what I mean by youth or young adults. The intended reader or audience for YAL is teenagers from 13 to nineteen and young adults from twenty to twenty-five (Cart), although some adults do read YAL. Deborah Lindsay Williams explains that adults write YAL, are involved in the publishing and are often “buying for

themselves almost as frequently as they buy for the teenaged readers in their lives” (3). Its relatability, stemming from the universal experience of adolescence, contributes to YAL’s success.

YAL is often described as a developmental literature, since it recognises the fact that young adults are “beings in transition, in search of self...morphing from the condition of childhood to that of adulthood” (Cart para. 49). YAL thus explores the complexities of the transition into adulthood. Some of the key characteristics of YAL include a protagonist between 12 and 18 years old, navigating themes of identity, self-discovery, and transition to adulthood. The genre often features realistic and relatable stories, with a focus on relationships, identity, culture, and social justice (see Trites 1998). YAL is often written in a contemporary, conversational style, with a strong narrative voice and perspective. These characteristics combined create stories that reflect the experiences and concerns of contemporary teenagers. However, these characteristics are not exhaustive, and not all YAL will have all of these traits.

This chapter provides a general definition of YAL, which will be further contextualised and explored in relation to the South African context in Chapter 4, where I will examine the case of *fundza.mobi*. The stories from *Wattpad* and *JAY Lit* do not fall under YAL but have been written by young African writers.

1.5 Chapter Outline

In this chapter, I have presented and outlined digital literature in Africa, outlined counter-storytelling and discussed reader-response theory. I defined key terms such as ‘the online space’ and ‘digital social reading’. I place emphasis on young adults and how they represent themselves in the online space because I consider them recorders of history as Adenekan says. They help us to understand and see what is happening in the world through narrative.

A detailed explanation of how each platform works will be presented in subsequent chapters. The overarching argument is that digital literature in Africa represents a powerful means of artistic expression and a way for young African voices to be heard in the literary landscape through counter-storytelling.

Although I do not focus extensively on the differences between *Wattpad*, *fundza.mobi* and *JAY Lit*, it is interesting to see how online writing manifests in different contexts with different goals and ideas. All three platforms allow me to trace the development of online literature on different scales and allow for an analysis that considers different styles of writing, themes and subjectivities affected by context and geography. As a result, my textual analysis factors in the historical and geographical contexts of each writer. Each chapter will have a short

theoretical framework in addition to this framework on account of the difference in theories that apply to each platform. Some theories and concepts that apply in one chapter might be different in another.

In Chapter Two I will provide an in-depth analysis of Ibrahim's short story "When the Sun Is Up". I examine how Ibrahim uses counter-storytelling as a narrative tool to expose and subvert what Bill Hughes terms the non-disabled imaginary. I also explore the story's alternative representation of a character with albinism and investigate how that representation shows the effects of psycho-emotional disablism. This short story is also an example of how the digital space allows young adults to create stories that portray different subjectivities. In Chapter Three, I examine Kalu's short story "Inter-Tribal Union" from the anthology *The Song of Us* as a counter-story in its representation of an interfaith relationship and sacrificial love. In Chapter Four I explore *fundza.mobi* as a platform that focuses on counter-storytelling. I analyse several short stories namely "In Search of Greener Pastures" by Oyama Comba, "Unlocked" by Akhona Mlenga, "The Hard Life" by Philane Ndabe, "Reneilwe" by Mogale Kgashane" and "I Will Find My Way" by Zukiswa Pakama" that depict rural-to-urban migration. I also investigate how the fairy-tale romance trope is used as a plot device to expose violence and patriarchy. The key points and content of this thesis are briefly summarised in Chapter Five, along with a reflection on digital platforms in Africa

Chapter Two: Counter-Storytelling in *JAY Lit*: Exploring the Non-disabled Imaginary and Bodymind in Ibrahim's "When the Sun Is Up"

2.1 Introduction and Context

In the first chapter, I introduced digital literature and YAL. I also defined counter-storytelling and discussed the ways that young African writers are using the digital space to represent their experiences. It is within this broad framework that I would like to situate my analysis of the short story, "When the Sun Is Up" by Ibrahim Babátúndé Ibrahim. I argue that Ibrahim uses counter-storytelling as a narrative tool to expose and subvert what Bill Hughes terms the non-disabled imaginary. I also draw on the concept of bodymind by Margaret Price to argue that the story's alternative representation of a character with albinism shows the effects of psycho-emotional disablism. This short story is also an example of how the digital space allows young adults to create stories that portray different subjectivities. My approach to reading this short story is framed by disability studies, affect theory and counter-storytelling. I start the chapter by unpacking said theories in a short theoretical framework and then provide an analysis of the short story. In my analysis I begin by examining the character Chuka; I read his character as one used by the author to subvert and resist the non-disabled imaginary and to show the pervasiveness of discrimination. I then move on to an analysis of the protagonist and discuss how her inner self represents a unique subjectivity but also shows the effects of psycho-emotional and social disablism.

"When the Sun Is Up" was published in 2021 in the first issue of *JAY Lit*. Set in a fictitious Nigerian high school, the story's protagonist is a teenage girl with albinism. She struggles to fit in because her schoolmates either ignore her, or mock and taunt her because she has albinism. When a new boy with albinism comes to the school, he helps her to stand up for herself and disprove the stereotype about her eyesight that is spread around the school.

Ibrahim Babátúndé Ibrahim is a Nigerian writer who lives in the United Kingdom. He is a writer, editor, and *JAY Lit*'s Africa Talent Liaison and Nigerian Ambassador. Most of his work explores "the human experience from an African perspective" (Akram para. 3). In an interview with Tahzeeb Akram from *Brittle Paper*, Ibrahim says,

Sometimes I look at these situations and people and wonder who tells the stories therein. All stories matter, right? That should also mean that we need as much representation as possible, and this goes beyond the classifications that we already have. That [*sic*] are

too many situations that don't actually have assured spaces in our classifications, even though they seem to do, but they are some people's lived experiences too, which makes them a part of our collective possibilities and awareness. I'm intrigued by these experiences. I love to explore them and make stories out of them. It's my way of reminding people that life is bigger than our individual realities. (para. 27)

Ibrahim places importance on representing people's actual lived experiences through storytelling. Although members of society may be aware of social issues or circumstances, they may not always understand them from a personal point of view. Writing in a way that represents people's lived experiences raises awareness of the possibilities and realities of society as a whole. For this reason, most of the stories he writes stem from the need to understand people's circumstances. For example, in his short story "This is the End", he portrays a young man who has been struggling with mental health issues and suicidal ideation.

Ibrahim always wanted to be a writer but was forced to pursue a science degree. After his tertiary education, he worked in the Nigerian media industry from 2009 to 2019, after which he returned to writing (Akram). To date, he has written several prize-winning short stories. He placed second for "Folding Time" in the #GogeAfrica20 Writing Contest in 2020 and fourth for "Other Side of the Coin" in the *Ibua Journal's* Pack Light Series. In 2021, his unpublished collection of short stories, *Dear Descendant(s)*, reached the longlist for the Dzanc Diverse Voices Prize and finished as a finalist at the Moon City Fiction Prize. He was longlisted for the 2022 Commonwealth Short Story Prize and received an honourable mention for the 2022 Laura Kinsella Fellowship (Ibrahim). Ibrahim was also awarded the Quramo Writer's prize for his unpublished manuscript *Giveaway Bride (Omonigo)*.

As mentioned above, Ibrahim is one of the editors of *JAY Lit*, a journal under a non-profit project of the same name that was started by Bronwyn Bowles-King with the help of Diona Stević Marinko, Kelly Maroon, Lwandile Ngendane, Ibrahim Babátundé Ibrahim, Sandesh Baiju and Jo-Anne King. *JAY Lit*, the journal, is a multilingual literary and creative arts periodical that publishes creative writing, prose (stories and narratives), plays, visual stories (photo essays, graphic and comic artwork) as well as artworks by young African writers and artists. Readers can access the journal on the *JAY Lit* website using their mobile devices and computers. To download the PDF version of the journal, users have to subscribe to *JAY Lit's* newsletter; then the download file will become available. All of the previous issues are on the Internet Archive website and are available for download in multiple formats including EPUB or eBook formats.

JAY Lit's hashtag is #AfricanStoriesMatter, and their motto Preserving African Youth Identities. On *JAY Lit*'s website they write:

One of our primary aims is to promote Pan-Africanism among a new generation of African peoples who want to make a decisive break from the often painful histories of Africa. We mourn the past, learning from the mistakes, but, most importantly, we move on and join together to create a better future for the children of Africa everywhere. (About para. 8)

The desire to make a break from painful histories, tell stories that represent current African youth identities and create better images of Africa than what has been seen before are a common thread within youth literature that is found online. In Chapter Three, I discuss these themes in relation to *Wattpad* writer Mercy Kalu's anthology *The Song of Us*. One of the ways that writers are using digital forms of writing to their advantage is through freedom of expression. The online space provides room for diverse and unique voices and subjectivities, which means that writers are free to explore certain themes in new ways without being afraid to go against the grain of typical narratives and without the burden of censorship or the fear that their work may not be received favourably. Furthermore, the online space allows for narratives about people who have been previously marginalised. In Ibrahim's story "When the Sun Is Up", the marginalised people represented are young adults with albinism.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

In this section, I establish my theoretical framework, drawing on disability studies, affect theory, the concept of bodymind, and counter-storytelling.

2.2.1 Defining Disability Studies, Affect Theory and Bodymind.

One of the ways I frame my analysis of Ibrahim's short story is by drawing from disability studies. Disability studies provide a framework for my analysis of albinism, which I argue can be understood through the lens of (dis)ability. As will be explained in further detail below, the parenthetical adjustment from disability to (dis)ability calls attention to the ways people with disabilities are often treated in relation to non-disabled people. Disability studies examine how (dis)ability can be understood as a socially constructed phenomenon, as well as the systemic social discourse which determines how certain bodies, minds and behaviours are characterised, represented, and treated (see Ferguson and Nusbaum 2012; Watson and Vehmas 2019). The field of disability studies was established in American Universities by disability advocates and

academics. Crucial to the development of disability studies was the disabled people's movement that began in 1969. The demand for inclusion within policymaking and development influenced the way that the field seeks to "unpack and explore the lives of disabled people" (Watson and Vehmas 3). Disability studies initially emerged as a field primarily based in the social sciences. Colin Barnes gives a summary of the origins of the social model of disability studies. Previously, academic and scholarly interest in disability was limited to individualistic and conventional medical explanations. The social model of disability studies prioritised involving disabled people instead of pathologizing them in its theorisation. The social model

suggests that if societies were set up and constructed in a way that was accessible for people with disabilities, those individuals would not be restricted from full participation in the world around them. In other words, the social model of disability views the origins of disability as the mental attitudes and physical structures of society rather than a medical condition faced by an individual. (Buder and Perry para. 5)

The social model redefined disability, shifting the focus from individual impairment to societal barriers. Before, impairment was considered the only cause of disability. It was a medical issue that needed a cure for the condition and modification of the behaviour of individuals with a disability. In 1976, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) made a distinction between biological disability and social disability. The biological definition of disability referred to impairment, whether physical, cognitive or sensory, while the social definition referred to (dis)ability, or the disadvantage of restriction of activity brought on by contemporary social organisations or structures which do not recognise people who have impairments and thus exclude them from participating in the majority of social activities (Barnes 16). For Barnes, an advocate for the social model, this was a starting point for what would become disability studies as a whole. However, there are limitations to the social model theory. These limitations and gaps were filled and expanded on by postmodernist scholars such as Margrit Shildrick, as well as feminist scholars Donna Reeve, Carol Thomas, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Ana Bê. These theories will be outlined below.

One of the debates around the social model is that it has become de-radicalised and does little to produce a direct challenge to the systems created by the worldviews that support the discrimination of disabled people (one of which is a capitalist neoliberal worldview). Barnes states that critics argue that there is a shift "away from the primacy of economic forces in the creation of disablement towards a politically benign focus on culture, language and discourse" (Barnes 24). According to Dikaïos Sakellariou and Elena S. Rotaru, in the neoliberal

discourse, “disabled people are often viewed as *costly bodies* who use up limited healthcare resources or as potentially *financially burdensome* [sic]” (3) since neoliberal systems emphasise a free market instead of the right to health.² The outcome is that in countries like Chile or Greece policies were created that negatively evaluate people with disabilities or obstruct people with disabilities from receiving adequate assistance or care (Sakellariou and Rotaru 3). Although the social model challenges how society understands disability, it does not dismiss the practical importance of assistance and reforms to improve the lives of people with disabilities. I would argue that it is not politically benign. In the digital space, where young people spend most of their time, there needs to be continuous conversation to understand how disability is influenced by culture, language and discourse. This focus on discourse and language also includes critical disability studies (CDS), a new field which has risen from postmodernist thinking about disability and defining disability. Margrit Shildrick explains that Critical Disability Studies, “challenges every one of us to rethink the relations between disabled and non-disabled designations – not just ethically as has long been the demand, but ontologically right at the heart of the whole question of self and other” (32). Furthermore,

Many people who live with bodily differences do not consider themselves disabled and the naming of disability itself varies depending on the context (D/deaf people are not disabled where everyone signs). From a constructionist perspective, then, the meaning of disability is slippery, multiple, and temporary – in other words, it cannot be fixed. Because the meanings of bodily variation themselves vary depending upon context, it is difficult, if not impossible, to set clear boundaries between what counts as disabled and non-disabled. (Rice et al. 518)

People who have impairments do not consider themselves disabled in the way that able-bodied people perceive them to be. Shildrick argues that disability is contextual; if someone with impairments is accommodated in society, their experience of life would not be consumed by navigating the obstacles created by that society. As discussed above, rethinking disability involves questioning why different body variations still mean that a person occupies an exceptional or marginal place, instead of being part of multiple possibilities of human embodiment. Shildrick also argues for a nuanced approach in defining difference and disability, especially since it is an intersectional concern; “[a]s opposed to examining gender, race, class, and nation as separate systems of oppression, intersectionality explores how these systems mutually construct one another...” (Hill Collins 63). Furthermore, definitions of disability vary across countries and cultures. In the African context, understanding disability includes more

² Emphasis in original.

than just impairment (whether physical or intellectual). Ken Junior Lipenga argues for considering people's own experience of disability and what is disabling in their world rather than sticking to a strict universal definition. In this way, cultural beliefs and traditions that contribute to the life experiences of disabled people are considered. Acknowledging that definitions of disability vary in different cultures and countries "permits countries to develop models of intervention and care based on their contexts" (Lipenga 16).

Although people have tended to discount CDS because it leans towards abstract concepts instead of actual lived experiences, it is important because questioning and deconstructing the definition of disability could radically change the way that the law, policy and cultural relations are conducted. Thus, in line with my chosen approach, there are terms and ways of explaining the text that I will use going forward which come from these theories. One of these terms is (dis)ability. Schalk explains that using the word disability without the parenthetical adjustment would only refer to disability and impairment. Using the parentheses highlights "the mutual dependency of disability and ability to define one another" (Schalk 6). In relation to (dis)ability, Schalk argues that disabled people are often viewed in relation to able-bodied people. It is their difference that makes them disabled, and this difference is then used to justify how they are treated. This, in part, is the reason why I consider albinism a (dis)ability in my analysis of the text. In the text, the protagonist is a person with albinism. Nathalie Wan, in her sociological study of stigmatization associated with albinism, argues that "much of the prejudice toward people with albinism stems from fear of an unknown condition" (278). She also explains that "Certain physical characteristics elicit fear because the etiology of the attribute or disorder is unknown, unpredictable, and unexpected" (278). This unfamiliarity breeds stigma and turns into the marginalization of people with albinism in societies. The stigmatization and discrimination that people face is disabling and crippling. It affects education, employment and the quality of medical care.

People with albinism are usually as healthy as everyone else and develop and grow at the same rate. The visual impairment that occurs as a result of the lack of pigment in the skin and eyes is what medically classifies albinism as a (dis)ability. Visual impairments in people with albinism can range from poor depth perception, nystagmus and far/near-sightedness to astigmatism, photophobia and myopia or legal blindness (Kirkham et al. 745). People with albinism also face other health challenges related to their skin. They are more susceptible to skin cancer without adequate sun protection and too much exposure to the sun. In my reading of the text, I argue that Ibrahim focuses on the ways society can be the agent of disablement.

The effects of the discrimination that disabled people experience translate to what Carol Thomas refers to as disablism. Thomas defines disablism (which is a social-relational concept), as “a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being” (73). Donna Reeve details the ways that psycho-emotional disablism affects people. Although psycho-emotional disablism occurs both directly and indirectly, most relevant to my analysis is the direct effect of psycho-emotional disablism. The direct effects of psycho-emotional disablism include othering or avoidance from able-bodied people, disavowal and rejection of impaired bodies, othering and avoidance of disabled people, ontological invalidation and self-invalidation (Reeve 103-105). It is here that I will discuss ontological invalidation in relation to (dis)ability. This will be important in my discussion and analysis of “When the Sun Is Up”. Ontology uses categories to separate existing things to better understand how they fit or relate with each other in the world. When it comes to (dis)ability, the social distancing that is associated with fear is projected into making existence about binaries and hierarchy. Disabled bodies are pushed lower down in the hierarchy. Bill Hughes argues that

the ontological insecurity of non-disabled identity is the original sin that pushes disabled people to the margins of the human community. Disability is not an outcome of the infraction of social norms about ‘normalcy’ but a product of the failure of carnal normalcy to take proper account of itself, to indulge in ‘bad faith’ and delude itself into thinking that it is exempt from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. The problem rests with the normative body that does not want to be reminded of its own vulnerability or to admit that abjection and death is its fate. In this context the disabled body is troublesome because it ‘exposes the illusion of autonomy, self-government and self-determination that underpins the fantasy of absolute able bodiedness’ (Thomson, 1997, p. 45). (681)

Hughes attributes ontological invalidation to the normative body’s inability to accept that we are all vulnerable to misfortune that could cause impairment or death. The disabled body becomes one that symbolises the loss of autonomy and agency associated with able bodiedness. This can manifest as fear and distancing- in attempts to rid society of its vulnerabilities. He also explains how (dis)ability “is assumed to be ontologically intolerable, that is, inherently negative [when it comes to] the ableist talk of normalcy, normalization and humanness” (Hughes 681). This results in the negative and invalidating ways that disabled people are treated, and results in harm to the ‘psycho-emotional well-being’ of disabled people. Psycho-emotional disablism is linked to the non-disabled imaginary, a term used by Hughes to describe

the negative emotions about disabled people that populate the minds of non-disabled people. Bill Hughes calls the emotions that people feel towards disabled people “the non-disabled imaginary” (89). I will draw on Hughes’ theorisation of the non-disabled imaginary in the first part of my analysis of “When the Sun Is Up”.

In addition to the idea of the non-disabled imaginary, I am also interested in how it relates to affect theory. Here, I will draw on Sara Ahmed’s theorisations of emotions. In Ahmed’s book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she explores the idea of the movement of emotions between people. She argues that emotions are not something that come from within and move out towards objects or other people. Rather, emotions are socially mediated, linked to historical processes and the ways in which certain viewpoints have come to be valued. Emotion precedes the subject; subjects or objects can arrive into the world with feelings and associations already attached to them without having done anything (Schmitz and Ahmed 98). This chapter demonstrates the importance of considering emotions in the representation of (dis)ability by analysing how the story portrays characters’ value judgments about people with albinism.

The building blocks of the non-disabled imaginary are fear, pity, and disgust; emotions that constitute the fabric of ableism. Ahmed explains fear as an emotion that works to restrict some bodies through the movement or expansion of others. Fear creates distance between bodies, and this distance is enforced by stereotypes. As an emotion that is part of the non-disabled imaginary, fear does not come only from within individuals but is an emotion in constant movement; circulated throughout history (Ahmed 62-65). The production of certain objects, or subjects as something to be feared depends on history and past associations. Ahmed states that “the object we fear is not simply before us, or in front of us, but impresses upon us in the present, as an anticipated pain in the future” (65). When it comes to the fear of disabled people, the pain is the discomfort, fear and anxiety about the precariousness of a person’s own being, and the vulnerabilities we experience as people. Hughes explains this in his discussion of non-disabled fear:

A negative and aversive reaction to the presence of disability is, in part, fear about the precariousness of one’s own being and the vulnerabilities of our ephemeral flesh. For Kierkegaard, fear is ‘of’ something in the world and anguish is horror of the self as freedom in the face of nothingness. The misrecognition and disrespect – not to mention segregation and oppression – that disabled people suffer at the hands of their non-disabled counterparts is a form of violence bred from our fear of and anguish about our alienation from the human condition whereby being human is simultaneously a facet of self and other. The feeling of anguish with respect to others is indivisible from the

feeling of disgust for oneself but in an ableist culture these feelings become separated. The body beautiful creates its eugenic opposite and proceeds to tyrannise the forms of physical and mental difference that are products of its own existential insecurity. (91)

Hughes argues that fear breeds violence that is expressed as segregation, oppression and discrimination. Similarly, good deeds or philanthropic acts that are performed out of pity are another way that distance is created between disabled and non-disabled people. Pity puts certain labels on people who are disabled; historically they have not been considered fully fledged persons or citizens and are dependent on the goodness and help of others to survive. Hughes argues that pity makes the non-disabled person benevolent and good, but is an act of othering and distancing because, ultimately, it takes the sense of agency from disabled people. Pity “makes disabled people good to be good to” and disgust [that occurs as a result of unchecked fear] “makes disabled people good to mistreat” (Hughes 96). Hughes also explains that when someone feels disgust towards an ‘other’ it also brings feelings of superiority. Disgust becomes a harsh value judgement and turns intellectual and physical differences into moral offences. One of the main points of my discussion of “When the Sun Is Up” is that some of the characters behave in ways that reflect the non-disabled imaginary; the mistreatment of the protagonist is rooted in fear.

The second part of my analysis will be framed by Margaret Price’s conceptualisation of bodymind. According to Price, the body and mind are usually understood as parts that interact with each other and are connected, but distinct from each other (270). Bodymind can also be used to show the “imbrication of mind and body, sometimes in extreme or explicitly apparent ways that do not exist in our reality” (Schalk 5). As mentioned earlier, one of the aims of disability studies is to “unpack and explore the lives of disabled people” (Watson and Vehmas 3). In her chapter titled “The Future of Bodyminds, Bodyminds of the Future” Schalk argues that “One’s experience of a disability is not only about physical and mental manifestations but also about one’s environment and the interaction between *bodymind* and society” (96). Drawing from Price’s understanding of bodymind, I show how the female protagonist experiences symptoms of psychosocial disablism by withdrawing from social activities, and through the creation of a second self.

2.2.2 Defining Counter-Storytelling and Outlining the Representation of People with Albinism

In the discussion above, I have unpacked the non-disabled imaginary using disability studies and affect theory. I argue that it is important to understand the workings of the emotions that

constitute the non-disabled imaginary. Equally important is understanding how the distribution of these emotions among communities can lead to the invalidation of disabled people's lives. The non-disabled imaginary also affects the way that people are represented, which often ends up in stereotypical portrayals of (dis)ability, and in this case, albinism. In my analysis of "When the Sun Is Up", I will show how the emotions fear, pity and disgust are not just individual feelings but are also situated in social, historical and cultural contexts and representation.

According to Lipenga, "representations of disabled subjects are always infused with particular ideologies and carry the baggage of existing traditions or habits of depiction and response" (14). I am interested in counter-storytelling because it advocates against using stereotypical and discriminatory representations. Before I turn my attention to the short story, I will draw on Sandra Hughes-Hassell's definition of counter-storytelling to discuss the representation of characters with albinism. Hughes-Hassell defines counter-storytelling as a "method of telling the stories of people whose experiences are not often told" (215). The aim of counter-storytelling is to challenge stereotypes, give voice to marginalised people and present the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation. This thesis considers the youth especially, because in some cases their voices are marginalised. As mentioned above Hughes-Hassell gives four purposes of counter-storytelling. Firstly, counter-storytelling gives voice to teens whose experiences tend to be underrepresented and misrepresented. Secondly, counter-storytelling challenges the notion of a 'single story' and provides a space of affirmation and validation. Thirdly, it "presents the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation" (215). Lastly, counter-storytelling challenges people who are privileged to consider the worldviews and experiences of inequality affecting people who have traditionally been oppressed and marginalised (215). I am interested in the first and fourth purposes of counter-storytelling for my analysis of "When the Sun Is Up".

The first purpose highlights how the voices and perspectives of some youth have historically been marginalised. In the past, YAL and literature directed at the youth was mostly for educational purposes. Considering a young person's perspective in a narrative then opens the space for the youth to be understood on their own terms, not in ways that they 'should be' according to adults. Hughes-Hassell later uses the fourth purpose in her article to discuss white privilege, but I will draw on it to discuss how the main character of the short story is marginalised and oppressed by the people around her not based on race, but because she has albinism. I argue that the short story is counter-storytelling in the narrative technique used; the story shows how the world might look to a person with albinism and illustrates how discrimination and prejudiced attitudes permeate society.

I will now provide some context on albinism in Africa in general and then turn my attention to Nigeria. Historically, narratives about people with albinism which stem from a lack of understanding of the causes of the condition have resulted in exclusion and ostracization. In some communities, cultural myths and superstitions, people with albinism are “considered by some individuals and communities to have special abilities, to be able to communicate with the spirit world or cure HIV AIDS” (Baker and Lund 3).

In response to a wave of attacks in Tanzania that spread to neighbouring African countries from 2006, the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) adopted Resolution 23/13 in 2013 which calls for the prevention of attacks and discrimination against people with albinism. Re-education and awareness campaigns in an effort to change the way people view albinism (see United Nations 2022; Mohamed Daghar 2022) resulted in lessened discrimination, violence and demonisation of people living with albinism.³ However, there are still places like Madagascar where people with albinism are being hunted because of myths and superstitions in impoverished communities. In other places like Nigeria, where there are no longer physical threats, people with albinism still face discrimination in their communities (see Hamalwa 2022; Musiyarira 2022).

Before Resolution 23/13, novels that featured people with albinism included *Because Pula Means Rain* (1998) by Jenny Robson, *Takadini* (1997) by Ben Josiah Hanson and *The Book of Chameleons* (2008) by José Eduardo Agualusa. The stories released after the resolution include *Zebra Crossing* (2013) by Meg Vandermerwe and the children’s story *Moon, Shining Bright* (2015) by Sulaikah Theis and Anneloes Versteeg. Considering that most of the stories mentioned above are based in the Southern African region, “When the Sun Is Up” stands out because it is one of the first narratives from West Africa that has a teenage protagonist with albinism.⁴

According to the Albino Foundation of Nigeria, there is still a high level of discrimination towards people with albinism. The Albino Foundation of Nigeria also reported that a study in 2014 showed that 41% of people with albinism in Nigeria suffer from mental health issues (Jaiyeola). In 2021, Yemi Osinbajo, then Vice President of Nigeria gave a speech at a virtual event on World Albinism Day. He emphasised the need for conversations around

³ On the 13th of June (International Albinism Awareness Day), the United Nations holds an annual awareness campaign.

The Albinism Society of South Africa (ASSA) hosts annual awareness campaigns in September (Albinism Awareness Month in South Africa)

⁴ Two other official texts are the novel *ColourSTRUCK* by Uzoma Uponi and the digital comic *UNDER THE SUN* by Austine Osas.

the empowerment and protection of people with albinism in Nigeria, saying that Nigeria should “aggressively begin to present counter-narratives to the socio-cultural misconceptions about albinism” (Albinism: Nigerians must abandon superstition – Osinbajo para. 6). In addition to Ibrahim’s focus on a teenage character, his style of writing is unique in that he focuses on the inner world of a character while criticising the society in which she lives. Baker and Lund note that “the representation of albinism in works of fiction tends to be highly stereotypical, and the qualities of albinism are typically exaggerated to identify characters with albinism as deviant or strange” (2). For example, in *Because Pula Means Rain*, the skin of the boys with albinism is described as “pig pink” (Robson 11) and *Takadini* the eponymous character is described as “creamy [and] grub like” (Hanson 13). Baker and Lund observe that this consistent foregrounding of skin appearance in fictional portrayals of albinism has the effect of defining individuals with albinism solely by this trait. This visual emphasis, they suggest, constructs albinism as an affliction, associates it with incongruity, and marks it as a sign of social exclusion. As mentioned above, I am interested in counter-storytelling because it advocates against using stereotypical and discriminatory representations. A counter-story would find ways to describe people with albinism without being preoccupied with presenting their appearance as deviant or strange. Thus, in my discussion, I argue that Ibrahim demonstrates non-stereotypical representation in how he describes people with albinism.

While Ibrahim’s portrayal of albinism is sensitive in some respects, his use of the term “albino” presents a contrasting element. For this discussion, I will use “person/people with albinism” instead of “albino” to align with more current and respectful terminology. The National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation (NOAH) discusses the use of the term ‘albino’ and states that

When a person is referred to as an albino, he or she is essentially being reduced to and defined by nothing more than their condition. It’s as though the world looks at that person and sees only the condition of albinism. In this way, it can feel like a dehumanizing label.

To most in the albinism community, the term “person with albinism” will always be a kinder, gentler, less shocking term. Regardless of the context, the word albino can sometimes be an ugly, jolting word to many, especially when heard unexpectedly. (para. 6)

Although some people in the albinism community find it empowering or neutral, there are still others that find the term derogatory or offensive. I have chosen to use person-centred language, which puts the person ahead of the condition.

Before proceeding with my analysis, I would like to reference Schalk's thought-provoking question, which resonates with the central concerns of this study:

What might it mean to imagine disability differently? [. . .] If, as Gloria Anzaldúa claims, "nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads," then changing the narratives of (dis)ability, race, and gender, changing the way marginalized people are represented and conceived in contemporary cultural productions, can also change the way such people are talked about, treated, and understood in the "real" world. (2)

Schalk's remarks raise a critical question that informs my examination of Ibrahim's representation of (dis)ability. Throughout my analysis, I argue that Ibrahim changes the narrative by imagining (dis)ability differently. Instead of focusing on Ewa's impairment or difference, Ibrahim focuses on society's ignorance and intolerance towards that difference. It is this ignorance and intolerance that separates Ewa from the rest of the school and not her difference.

2.3 "When the Sun Is Up" by Ibrahim Babátúndé Ibrahim

I now turn to the short story. "When The Sun is Up" is set in a fictitious Nigerian high school and the story is told in the third person by the protagonist and the story's focaliser, Ewa. The story starts with a new student being introduced to the school. He is described as "a tall boy who [stands] out like a lone chalk mark on a black board, white-faced" (69) which points to his albinism and draws Ewa's attention to him. The author does not give the new boy a name so, for the rest of the story he is referred to as "The boy". In my discussion and analysis, I will refer to him as 'B'. When 'B' is introduced, Ewa squints to see him more clearly and is mocked and laughed at by Chuka (the bully) and other students. Chuka points at her and says, "I told you she can't see when the sun is up" (69) implying that she cannot see because she has albinism. It is this phrase 'when the sun is up' that also serves as the title of the story. After the 'B' and Ewa become acquainted, they meet every break time, and she shares her experiences at the school with him. The previous term, Chuka stole her position as bell ringer, and spread lies about her eyesight. As a result, Ewa withdraws from social activities and contact and only interacts with Soso, a character whom I read as both Ewa's inner self and a coping mechanism for dealing with prejudice at the school. The rest of the story follows 'B' finding ways to defend Ewa and to get her reinvolved in school activities. His lack of a name is important, because he is a character that does not draw attention to himself. Rather, the author uses him as a character

who encourages Ewa and helps her to stand up for herself. With the help of 'B', Ewa regains confidence and her agency; she makes a speech at the parent-teacher association presentation day where she confronts Chuka and the rest of the school.

Ibrahim uses counter-storytelling as a narrative technique to represent the life of a teenage girl with albinism by showing how her world might look. He also uses this narrative technique to raise awareness of the discrimination a person with albinism may face on a daily basis, and how discrimination and prejudiced attitudes spread. One of the ways that counter-storytelling as a narrative technique is used is through the description of the characters with albinism. In the theoretical framework for this chapter, I give examples of the ways that writers have described the skin of characters with albinism. Robson uses "pig pink" (11) as a descriptor and Takadini's skin is described by Hanson as "creamy [and] grub like" (13). Unlike these authors, Ibrahim uses minimal descriptions. The only descriptions of people with albinism that are presented are through Ewa. She describes 'B' as "the only other chalk smear on that immaculate blackboard" (Ibrahim 69) and "the white-faced boy" (69) in the beginning of the short story to identify him as a person with albinism. After that, he is referred to as "the boy" or "the albino boy". By describing 'B' from Ewa's perspective, the narrative normalises albinism and avoids identifying him as strange. Rather, 'B' is another person who happens to look just like Ewa. In this way, the short story challenges how society views Ewa and 'B' as people with albinism. This will be discussed further in the section below.

2.4 Analysing the Non-Disabled Imaginary in "When the Sun Is Up".

I now draw on Hughes' analysis of the non-disabled imaginary to discuss Chuka's behaviour towards Ewa. "When the Sun Is Up" demonstrates the fourth purpose of counter-storytelling, which is to challenge people who are privileged to consider the worldviews and experiences of inequality affecting people who have traditionally been oppressed and marginalised (Hughes-Hassell 215). Chuka is a character whose life has been shaped by privilege, and Ewa shows how the world might look to people with albinism. I argue that Ewa is more disabled by the people around her rather than by her actual condition. Ewa experiences discrimination in two ways; firstly, she is teased and mocked by her classmates, and then the stereotypical beliefs of those around her unjustly deprive her of the bell-ringer role she earned by being top of the class. Reading the story from her perspective reveals how limiting and disabling societal perceptions can be. Below, I will discuss the ways in which Chuka displays discriminatory

behaviour towards Ewa and I will show how Ibrahim uses Chuka as a character to subvert the non-disabled imaginary.

Chuka is portrayed as the ringleader of the bullies, who encourages others to taunt Ewa and B. The primary emotions that Chuka displays in his behaviour and actions are disgust and fear which can be seen in Chuka's displays of arrogance and his dislike and mistreatment of Ewa because she has albinism. At first encounter, Chuka laughs at Ewa and mocks her. During roll call, she squints to get a better view of 'B':

A mean laughter broke out just beside Ewa...It was Chuka, a boy from her class. He was pointing a dirty-nailed finger at her, and infecting a few others with his mockery laugh. 'I told you she can't see when the sun is up,' he said. (69)

People with albinism experience varying degrees of visual impairment, but Chuka uses this to marginalise Ewa and to convince the school that she cannot see at all in sunlight. In the scene described above, Chuka sees her squinting as an opportunity to reinforce the idea that Ewa cannot see in daylight. The dirty-nailed finger is used to illustrate Chuka's spread of discrimination as an infection in the school. Hughes describes a Sartreian concept called '*le visquex*' or 'slime' as a symbol to describe how dominant actors (in this case ableists) enforce injustice over subordinate actors (people living with (dis)abilities). In short, slime is the existential discomfort associated with death, illness and human experiences that are hidden from society but experienced by all. It is connected to dirt, mess and impurity and the fact that "we live and die and that the process is a messy one emitting substances and odours that make us doubt ourselves and fear our neighbour" (96). According to Hughes,

When *le visquex* overflows into consciousness it compromises integrity. It invokes the horror of ambiguity and anomaly, just as '[p]eople with disabilities invoke anxiety and revulsion because they are defined as literally embodying ... loss of control, loss of autonomy, at its deepest level, finitude, confinement within the human condition, subjection to fate'... (96)

When associated with (dis)abled people, *le visquex* is one that legitimises disgust. Hughes argues that to feel disgust towards someone else is to "make a case for 'our' superiority, 'our' place above the herd, 'our' purity" (96) and physical or intellectual differences are considered moral offenses. Similarly, I would like to argue that Chuka attempts to make a case for his superiority by treating Ewa appallingly. The only way that he can be above her is to bring her down by bullying. He convinces most of the school that there must be something wrong with

Ewa and that she is to be avoided or laughed at. Even though the whole school knows that she is the top student, he makes sure that her academic aptitude is overlooked and that her difference as a person with albinism is pathologised and used against her. The image of Chuka's dirty-nailed finger presents a counter-story in which Chuka becomes the embodiment of slime that spreads slowly like an infection through the school. Furthermore, this image makes Chuka the object of disgust and puts the non-disabled imaginary in disarray. The dirty-nailed finger itself suggests *le visqueux* and Chuka becomes a subject to be feared and avoided by his peers. When Ewa re-joins the debate, drama and quiz groups she reflects on how "The groups had all been sad to see her go anyway, except for Chuka, of course" (71) who had not shown any form of remorse or sadness when she left. Chuka had driven her out of these groups because he is intimidated by her excellence and talent. In her absence, he excels. In different circumstances, Chuka's behaviour might be seen as jealousy, but in this context, it is prejudice against her. Not only does he mock her and laugh at her but continuously calls attention to her poor eyesight by saying "I told you she can't see when the sun is up" (69).

After Chuka laughs, a few other learners also point and laugh. One learner responds to Chuka saying, "I bet that new one too can't [see]..." (70). This learner's use of language has discriminatory undertones. By referring to 'B' as 'that new one' he is distancing himself and sees him as 'other'. Kirkham et al. in their discussion of the spiritual and cultural meanings of albinism, explain that, in this particular worldview, the person with albinism is not just a physical other but viewed as an 'ontological other'.⁵ The ways in which Chuka and his friend refer to Ewa and the unnamed boy, reflect how people with albinism are viewed as ontological others. Hughes, in his analysis of discrimination, says that the non-disabled imaginary legitimates violence because it has "a strong foothold in emotional antipathy that can be stoked by negative social representations" (90). Ahmed argues that fear and emotions are mediated socially and are attached to history. So, "[a] subject arrives into a world that already has affects and feelings [about them] circulating in very particular ways" (Ahmed 98). This scene between Ewa, the other learner and Chuka seems to suggest that people with albinism elicit certain emotions because their skin is already associated as something that is fearful or otherworldly. Although the boys do not show fear outrightly, they ostracise them by taunting and mocking Ewa and 'B'. It seems they use bullying to mask the fear or misconceptions that they have about people with albinism. Furthermore, Chuka's bullying and sabotage shows that he

⁵ An ontology of interconnectedness of entities (human beings, animals, plants, minerals, events, natural and supernatural) results in a community that practices exclusion of beings to "protect the socially approved web of relationships from anything that threatens its harmony and equilibrium" (Kirkham et al. 770).

perceives Ewa to be deserving of ill-treatment because of her difference. Instead of trying to learn more about albinism or getting to know Ewa, Chuka pathologises Ewa's condition and continues to repeat that she cannot see in sunlight. The ridicule causes her to withdraw from interactions with other learners and school activities. Ewa drops out of the drama, chess and quiz clubs because of the negative attention. She also changes her attitude towards her schoolwork, saying that "They will notice me less if I don't have the best result this time, so I've stopped trying" (70). In an effort to protect herself, Ewa begins to take actions that will see her less noticed by the people around her. This will be discussed in more detail when I explain Soso as an effect of psycho-emotional disablism.

While Ewa might have physiological health difficulties, they are exacerbated by Chuka's prejudice. It is not Ewa's condition, but Chuka's behaviour and mindset that hinders her from her bell ringing duty and pushes her away from doing the things that she loves. Her reality and experiences are governed by the perceptions of Chuka, and others who choose to join him as he bullies and isolates her. The story is told through Ewa's eyes, and it is clear the only thing that limits her is the people around her.

Later on, the reader learns that Chuka's mockery and bullying also comes in the form of sabotage. This bullying is made worse by the fact the headmaster does not make any effort to help Ewa. According to school rules, the learner with the best result from the previous term rings the bell. Ewa is that student, but Chuka sabotaged her by tricking her into missing her bell ringing duty:

I missed break-time on my first day, and [Chuka] told the headmaster it's because I couldn't read the clock. His result was second best, so they replaced me with him.' [...] 'why did you miss the break-time?' 'Chuka asked me to help him copy a note. I was rushing to get it done, and he said he would help me with the bell.' (71)

Ringling the bell is associated with status and honour. No one can touch the bell but the headmaster and the top student. Anyone else who touches the bell is heavily punished. When Chuka does not earn the privilege of ringing the school bell, he takes the privilege by presenting himself as superior. Chuka's character is defined by a fear of the unknown, coupled with insecurities and a desire for influence and popularity so intense that he resorts to manipulative actions, including sabotaging Ewa. Treating Ewa as 'other' gives him benefits that affirm his position in society, not only as a 'normal' human being but as a special learner who gets to ring the bell. It does not take much for him to convince the headmaster to let him ring the bell, and this shows a shared understanding of people with albinism and their abilities. The headmaster

is not portrayed as someone who pities or is charitable towards Ewa specifically. However, even he could be seen as biased, even if it is through ignorance. The headmaster's actions expose his underlying assumptions about (dis)abled people: that Ewa is not fully human and he, therefore, can decide without asking her about her side of the story. The headmaster's inaction is an example of ontological invalidation; Ewa is pushed down lower in the hierarchy and to the margins of her school.

In the end, when Ewa has made her speech and proved to the school that she can, in fact, see 'when the sun is up', Chuka runs out of the hall in tears. All his mockery and bullying are exposed for what it is, his inability to see Ewa outside of the stereotypes of albinism. His tears of remorse and embarrassment show a realisation of how harmful his actions were to Ewa as a person. As a main character, Chuka is a representation of the kinds of people who behave in discriminatory ways towards people that are differently abled. However, Ibrahim does not stop at exposing the non-disabled imaginary. Through Soso, Ewa's second self, he also presents a unique subjectivity that illustrates the inner world of someone who is ignored and ostracised by her community.

2.5 The Second Self and the Ally: Overcoming Psycho-Emotional/Social Disablism

In "When the Sun is up" Soso represents Ewa's inner self, existing as both the same person and a distinct personality. Below, I argue that Soso, who is a part of Ewa's bodymind, not only represents a unique self but also shows the effects of psycho-emotional/social disablism. I start by describing how Soso helps the reader to understand Ewa's inner world and struggles. Then, I discuss how Soso, as Ewa's inner self, is pivotal in helping Ewa to confront bullying and prejudice. 'B', too helps Ewa confront bullying and prejudice. Therefore, I also discuss his role in helping Ewa to become more confident and stand up for herself.

To explain the relationship between Ewa and Soso, I will draw on Margaret-Price's conceptualisation of bodymind, as well as Schalk's ideas on close reading. This approach to reading Soso using bodymind is informed by Schalk's discussion of Barbara Christian's insistence that "every text suggests a new approach" (qtd. in Schalk 7). According to Schalk, Christian argues that critics, particularly Black feminist literary critics, do not have to create theories that will apply to literature, but should rather aim to, through close reading, understand theories demonstrated or embodied in certain texts (7). Furthermore, I take this approach to reading Soso because I agree with Schalk when she argues for "reading within the rules of a reality of a text" (24). There are many theories or tropes from different genres I could use to

explain Soso. If it was a comic book or an animated film, she might be seen as the little angel that sits on Ewa's shoulder. However, in the context of disability studies, Soso is a unique way of demonstrating bodymind. If I am to read Soso in any other way, I risk dismissing Soso as simply an imaginary voice in Ewa's head. Margaret Price's discussion about stories told by people with psychosocial disabilities, argues for a reading of the 'self' or the character on their own terms. The 'self' in the text should not be read and analysed in the way a reader would understand and see life typically, but within the reality of the text itself. In her analysis of different texts, one of the techniques that people with psychosocial disabilities such as depression, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder use is to present and position the self in ways that take advantage of "fragmentation, proliferation, and [an] otherwise unruly existence" (18). This incoherence of fragmentation is "a-coherence, or sometimes anti-coherence; [which] is turned to strategic advantage rather than accommodated as impairment" (19). This a-coherent self could be read as proliferation: the construction of many selves to tell a single person's story (21). Proliferation is presented as a strategy for counter-diagnosis which uses language to subvert the urge to explain a disabled mind (17). It is a way of presenting the self in a way that goes against the conventional understanding of (dis)ability by replacing it with a different kind of story.

In the first few paragraphs of "When the Sun Is Up", Ewa interacts with Soso during roll call. At first, it seems like Soso is Ewa's friend, but as the story progresses it becomes clear that she is not a physical character. She is only visible to Ewa and is portrayed as a part of Ewa's consciousness. Although Soso is a part of Ewa's mind, she does not control Ewa's movements. Instead, she has her own body. She is like a small cartoon character that resides in Ewa's mind. Throughout the text, Soso pops up in Ewa's consciousness, either counting, dancing, or expressing Ewa's emotions in animated ways. It is difficult to understand Soso without seeing her as another part of Ewa, or Ewa herself:

In the crowd of voices, Ewa could make out Soso's; thin like the stretched flesh of an inflated balloon, swelling into a bubble, effectively keeping the rest of the crowd out. She had started to count again...Soso would get confused then and give up counting, instead switching to a vocal mimicry of the stamping of the many feet: gba, gba, gba, gba[...] So, Ewa let her count: thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two... [. . .] She had her eyes on him before Soso seized them to count socks lined up in imperfect rows around her, and now that Soso was on 'gba gba gba', she could finally look-stalk him again. She maintained a gaze and waited for his head to turn off his now statue-like figure and look her way. All through the two stanzas of the national anthem and Soso's nagging chant of gba gba gba, he didn't, and a cloud of smoke fumed faintly around the walls of her mind, choking Soso and herself. (69)

I read the idea of this split between Ewa and Soso as an illustration of proliferation. As Ewa's second self, Soso is also telling Ewa's story. While Ewa focuses on 'B' and the national anthem, Soso counts and mimics the "gba gba gba" (69) of learners' stamping. Ewa's fixation on 'B' is due to his appearance as someone who looks like her. Soso's fixation on the sound of the feet and counting the socks seems a distraction at first, but as the story progresses it becomes clear that Soso's counting is an act of affirmation. Everyone around her believes that Ewa cannot see in sunlight, but Soso knows that she can. In her speech, Ewa dispels the assumption that Chuka has spread about her:

'Dear headmaster and distinguished teachers; our loving and able parents; my co-debaters; and fellow students... all protocols duly observed...

'The Yoruba word for beauty is Ewa. My name is Ewa, and I am a beautiful creature of God, just like you. My mother knows this, and you can tell by how she named me...' [. . .] '...there are one hundred and twelve feet on the assembly ground; all from fifty-six pupils, including late-comers. Forty-eight of these pupils wear socks and eight do not. I know this because I counted them. I was able to count because contrary to what Chuka and the school believe, albinos can see When the sun is up...' (72)

In this speech, Ewa confronts ontological invalidation by reminding her schoolmates that her difference is not a marker of her worth as a human being. Ewa then begins to recite the number of feet that she sees on the assembly ground every morning. To emphasise her ability to see, she speaks about the number of the learner's feet in detail, including the students who do not wear socks. It is here that we see how Soso's counting at the beginning of the short story is used to help Ewa prove to the rest of the school that she can see in daylight. The anti-coherence of a second self proves useful when Ewa needs it the most.

Another point worth noting is that the event where Ewa makes her speech is a debate about "Equality among Boys and Girls in Our Schools" (72). The debate topic shows that there are already issues of inequality within the school. Ewa is excluded because of her gender and albinism. Ibrahim's inclusion of the gender equality issues subtly highlights the intersectionality of the discrimination Ewa suffers. Ana Bê's discussion on feminist perspectives in disability studies is relevant here. She quotes Rosemarie Garland-Thomson who says that "both the female and disabled body [have historically been] cast as deviant and inferior; both [have been] excluded from full participation in public...[and] defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority" (qtd. in Bê 431). Ewa takes a step further in addressing the inequality in her school by confronting discrimination based on appearance and (dis)ability. Ewa is the only female voice in the story against male

voices, and this points towards the fact that the girls are trying to advocate for their place in the school. During her speech, she confronts Chuka, the headmaster and other learners about the way that they have been treating her. She also asks to be reinstated as “bell-ringer” (71) and for an apology from the headmaster and the school.

Although Soso is a coping mechanism and helps Ewa to store important information and affirm herself, she exists as a result of internalised prejudice. Schalk says that “Understanding disability as a complex experience means remaining attentive to positive, negative, and ambivalent aspects of disability (physically, mentally, and socially) as well as the relationship between all three” (24). While Ewa’s a-coherence helps her when she needs it the most, it also represents the complex experience of (dis)ability. While observing ‘B’, Ewa and Soso interact in her mind:

Maybe he [‘B’] doesn’t see in daylight, Soso said, waving away a loose strand of smoke rising before her, and almost breaking into a cough. Ewa mulled the thought, and then strained her eyes a little more, leaning forward to see if Soso was maybe right. But you can’t know just by looking Ewa, Soso mocked. (69)

This interaction shows the extent to which Ewa has internalised the prejudice around her. Soso knows that Ewa can see but also has doubts about ‘B’ because of the perception that has spread around that she cannot see in daylight. She even expresses this out loud in conversation with ‘B’ when they become acquainted. ‘B’ asks if the other learners are always laughing and teasing her, and Ewa replies,

‘Well, I don’t see When the sun is up, so I don’t see anybody when I’m here.’
So you can’t see me now?’ he asked with a hint of sarcasm.
‘You are not anybody. You’re like me.’ They both smiled their way up the flushed steps to the long corridor that stretched out before all the classrooms, joining the classrooms together. They agreed to seek out each other at break-time. (70)

Both Ewa and ‘B’ know that she can see everything around her, and this moment is the start of their connection. Reeve argues that the (dis)abled subject desires recognition as “human, capable of activity, full of hope and possibility, [but] she receives from the dominant culture only the judgement that she is different, marked or inferior” (109). Although Ewa knows the truth about herself, being the only person with albinism (until ‘B’ joins the school and becomes an ally) in her school so far makes it hard for her to continue to stand on that truth. Reeve also discusses internalised oppression, saying that it “is very difficult to challenge; it is often only through contact with other disabled people that one sees alternatives to the mainstream cultural

lexicon which equate disability with loss and lack” (109). It is through ‘B’ that Ewa begins to gain confidence and break out of the limitations that have been placed on her by everyone else.

Both Soso, as Ewa’s inner self, and ‘B’ embody the bold and unruly part of Ewa, with ‘B’ appearing to be a physical manifestation of this shared trait. According to Price,

In clinical terms, ‘splitting’ is an undesirable event; it is what happens when a troubled consciousness divides itself, retreating into a fugue state or other alternative (protective) state of consciousness. Therapy for persons who experience splitting is generally aimed at eliminating the phenomenon by helping the therapized person ‘integrate’ her consciousness. However, in counter-diagnostic narratives, a proliferation of selves may be a desirable state. (21)

In medical terms, Ewa might be considered someone who has dissociative identity disorder (DID), which is, by definition, a mental health condition where people have two or more separate personalities that control their behaviour at different times (Cleveland Clinic). She seems like she has DID because there is a splitting or multiple states of consciousness within her. However, Soso does not cause gaps in memory or any other physiological symptoms of DID. Rather, she is the part of Ewa that represents the interaction between bodymind and society.

Ewa’s internalisation of prejudice causes her to avoid social situations, while Soso is free to do what she wants:

Soso had positioned herself at the windows of Ewa’s ears, bouncing off all other sounds in anticipation of the break-time bell. Ewa could see the teacher’s mouth locked in a lengthy dance as he taught the class, but she was deaf to it all, thanks to Soso. Ewa could have pushed Soso off those windows, but the truth was she was just as excited as the entirety of her mind, and she too couldn’t wait for the break-time bell to toll. When it finally did toll, she didn’t have to go look for him. (70)

The next day, at midday, Ewa looked expectantly out of the classroom window, straining her ears for the sound of the bell, half expecting it not to ring. Soso swam around in her mind, break-dancing, waltzing, shaku-shaku-ing, zankuing, gbeseing, happy that Ewa would see the albino boy again in minutes.

After school the day before, he had said before they departed,

‘I won’t let them ring that bell again,’til they give it back to the right person.’ He had a rigid determination glued on his face.

‘I don’t want it,’ she retorted, ‘and you don’t want them to start with you.’

‘Where I’m from, they kill albinos for rituals. I’ve lived all my life there before coming here,’ he grimaced, ‘so, I’m sorry your scarecrows here don’t scare me.’ (71)

Soso's character gives the reader access to Ewa's inner world. The descriptions above are an illustration of Ewa's distraction during class and her excitement to see 'B'. The prospect of a friendship with someone else, especially someone who understands her experiences, is exciting. Soso expresses her excitement with various dance moves, including the popular Nigerian dance moves shaku-shaku, zanku and gbese. In this way, Soso embodies the emotional dimension of Ewa's being that is otherwise rendered inexpressible by her social environment

Yet, 'B' is more than just a potential friend, he is an ally, bold enough to oppose prejudice and act on Ewa's behalf, even if it means getting into trouble. On his second day of school, 'B' keeps his word and rings the bell on Ewa's behalf. Although Soso weeps when he is whipped in front of the school as punishment, this disruptive act "[gives] confidence back to Ewa" (71). Chuka is seen for what he really is – a scarecrow whose power only exists because he has forcefully taken her position from her. 'B' also encourages Ewa to re-join all the extra-curricular clubs by joining them himself. Nathalie Wan's study, based on data and interviews, reveals eight coping strategies developed by people with albinism to navigate prejudice. These strategies are relevant to my analysis of 'B' and Ewa's relationship. "The Defiant" respond quickly to insults and are described as "forthright in asserting their rights"; "The Activists" are involved in raising public awareness about albinism and putting it in a positive light; "The Serenes" are those who patiently explain their condition to other people. "The Internalisers" resent mistreatment but do not show it outwardly, they internalise and assimilate their pain while "The Talkers" discuss their experiences of adversity with family and friends; "The Hiders" make efforts to hide their (dis)ability so that they can escape prejudice; "The Flamboyants" display themselves publicly and flaunt their uniqueness and "The Positivists" are those that have learnt to accept albinism as part of their identity (287). Ewa fits into the role of "The Internaliser" but later becomes "The Serene" as she gains confidence. This confidence comes from her relationship with 'B', who is both "The Defiant" and "The Activist". While Soso affirmed Ewa in her mind, 'B' is a physical presence that affirms and encourages Ewa with his boldness.

Soso continues to express herself, but with Ewa's growing confidence she also becomes a marker of Ewa's growth as a character. One significant moment in the text is when Ewa is about to present her debate speech:

Soso's mood swung her from one corner of Ewa's mind to the other. By the time Ewa stepped behind the microphone in the crowded hall for her presentation, Soso had

withdrawn further and further into the shadows of her consciousness, enveloped in fear.
(71)

All along, Soso has been the unruly one. The girl who is usually singing, dancing and teasing Soso retreats in fear, knowing that Ewa is risking being ridiculed again. However, Soso's retreat also symbolises Ewa's growth in confidence. She takes a step back, so that Ewa can be bold and stand up for herself. After Ewa's speech, Soso returns to celebrate her with "a gleaming Michael Jackson-styled leather outfit" and a small performance where "She [spins] around to slide forward on both knees" (72). With "a thunder" (72) of applause, the learners acknowledge Ewa and show their support publicly, a complete turnaround from their ignorance and silence before.

2.6 Conclusion

Using Hughes' concept of the non-disabled imaginary, which consists of fear, pity and disgust as the fabric of ableist attitudes, I analysed Chuka as a representation of society's attitudes and mistreatment of people with albinism. My main point was that the text presents Chuka as the object of abnormality, instead of the characters with albinism. Through his character, the non-disabled imaginary is both challenged and subverted. This is important because it shows the power of counter-narratives and their influence on representation. I also discussed the relationship between Ewa and her second self Soso and 'B's role as an ally. My analysis of Ewa as a character reveals the effects of psycho-social disablism and how it may manifest. Ewa, portrayed as an "Internaliser" finds support in Soso, her second self, to cope with the prejudices of society. At the same time, Soso allows the reader into Ewa's inner world and offers insight into her perspective. Furthermore, Soso and 'B' help Ewa to overcome the limitations placed on her by the school. Soso affirms Ewa internally, while 'B' stands as Ewa's ally and helps her to find her voice and a sense of agency.

JAY Lit is an example of a digital platform that provides the space for unique subjectivities and portrayals of contemporary African youth. Although Ibrahim did not write the text as a direct response to then Vice President Yemi Osinbajo's plea that Nigeria should "present counter-narratives to the socio-cultural misconceptions about albinism", he succeeds in being one of the pioneers of non-stereotypical discourse. "When the Sun Is Up" provides an alternative representation of a main character with albinism and also counters society's prejudice. The story is an exact demonstration of counter-storytelling: it challenges people who are privileged to consider the worldviews and experiences of inequality affecting people who

have traditionally been oppressed and marginalised. Chuka is forced to reflect on his privilege and his prejudice towards Ewa, and we get to see what it might be like to be a teenage girl in Ewa's circumstances. In my discussion about counter-storytelling I quoted Schalk, who asks what it might mean to imagine (dis)ability differently. Instead of focusing on Ewa's impairment or difference, Ibrahim focuses on society's ignorance and intolerance towards that difference. As a product of contemporary culture, this short story highlights the ways that representations and conceptions of marginalised people can be different. I imagine that the story goes on and Ewa is able to reclaim her place in the school and the headmaster and the rest of the learners make an effort to understand albinism.

Chapter Three: Examining Contemporary Love Stories in Mercy Kalu's *The Song of Us* on Wattpad

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter Two, I analysed how Ibrahim's short story "When the Sun Is Up" from *JAY Lit* uses counter-storytelling as a narrative tool to share an alternative representation of a character with albinism, thereby demonstrating how the digital space allows for the portrayal of different subjectivities pertaining to youth. In this chapter, I focus on a short story titled "Inter-Tribal Union" by Mercy Kalu from the online platform *Wattpad*. The short story is from an award-winning anthology in the general fiction category for the Ambassadors of Africa titled *The Song of Us*. I read this short story as a counter-story in its representation of interreligious encounters; it challenges the notion of a single narrative by presenting an unconventional love story that transcends boundaries, especially considering the historical tensions between Christian and Muslim communities. It also explores the complexities of ethnic identity formation and presents an interesting gender dynamic between the young couple through the theme of sacrificial love. According to her *Wattpad* profile, Mercy Kalu is a "Wattpad Creator 📖 Wattpad original writer 📖 Yonder writer ✨ [She writes] clean contemporary romantic adult fiction relatable to life 💕 🍷".

The chapter starts with an outline of *Wattpad* as a digital platform, detailing its development from a self-publishing platform to a self-standing publishing house with its own imprints. I then outline how Kalu interacts with people outside of *Wattpad* as a social author before analysing the short story and examining the readers' responses in the comments.

3.2 Contextual Background

Before iPhone, Kindle and the rise of eBooks and self-publishing, there was *Wattpad* (Yuen 2013). In 2006, Allan Lau and Ivan Yuen created *Wattpad* in a garage. The platform was the beginning of a community of millions of readers and writers from all over the world. Lau and Yuen's vision was to change how people share stories; readers could download the *Wattpad* mobile application to read, share and chat about fiction written by professional and aspiring writers from around the world. Currently, *Wattpad* is a community of 90 million readers and writers who spend 26 billion minutes a month combined reading original stories (Wattpad). Below, I give an overview of *Wattpad* and outline how writers can self-publish their works on

the platform. I also discuss Mercy Kalu's social presence to illustrate the workings of social authorship.

3.2.1 *Wattpad* and Digital Self-publishing

For the past 17 years, *Wattpad* has provided writers with the space to publish fictional and non-fictional writing outside of mainstream publishing. As the platform has grown in popularity, it has also assisted writers in adapting their stories into hardcover novels, movies or television series.⁶ According to *Wattpad* HQ,

The entertainment world is in an unprecedented period of disruption. The walls that kept storytelling in film, TV, and publishing something reserved for an elite few? They're crumbling. People from around the world are picking up their phones and laptops, and creating their own narratives. And tens of millions of them are doing it on *Wattpad*.

[. . .]

And as for the big bright future of entertainment? It's already happening on *Wattpad*. Every day, we connect Hollywood with proven ideas that have built-in audiences. By empowering diverse voices, we've opened up a whole world of stories just waiting to be turned into movies, TV shows, and audiobooks. (para. 1-3)

As more and more *Wattpad* authors grew million-wide audiences and garnered the attention of publishing houses, *Wattpad* realised it could go beyond digital self-publishing. A few of the ways that *Wattpad* is "empowering diverse voices" (*Wattpad* HQ para. 3), as mentioned in the quote above, is through the multiple programs and opportunities that the platform has created, including the *Wattpad* Creators Program, The Wattys, *Wattpad* Originals, Webtoon studios, writing contests and band opportunities and partnerships. I will explain the *Wattpad* Creators Program in detail in a discussion below about social authorship. *Wattpad* Originals is a collection of high-quality stories from *Wattpad*'s top creators selected by editorial experts, which works with a pay-to-read model. Readers can support their favourite writers by unlocking *Wattpad* original works with *Wattpad* Coins or by subscribing to *Wattpad* Premium+ (*Wattpad* Help Centre para. 4). The Wattys are an annual awards contest where thousands of writers from the *Wattpad* community submit their ongoing or completed stories to secure the

⁶ The platform does this through *Wattpad* Studios' partnerships with Sony Pictures, Hulu and Syfy and *Wattpad* Book's partnerships with Macmillan Publishers, Penguin Random House UK and Anvil Publishing.

prestigious prizes offered by the competition.⁷ *Wattpad* also provides writing opportunities with brand partnerships with well-known brands such as Maybelline, Tim Hortons, JCPenney, Paramount Pictures, and many others. These partnerships offer various ways for creators or writers to earn income, including writing branded content, creating bonus chapters, and participating in social media takeovers (Wattpad “Brand Opportunities”). *Wattpad* also has four imprints under the *Wattpad* WEBTOON Book Group: *Wattpad* Books, WEBTOON Unscrolled, W by *Wattpad* Books and Frayed Pages x *Wattpad*. For international writers, they have global publishing partners that they work with, such as Penguin Random House. *Wattpad* WEBTOON Book Group embodies Stephanie Bosch Santana’s understanding of digital literature as “network rather than object” (191).

In Chapter 1, I mentioned that young African writers tend to prefer online publishing as a starting point because they are more likely to have more opportunities to be recognised without subscribing to specific ways of expression. *Wattpad*’s journey as a social media writing platform, which has expanded into publishing, shows what that looks like on an international scale. One of the most well-known *Wattpad* stars turned bestselling author is Anna Todd. Before *Wattpad*, Todd wrote fan fiction stories and posted them on Instagram. When the stories became popular, a follower told her about *Wattpad*. She then started writing and uploading on *Wattpad*, one chapter at a time. Eventually, she had 100 chapters uploaded with 2 billion reads. The story was then turned into a five-book series: *After*, *After We Collided*, *After We Fell*, *After Ever Happy* and *Before*. The series was published by Simon and Schuster, translated into over 35 languages and adapted into films for Paramount Pictures (Davies 59). She later turned *After* into a graphic novel, then started Frayed Pages, her own entertainment and publishing company, and is currently partnered with *Wattpad* to “give storytellers from all over the world an innovative, safe, and fair place to tell their stories, along with the tools they need to bring their words to readers everywhere” (Todd). Todd’s rise to fame shows the power of digital self-publishing.

Digital platforms, in connecting people together, have brought together communities of writers and readers who support each other. These kinds of platforms ensure that the writer does not feel alone, trying to get editors and publishers to distribute their work, but instead can harness the power of community to get more reach. According to Claire Parnell, José van Dijck’s connective media ecology model for contemporary digital book publishing analyzes

⁷ Ongoing stories are stories that writers update on a schedule until they have completed them. Writers can submit stories in English, Spanish, and Filipino.

how social media platforms function in two ways. They function as individual microsystems with their own parts and processes and within a connected ecosystem of social media platforms. In the connected ecosystem, social media platforms have their existence governed by competitive and cooperative relationships with other social media platforms (525). Parnell extends this observation to other forms of cultural productions, such as books, film and television, which are part of a larger entertainment ecosystem. This ecosystem is an environment where lines are blurred between professional and amateur. The conflation of these categories helps young African writers in several ways. To begin with, digital self-publishing on a platform such as *Wattpad* allows non-professional writers to share their stories and develop their writing simultaneously. Some writers would not have published their work without *Wattpad*, as serialisation helps them develop their skills while building an audience. Additionally, digital self-publishing also makes room for diverse subjectivities and exploring themes in alternative ways. Writers are not obliged to conform to convention and can thus seek or share personally satisfying stories as Bold argues:

...topics such as gender identity, pansexuality and BME feminism were explored by some of the popular authors, which means that *Wattpad*, and self-publishing in general, can be a vehicle for expressing otherness and offering a response to the under-represented in traditional publishing. (124)

On *Wattpad*, there is room to express what is misrepresented or underrepresented in traditional publishing. Gender, race and location become immaterial, and “No one need know how old you are, what your social background is, or where you live. Readers can be anywhere” (Margaret Atwood, qtd. in Bold 124). Readers who enjoy a writer’s work will read, share the story and add it to their reading lists for their followers to see.

Wattpad’s simple, easy-to-navigate interface makes it a user-friendly digital self-publishing platform. After a user has created their profile on *Wattpad*, they can start writing a story by clicking the ‘Write’ tab and ‘Create a new story’, as shown in Figure 1.

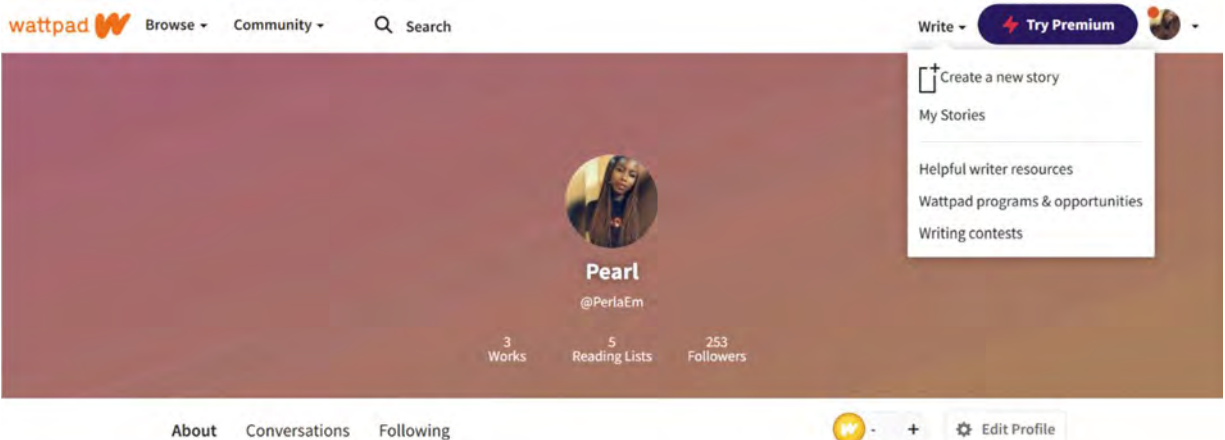


Figure 1

Once a user has created a story, they upload a book cover.⁸ Then, they can upload chapters of their book all at once or publish each chapter of the story as they write. *Wattpad* writers are responsible for the writing, editing and publishing of their works. They also choose when they want to post their chapters. Before *Wattpad*'s 2020 update, writers could market their work by sharing it in groups in *Wattpad* Forums. The Forums were under specific topics or genres, and writers could ask for editorial and proofreading assistance, as well as book covers and reviews. Writers can still seek help, but they can now only do so by contacting other users directly. Each user also possesses a personal library, where they can curate and store selected books or stories. Users can also generate reading lists based on genre or any other classification of their preference, as seen in Figure 2.

Although writers can upload all their chapters at once, *Wattpad* encourages writers to upload one chapter at a time. The architecture of *Wattpad* as a multimodal platform, akin to social media, cultivates a readership familiar with serialization. For authors who write part-time, serialising chapters allows them to write at their own

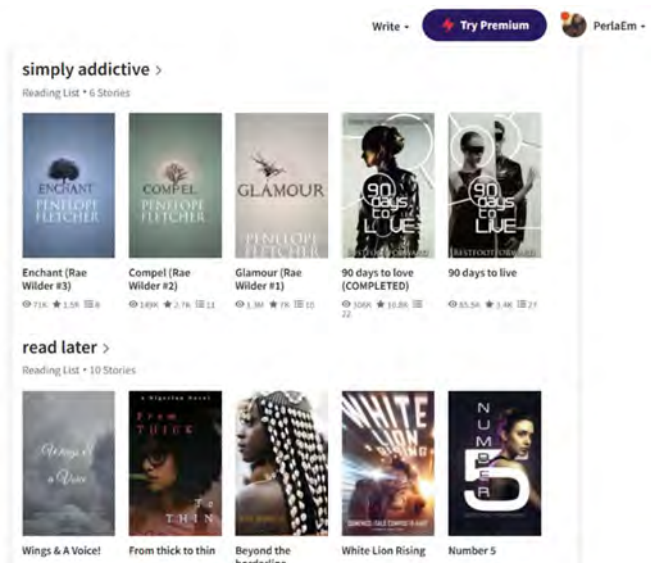


Figure 2

⁸ Writers can make covers on Canva or Desygner. Canva lets people design covers for free using premade templates or instructions from their website: <https://www.canva.com/create/wattpad-covers/>

pace. Writers update their readers on the frequency of uploads, whether they upload weekly or biweekly, depending on how many stories they are writing at any given time. To sustain reader interest, writers often provide updates through posts on their conversation boards, expressing gratitude and engaging with their audience. Writers also notify readers of any changes to the frequency of updates. Parnell discusses the impact of serialised publishing on story sharing and distribution. Firstly, serialization allows writers to grow their audience or visibility through votes. The more votes a chapter has, the more popular the story becomes. Readers make the stories on *Wattpad* popular, and they are an important part of the distribution of texts. Thus, a story with a high read count is more likely to be attractive to new readers. The *Wattpad* algorithm picks this up and recommends the entire novel associated with the popular chapter to other users on the platform. Secondly, serialisation means there is a constant stream of conversation around a work. Readers can comment on a paragraph within the text, reply to each other, or have conversations with the writer about the chapter. Lastly, the reader can become a part of the author's writing process through editorial feedback and in some cases, plot suggestions (531). Every user, whether a reader or writer, has a conversation board on their page. Here, writers give updates on their work or share news about their writing with their audience. For example, on the 30th of June 2022, Mercy Kalu made a post on her conversation board as seen in Figure 3. In this post, she explains that she is part of the first cohort of *Wattpad* Creators. The program is by invitation only and helps grow their visibility and writing skills through resources and opportunities such as editorial support and workshops.⁹

⁹ The eligibility requirements can be found on Wattpad's website on this page: <https://creators.wattpad.com/programs-and-opportunities/wattpad-creators-program/>

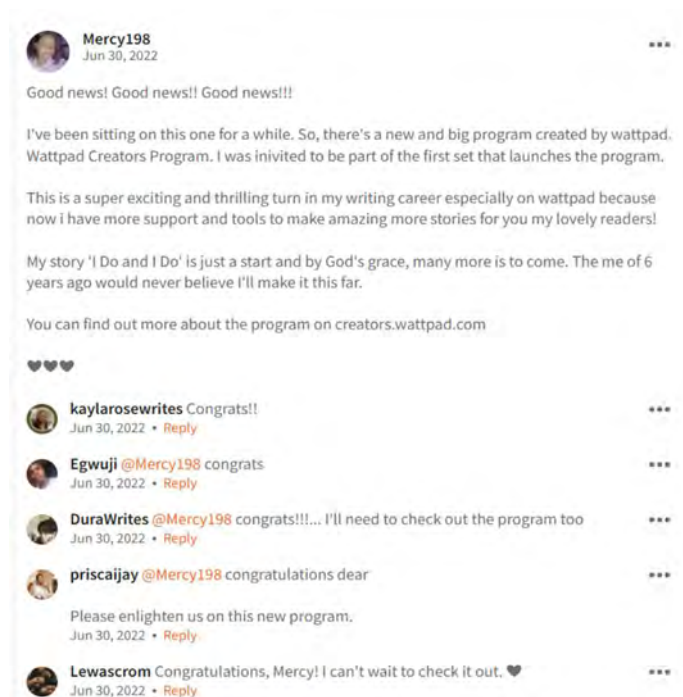


Figure 3

In line with the discussion above about *Wattpad* readers, my approach to analysing the *Wattpad* comments below is informed by reader-response theory as outlined in Chapter One. The comments I will analyse are mostly aesthetic, since there is no guide or question for readers to answer. Aesthetic readers immerse themselves in the text, interacting with the characters, emotions, ideas and situations as they emerge. They also actively engage in the narrative's dramatic journey, feeling the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions as they develop (Mart 81-82). I will analyse specific comments and show how they add to the story or provide extra meaning. Otherwise, it is necessary to note one particular reader, JS, who has read the whole anthology. JS interacts with Kalu in the comments under the short story "Inter-Tribal Union", which will be discussed in detail in the literary analysis. Kalu and JS, as *Wattpad* users, also highlight the community aspect of *Wattpad*. Although there are no signs that they have a relationship, they are found in the same spaces and are connected through one user, Ambassador NG, who has a reading list that mentions both their works. JS also makes an editorial comment under the short story "Hope Till the End":

Primary school in Nigeria is the same in the UK. In USA, it's elementary school. If you want to refer to middle school compared to Nigeria that's Jss 1 and Jss 2, while high school is Jss3 to Ss 3. It's better you just state the grade number as it will be clear to both Nigerians and foreigners.

This is just a suggestion though.

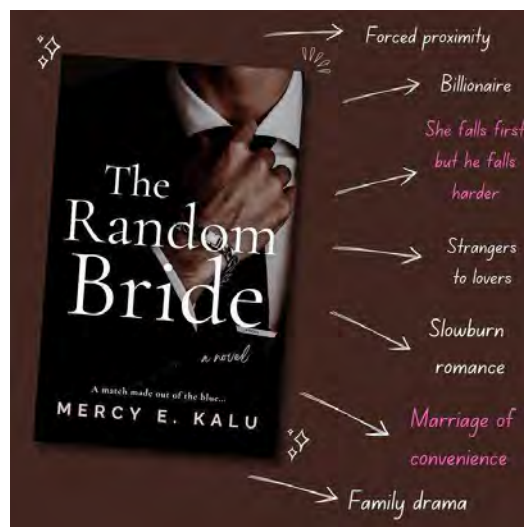
As a writer themselves, JS has made this suggestion, and although Kalu has not changed the story, someone reading the comment would understand the text better if they were confused about that specific point. Below, I outline how Kalu interacts with people outside of *Wattpad* as a social author.

3.2.2 Social Authorship

According to Ramdarshan Bold, social authorship is the practice of combining writing and social media presence. Most writers practice social authorship to accrue social capital and promote themselves and their works (Bold 120). In the digital age, the simplicity and immediacy of creating and distributing content means that anyone can become a micro-celebrity if their followers enjoy their work.

Kalu demonstrates this in her engagement on several social media platforms. The social media aspects of *Wattpad* have enabled her to build a following since users can also connect their social media accounts to *Wattpad*. For example, she has multiple pins on Pinterest advertising her work as seen in Figures 4 and 5. In each, she uses a different design style to advertise her *Wattpad* original, *The Random Bride*. Figure 4 shows a poster with keywords that indicate themes and phrases that give a glimpse into the plot. Figure 5 shows images associated with wealth and luxury. The post is captioned: “One of the most powerful families in the country. A generational wealth in existence. The Blackwells 🍷❤️👰 #booktok

#wattpad #read #enemiestolovers # #bookaesthetic #marriageofconvenience #booklover #bookstoread #bookstagram #books #ceoromance #therandombride #read”. In this post, Kalu advertises her work by introducing the Blackwell family and their wealth through images. The poster’s design demonstrates an understanding of Pinterest’s visual conventions. This design style is similar to what other authors use to advertise their books on Pinterest.



The random bride



When pressured to marry, Sarah Miller, a maid, becomes Ramsey Blackwell's unexpected choice. But as he begins to genuinely care for her, he must decide if she's more than an option.

Figure 4

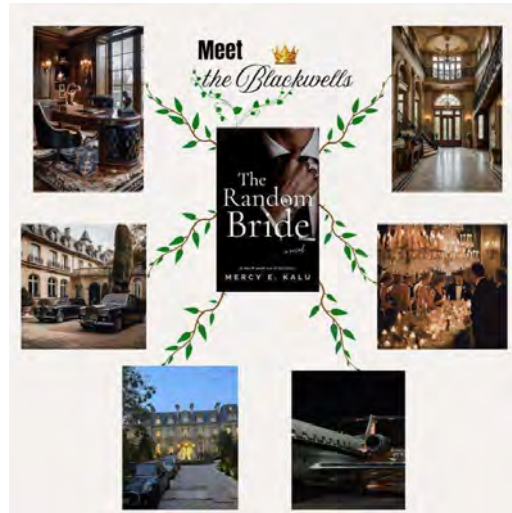


Figure 5

Kalu also has a TikTok account where she posts book recommendation videos with snippets from her work or short teasers about her stories as seen in Figure 6 below. On her Instagram page, she combines personal content and posts about her work. Figure 7 shows a picture of a gift package she got from *Wattpad* to celebrate her invitation to the *Wattpad* Creator's Program.

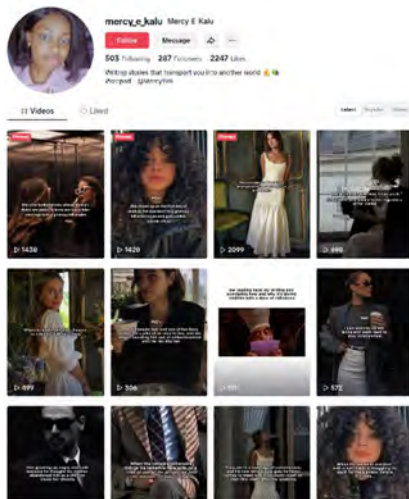


Figure 6

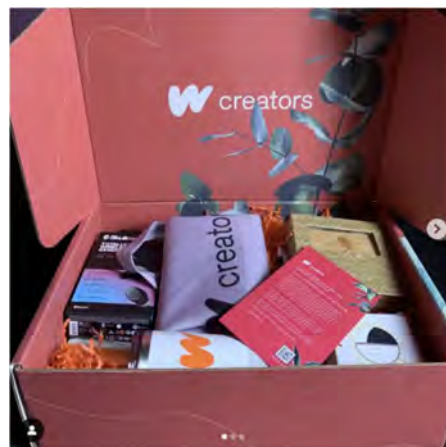


Figure 7



Kalu also has similar posts to her Pinterest on her Instagram page. In Figure 8, Kalu reimagines the covers of her more popular works into movie posters.

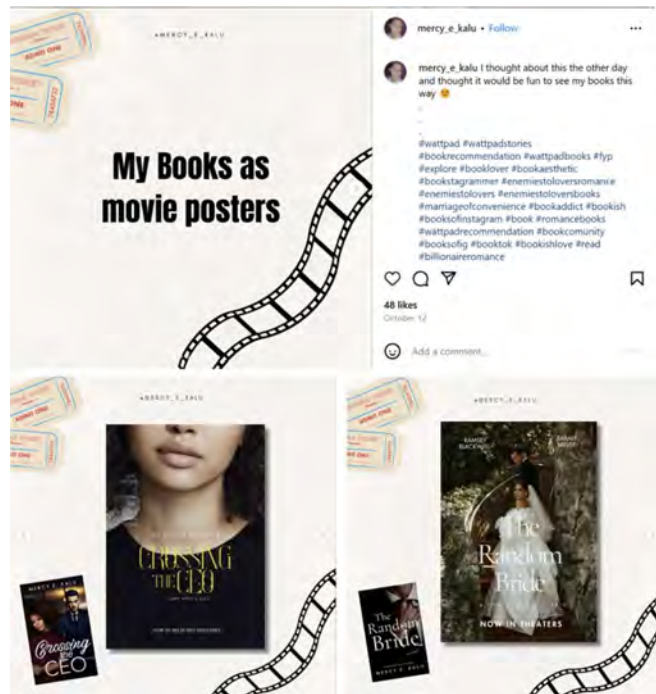


Figure 8

Kalu’s social media presence also embodies social authorship in her following of trends such as the era trend, as seen in Figure 9. According to Keyhole’s social media glossary,

The term Era is often used to label a person’s current interests or priorities. It has gained popularity on platforms like TikTok, where users use the phrase “in your [blank] era” in both serious and humorous ways.

It can be a way to signify a particular phase or trend that someone is relating to or engaging with at a given time on social media platforms. (para. 1-2)

In this particular instance, Kalu makes use of the trend to advertise some of her works. She also references Netflix’s “Strong Black Lead” sub-brand, which, according to Shamira Ibrahim “amplifies content specifically targeted to various slices of the Black experience” and has “become a popular brand outside the platform at the cross-section of technology, culture and community-building” (para. 4).

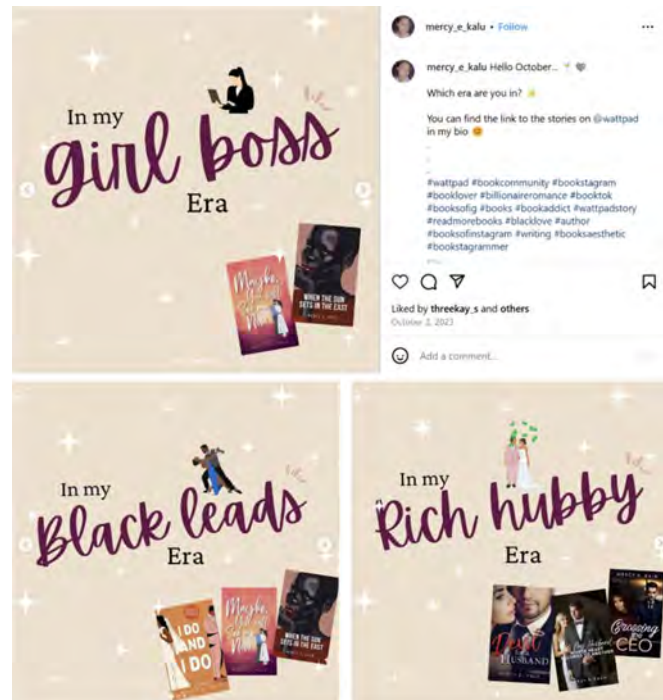


Figure 9

While Kalu is active on all three social media platforms, she is more popular on *Wattpad* and has more followers there. She has 56.7K followers and is a micro-celebrity on *Wattpad*, compared to the 1484 followers she has on Instagram, 746 on Pinterest and 287 on TikTok. Instagram could also be a way for her to build or maintain a Nigerian audience, or to share her work with the people closest to her who might not know about *Wattpad*. Most writers build audiences online through direct engagement on social media before publishing on more traditional platforms, but with a platform like *Wattpad*, it seems to happen the other way around. Writers build an audience on *Wattpad* who can choose to follow her on other social media platforms if they desire.

Parnell observes that “Popularity on Wattpad, as expressed by the outcomes of its algorithm, is not purely technical but rather sociotechnical as it is influenced by user behaviours” (531). Bold argues that emerging authors become micro-celebrities by “[gaining] popularity as a result of specific trends, in specific domains, at specific times” (118). This can be seen in the texts that are most popular, usually, they are under genres such as Romance, Fantasy and Fan Fiction.¹⁰ Indeed, Kalu’s most popular works are Romance stories. *Devil For A Husband* has 50.7 million reads and 1.9 million votes while her *Wattpad* Original work

¹⁰ “The impact of this information can be seen in the entertainment ecosystem [. . .] through content that is republished by partner publishers or adapted for film and TV” (Parnell 531) For example, *After* (Paramount Pictures), *Slow Dancing* (Mediacorp), *Turn On* (Vidio), *Light as a Feather* (Hulu).

Crossing The CEO has 8.5 million reads and 405 000 votes. Both have pay-to-read features. In her author bio she mentions that “CROSSING THE CEO previously Coffee And Papers is now a paid story. DEVIL FOR A HUSBAND has a paywalled exclusive chapter” (Kalu “@Mercy198”). It is undeniable that certain genres are more popular than others, and a certain kind of writing attracts attention. It is within this popular form of writing that *The Song of Us* emerges as a personally satisfying story.

My use of the term ‘personally satisfying’ comes from Bold’s discussion on self-publishing. She says that “Free from the constraints of traditional publishing, self-publishing can be a liberated activity where writers are not obliged to conform to convention and are therefore permitted to search out or share versions that are personally satisfying” (124). While there may be other works that detail everyday lives of Nigerians, or stories about independence that do not necessarily focus on “the fight for freedom”, Kalu’s writing of the anthology is a version that is personally satisfying for her. Drawing on Ramdarshan Bold’s discussion of self-publishing as a “liberated activity” (124) where writers can create versions that are “personally satisfying,” this essay argues that *The Song of Us* embodies this principle. Ramdarshan Bold suggests that self-publishing allows authors to “search out or share versions” that resonate with their own vision, free from the constraints of convention. These personally satisfying stories are also aligned with Wattpad’s “own voices” movement, which, according to Sarah Brouillette’s analysis of Wattpad is founded on the idea that readers benefit psychologically from seeing themselves reflected in literature. The movement promotes writing from one’s own identity, a principle that mirrors *Wattpad*’s own values of providing a primary space for marginalized communities to share their stories with one another. Kalu’s anthology, in its focus on everyday Nigerian life and a nuanced perspective on independence, exemplifies this kind of personally driven creative expression.

3.3 Every Day Nigerian Love Stories on *Wattpad*

The Song of Us appears to be a personally fulfilling project for Kau, reflecting her unique perspective on Nigeria’s Independence, love and romance. The introduction to the anthology reads:

1st October, Nigeria’s Independence day. She turns 60.
Instead of writing the usual Independence story about colonial rule and fight for freedom. I decided to do something different.
This book contains four different chapters of different stories that gives [*sic*] a glimpse into the typical life of an average Nigerian.

It's short, a little witty and averagely relatable. Non-Nigerians are welcome as well. Don't worry. It's a quick read. (Kalu)

This description of the text demonstrates how young writers are navigating their worlds in the twenty-first century. In his discussion of writers who write online to bypass traditional publishing, Adenekan says "The goal [for African writers] is to write fiction and poetry that target African readers first and the rest of the world second" (10). This is demonstrated by her choice to portray the typical life of an average Nigerian, rather than the familiar story of Independence struggles. These short stories are not written with "the poetics of anti-colonialism" (6) that Adesokan speaks about. Instead, Kalu writes stories that have diverse themes that paint an image of a Nigeria that is balanced, with hardship, but also hopeful possibilities. For example, "Hope Till the End" is about a young man named Joseph, who, driven from his village by poverty, struggles to survive and support his family. Consumed by debt and despair, he contemplates suicide but is ultimately stopped by a young, homeless boy with a disability. In another short story in the anthology titled "The Tease of a Boy-Girl Relationship", Lizzy's search for the perfect afro shampoo in a supermarket is interrupted by her friend Rachel, who notices two intriguing young men. A brief exchange culminates in introductions, suggesting the beginning of a possible romance between Lizzy and Kenny. Although Kalu invites non-Nigerians to read the contents of *The Song of Us*, its focus automatically attracts a young Nigerian reader.

I also read the short stories as 'personally satisfying' because of the number of reads and votes compared to her other stories. The anthology is not as popular but is appreciated by Nigerian readers like JS, who comments, "The stories are amazing. They really reminded me of life in Nigeria. I wish you would write more though because they have comforted me today. Happy Independence Day!". The anthology seems a personal gift in celebration of Nigeria's independence. The short stories I analyse below reflect Kalu's identity as a writer. In an interview with @itsalwayslucishe on Instagram, Kalu says, "I am someone with a passion to tell stories where the main characters are ordinary people finding love in a contemporary setting".

3.3.1 Counter-Storytelling of Interreligious Encounters in Mercy Kalu's "Inter-Tribal Union"

Kalu's short story "Inter-Tribal Union" is about a young couple from different ethnicities and with different religious beliefs who are seeking their parents' blessing for marriage. I argue

that the text is a counter-story for several reasons. Firstly, the story challenges the notion of a single narrative by presenting an unconventional love story that transcends boundaries in the context of interreligious encounters, particularly given the historical tensions and conflicts between Christian and Muslim communities. Secondly, it explores the complexities of ethnic identity formation and presents an interesting gender dynamic between the young couple by exploring the theme of sacrificial love. My analysis of comments under the story also demonstrates how both the reader and the writer co-create meaning and negotiate understanding through their interactions.

The story begins with Olumide, a young Muslim man and his unnamed Christian fiancée in her parents' house where the young couple announce their engagement. Upon the couple's announcement, the young woman's parents express reservations about their differences in religion and ethnicity. Their initial disapproval culminates in their withdrawal from the conversation, underscoring the depth of their concerns. A subsequent visit finds Olumide, the young man, declaring his intention to convert to Christianity, a decision met with threats of disownment from his own parents. Despite this familial pressure, Olumide's commitment to the relationship remains steadfast. Following further deliberation, the young woman's parents reluctantly concede to the union, though their reservations regarding the couple's long-term commitment persist. The narrative unfolds as a vignette structured around two key conversations within the young woman's family home. While the young woman remains unnamed, she serves as the focal point, the narrative emphasizing her family's reactions to the engagement and the potential ramifications for her future. It is evident from the conversation that the young couple are of different ethnicities, but Kalu does not mention which and this suggests a different approach to the topic. She is more focused on the young couple's love for each other and the lengths they are willing to go despite the difficulties. In this way, the story demonstrates how Kalu, as a young writer, is navigating her world in the twenty-first century by interrogating interreligious marriage in Nigeria.

I read Kalu's writing of the couple's interfaith and interethnic relationship as a counter-story for several reasons. Kalu is what Nathan Suhr-Sytsma would call a "social thinker" (669) in the way that she explores the interfaith theme in the Nigerian setting. Considering the tension and violence associated with relations between Muslims and Christians in the country (see Tuduks 2021), Kalu's imagining of a romance between two supposedly opposing faiths crosses boundaries in a way that challenges the 'single story' of interfaith encounters. She goes beyond conflict by representing sacrificial love. Her story also explores two possible options in an interfaith marriage, either mixing the two or complete conversion. This reflects the third

purpose of counter-storytelling, which presents the complexity of ethnic identity formation, seeing that their children will be interethnic. In the first conversation, the young woman's father makes a statement:

Marriage is not just about love. Marriage is a union of both families but in your case... You're both from different tribes as well as religions. Have you thought about your religions? You're a Christian and he's Muslim. What religion will your children follow? They'll be confused. (5)

Olumide and his fiancée tell her parents that they will “let [their future children] decide which religion to follow (para. 7). This conversation aligns with Marloes Jansen and Birgit Meyer's framework of studying Christian-Muslim encounters with a “both/and paradigm” instead of an “exclusive either/or” (6). Nwankwo Nwaezeigwe quotes Elaigwu who says that in the “Yoruba experience” of interfaith marriages,

It is common to have a Muslim father, a Christian mother, and a Muslim daughter, a son who worships “Ifa” or “Oshun” and a Christian daughter. If anything, among the Yoruba's it seems that the traditional religion provides a common factor. As many objective observers will confirm, it is not unusual for both Christians and Muslims to visit the “babalawo” or the priest of traditional religion (at times referred to as ‘Juju’ priest) in the end. (qtd. in Nwaezeigwe 74)

According to Jansen and Meyer, “For centuries, there have been high levels of social interaction between Christians and Muslims, and interfaith marriages and reverted conversions [are] not uncommon” (618). However, as one reader expresses, this decision is an extremely difficult one. Reader AA makes an in-text comment attached to this paragraph:

Don't get me wrong, I'm not the most troubled by the tribe you hail from. My worries resided in the fact that your religion is different from ours. As a deacon in the church, what kind of Christian will I be if I let my daughter get married to a Muslim? A family is supposed to be one. (para. 11)

AA says, “I swear the matter tuff, me I no go wan dey their shoe”, meaning ‘the matter is tough, and I would not want to be in their shoes’. This comment shows an awareness and thought about the difficulty, not only of the decision but of their future as the couple attempt to join their lives as husband and wife. AA also shows personal understanding and relatability through their comment when they discover that the young woman's father is a deacon in the church.

AA says, “And her pale na deacon” meaning ‘and her father is a deacon’. By reiterating this fact, the reader expresses the tension of the situation.

It is here that I want to highlight the absence of specific detail in how Kalu tells the story. This makes a difference in how readers would interpret the stories, depending on their own backgrounds, locations and beliefs. As Nwaezeigwe argues,

The patterns of reaction to both interreligious conversion and interreligious marriages differ markedly among the different Nigerian ethno-religious groups. These differing patterns are in effect inextricably bound to the equally differing cultural, historical and religious backgrounds of the people. (73)

Nwaezeigwe also identifies “three major patterns of approach and reaction” (73) which exist based on cultural and historical background. The Hausa-Fulani and related groups in Northern Nigeria exhibit strong opposition to the spread of Christianity and Western culture. Their reactions include outright jihad, commercial linkages, political patronage, coercion, interreligious marriage, and the Madrassa Almajiri cell system of education. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is viewed as rebellion and often met with severe consequences, including violence. The Yoruba of Western Nigeria show a more tolerant and accommodating approach to interreligious conversion and interfaith marriages. Both Christianity and Islam hold sway among the Yoruba, with traditional religious beliefs also maintaining a presence. Interreligious marriages are widespread and practised with little conflict, and the Yoruba often adopt practices from both religions. The Igbo of Eastern Nigeria exhibit strong opposition to conversion to Islam. The Igbo are predominantly Christian and have a historical and cultural attachment to Christianity. Conversion to Islam is often viewed with social disdain, and interreligious marriages between Igbo Christians and Hausa-Fulani Muslims are rare and seen as acts of religious apostasy. Although these patterns exist, Kalu’s omission of which exact pairing elicits personal interpretation from each reader, based on their cultural background and location.

In light of these three different patterns of reaction, I read the ending of the short story as a counter-story. Firstly, the story does not end with the decision for the coexistence of their beliefs, and the main character does not revert to Islam but decides to convert to Christianity (para. 25).

“Do you know what you’re trying to get yourself in? Christianity is not just a religion. It’s a practice. It’s a way of life. It’s you accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior [*sic*]. Do you believe you’re capable of leaving your family, religion and every other

thing in the world to come to him?” He posed the question much clearer for him to understand the gravity of his decision.

Yes, he would prefer his daughter marries a young man from a well trained Christian home but here was a young man willing to fight the society and accept Christ solemnly to become his son-in-law. To be frank, he wasn’t excited about his reasons for converting but it was better than two religion under one roof. He didn’t believe any home could pull it off.

“Yes sir.” His reply came soon after a slight hesitation. (para. 31-33)

Olumide decides to convert to Christianity as an act of sacrificial love, surprising even his fiancée, because he loves her and cannot lose her and is “ready to do something this big for her sake” (para. 27). He takes it upon himself to bear the brunt of ostracisation, acknowledging that he is making this decision despite his parents threatening to disown him. In addition, although hesitant, he chooses to leave behind “family, religion and every other thing in the world” (para. 31). Furthermore, his choice to convert reflects a turn in writings from Nigeria. Christopher Babatunde Ogunyemi discusses the ways in which women were portrayed in first and second-generation Nigerian writing. Women were written from a male perspective; representations were biased and “mostly used women as a tool to further plot lines” (Ogunyemi 131). He explains that women writers reacted to first and second-generation writing by “producing different, empowering representations there were more options and possibilities for women characters in Nigerian literature” (132). Kalu is one of these writers, writing from a historical present where she has to “navigate the past, present and the future to present in their writing the full spectrum of oppressions women experience as gendered subjects” (131). Furthermore, Kalu’s writing incorporates the approach that Yomi Olusegun-Joseph attributes to third-generation writers who disturb the patriarchal patterns of Nigerian literary discourse by portraying both their male and female characters as equally suffering from and triumphing over the social and existential situations they come into (70). The young woman in “Inter-Tribal Union” is not welcome in Olumide’s family because he has made the choice to marry her, but she also does not have to make the sacrifice that might bring ostracisation in her community. The young man uses the power of choice to benefit his wife, knowing that he will have to face the consequences and complications that arise with his familial and religious relationships.

Although Kalu ends the story with Olumide’s decision to convert, readers express that it is not as easy as she presents it, emphasising the counter-storytelling nature of the text. Reader JS says, “Omo, it’s not as easy as you write it here oh. Nah battle for real life.” This starts a conversation with the writer and demonstrates how readers and writers can interact on digital

platforms. Kalu responds and says, “Yeah that’s right. He made his decision, but we all know both families won’t needlessly take it lightly.” To which JS responds with, “I know. Underneath this string of comments, another reader, LT, responds to the text with:

Wow, that’s a tough one.
These kind of things won’t happen in my house o
My papa no go wan hear say, so so so and so.
And this decision is not a light one either. Wow.
Nice one 👍 👍

The comments show how readers relate the story to their own lives. As Rebora and Pianzola discuss, during reading, “values are negotiated; identities are constructed; authors interact with readers; metaphors are interpreted; intertextual connections are built; factors like “experiential background” [126] and “personal relevance” [127] affect reader response; etc.” (2). In their dynamic interaction as reader and writer, JS and Kalu collaboratively negotiate their values and understanding of the complex situation. Kalu recognises the gravity of the scenario, acknowledging that “both families won’t needlessly take it lightly.” This is evident in the way the young woman’s parents rigorously question Olumide and their reluctance to accept his decision to convert. LT, on the other hand, demonstrates her experiential background and personal relevance by noting that her father would have significant input. She also expresses a strong conviction that such an event would be inconceivable in her family, indicating that it is not even a viable option for her.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter examines how Mercy Kalu’s short story “Inter-Tribal Union” is a counter-story in its representation of interreligious encounters. Considering the tension and violence often associated with relations between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, Kalu’s imagining of a romance between two supposedly opposing faiths crosses boundaries in a way that challenges the ‘single story’ of interfaith encounters. By representing sacrificial love, she goes beyond the typical narratives of conflict, offering a nuanced perspective on interfaith relationships.

Kalu’s story also explores two possible options in an interfaith marriage: either mixing the two faiths or complete conversion. This exploration reflects the third purpose of counter-storytelling, which is to highlight the complexity of ethnic identity formation, particularly in

the context of interethnic children. Her narrative highlights the multilayered nature of identity and the various ways in which it can be shaped and negotiated.

Lastly, Kalu's writing reflects a significant shift in how gender relations are represented in literature. She empowers her female character through her fiancé's decision to sacrifice, which is a departure from traditional gender dynamics. The young woman in "Inter-Tribal Union" faces resistance from Olumide's family due to his choice to marry her, but she is spared the need to make a sacrifice that might lead to ostracization in her own community. Instead, Olumide uses the power of choice to benefit his wife, fully aware that he will have to face the consequences and complications that arise with his familial and religious relationships.

Kalu's narrative not only challenges the 'single story' of interfaith conflict but also provides an exploration of identity, choice, and sacrifice. Her work offers a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in interfaith and interethnic relationships, contributing to a more nuanced and inclusive literary discourse.

Kalu's social media presence is a prime example of social authorship. She demonstrates how emerging authors accrue social capital to raise awareness around themselves and their work and interact with others to promote their writing. Despite already being popular on *Wattpad* and multiple social media platforms, Kalu continues to engage her followers by using social media trends and cultural references. As a digital native, she seamlessly combines social media with her writing, enhancing her reach and impact.

Her popularity on these platforms allows her to write personally driven stories that celebrate her home country's independence. While most of her works have garnered the attention of *Wattpad*'s international audience, the short stories in *The Song of Us* are specifically directed towards Nigerian readers on the platform. In these stories, Kalu combines her goal of writing contemporary love stories with a glimpse into the everyday life of Nigerians, providing a unique perspective.

As a social author and social thinker, Kalu interacts with her readers on *Wattpad*, demonstrating the negotiation of values and meaning-making through conversation. Kalu's reader is someone who is familiar with Nigeria's history and has been a part of it. This reader also appreciates her decision to write this kind of anthology, which reflects a deep understanding and connection to the cultural context. Her readers are active and engaged, and their conversations add to the understanding of the text. This dynamic interaction not only enriches the reading experience but also highlights the collaborative nature of literary creation in the digital age. Her work not only celebrates personal and cultural histories but also encourages a sense of community and shared meaning among her readers.

Chapter Four: *fundza.mobi* as a Counter-storytelling Platform for South African Youth

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I focus on the texts as counter-storytelling texts rather than the platforms themselves. In this chapter, I argue that FunDza's digital platform *fundza.mobi* is a counter-storytelling platform in its focus on publishing stories that are appealing and educational for South African youth. While *fundza.mobi* can be regarded as a counter-storytelling platform, not all of my chosen stories for analysis necessarily reflect this characteristic. To provide context, I will first establish *fundza.mobi* as a counter-storytelling platform. Then, I will analyse a selection of five short stories that share a common theme of rural-to-urban migration, each featuring a young woman as the protagonist who has relocated to the city in pursuit of employment or a better life.

The chapter begins with a brief outline of YAL in South Africa and a discussion about gendered rural-to-urban migration. I then trace the evolution of the *fundza.mobi* platform from its inception to its current operational status while examining FunDza's goals, development phases, and the factors that have shaped its growth and current functionality. My analysis will examine how each writer portrays the experiences of young women who face various challenges including abusive relationships, unemployment, and kidnapping. Guided by Jessica Murray's research, I will employ a feminist literary analysis approach to explore the representation of women and gendered violence in these literary texts. This approach aims to uncover embedded patriarchal assumptions and to create a space to explore the relationships between literature, society, and women's experiences. In the first portion of the analysis, I argue that while "The Hard Life" by Philane Ndabe and "Reneilwe" by Mogale Kgashane inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes about young women in the city, Zukiswa Phakama's "I Will Find My Way" offers a counter-narrative of hope and empowerment that subverts common tropes. Secondly, I conduct a close reading of "In Search of Greener Pastures" by Oyama Comba and argue that she subverts the fairy-tale romance trope to highlight the pervasiveness of violence in South African society. Lastly, I show how "Unlocked" interrogates internalised misogyny and benevolent sexism in romantic relationships through Akhona Mlenga's writing style and characterisation. In addition, I use readers' comments to augment my analysis using reader-response theory.

4.2 Contextual Background

This part of the chapter provides context for understanding *fundza.mobi* as a counter-storytelling platform, a designation that I will argue is central to FunDza's mission.

4.2.1 Young Adult Literature in South Africa

According to Sandra Stadler, when it comes to YAL, "literary texts represent the present socio-economic climate in South Africa to a surprisingly accurate extent" (qtd. in Jenkins page 116). Young adults want to be able to see their lives and experiences in the stories they read. Whether it is genre fiction (ranging from fantasy to post-apocalyptic fiction) or romance and drama stories, South African YAL almost always parallels the social, economic and cultural climate at the time. In the discussion below, I will outline the development of YAL in South Africa.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, three channels of Young Adult fiction - written for readers aged 12 to 18 - that included characters of different races emerged from what had previously been focused on white characters and their lives. According to Judith Bentley and Peter Midgley, the first channel was a group of white authors in the 1970s who "began writing novels that cautiously explored what life was across colour lines" (para. 7). This continued into the 1980s and 90s with crossover fiction involving cross-cultural friendships with stories like *Mystery at Cove Rock* (1990) and *Pedal Me Faster* (1995) by Beryl Bowie and *The Joining* (1996) by Peter Slingsby. These novels explored friendships between teenagers and children of different races. The second channel had black and coloured writers like Dianne Case with fictional novels such as *Love, David* (1986) and *92 Queens Road* (1991). These writers mostly wrote about the experiences of young people in South Africa during apartheid. The third channel had writers who crossed the colour lines but reinforced stereotypes and prejudice in their narratives. According to Judith Inggs, the stories depicted white characters as "occup[ying] privileged positions of power, while young black characters were locked into positions of powerlessness from which it was difficult to break out" (36). In these stories, black and coloured characters were in the novels to support white characters emotionally and physically yet remained economically and socially disenfranchised.

The end of the apartheid regime in 1994 brought literature that reflected the tension of transition. Bentley and Midgley give examples of literature that reflected the dislocation in the nation and families, with texts like *Mpho's Search* (1994) by Sandra Braude and *Joe Cassidy*

and the *Red Hot Cha-Cha* (1994) by Janet Smith.¹¹ Rather than addressing the entire social system, most Young Adult novels were political at the interpersonal level.

In the early 2000s, writers started to explore what it meant to be a young adult in the new South Africa. Inggs analyses five novels set between 2002 and 2005 to explore how “South African writers make use of language and focalisation to construct their adolescent characters” (37).¹² She examines whether narratives moved away from focalising characters through the dominant worldview. According to her findings, positive improvements include creating different subject positions for readers and writing about characters from South African ethnicities and cultures other than the economically dominating English-speaking and middle-class culture. However, the authors struggled to avoid focalisation through that culture’s perspective. For instance, Sandile Memela attempted to subvert the prevailing ideology in *Flowers of the Nation*, but his efforts were generally unsuccessful due to the work’s overtly didactic tone. In addition, the fact that white authors created two of the works with black characters may have prevented them from presenting a potentially foreign viewpoint because of their cultural background (Inggs 48). The strong didactic tone is characteristic of YAL before the twenty-first century. In my analysis of the texts from *fundza.mobi*, I will demonstrate how this didactic nature still exists in some form. For the most part, the stories are narratives that represent young lives and their experiences, but there are still stories with overly didactic undertones.

Inggs also observes that there was a difference between black and white writers’ novels. Although the novels’ black and white characters face similar obstacles and issues, they “inhabit very different spaces” (35). This can be attributed to the segregation laws of apartheid and the effects thereof in democratic South Africa. In his article in 2004, Shaun Irlam points out that at the time, “Increasingly, a new literature of separate development [was] emerging, in which communities once submerged in their common resistance to apartheid now finally exercise the liberty to explore their own histories and assert their own agendas” (698). Twenty years on, Irlam’s findings persist, at least within the confines of *fundza.mobi*. The literature published on *fundza.mobi* exhibits this development in its subject matter and themes. Most texts focus on

¹¹ Mpho’s Search follows a 13-year-old boy who is forced to leave the farm where he was working after a sheep is stolen. He goes to Johannesburg to look for his father and must survive on the streets until he finds his father. His is a happy ending – he finds his father right before the 1994 elections. Cassidy, in Smith’s novel, does not quite have a celebratory ending. She returns to South Africa after eight years in exile and soon after loses her father.

¹²Inggs analyses *Welcome to the Martin Tudhope Show!* (2002) by Sarah Britten, *Eighth Man* (2002) by Michael Williams, *Someone Called Lindiwe* (2003) by Gail Smith, *Flowers of the Nation* (2005) by Sandile Memela and *The Mending Season* (2005) by Kagiso Lesego Molope.

people of colour as their protagonists and deal with issues specific to the demographic. The stories are situated within different cultural frameworks, and authors include South African languages and colloquialisms in the texts. On *fundza.mobi*, writers can publish in isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, Afrikaaps and Sepedi. Usually, texts in different languages are used for educational purposes, but FunDza has facilitated translated texts outside the educational sphere.

4.2.2 Gendered Migration Narratives in South Africa

Migration, an age-old phenomenon in South Africa, particularly the movement from village to city, resonates powerfully as a key theme in the chosen short stories. Thus, it is a relatable theme to many readers on *fundza.mobi*. It is also helpful as a theme to portray the challenges that youth face as they transition into young adults. Using Alan Mabin, Andrew Partridge and Stephanie Bosch Santana's scholarship, I will outline rural-to-urban migration in South Africa below. In addition, I will examine gendered migration in South Africa, focusing on representations and experiences of female characters within this context.

To summarise, rural-to-urban migration in South Africa started before the 1850s. People moved to towns searching for work in docks, warehouses, railways and manufacturing enterprises. From the 1850s to the 1870s, mining and construction became the primary reason people migrated from villages to towns. After the South African War of 1899 to 1902, some moved back to rural areas for farming, but with farm evictions and the National Party Government coming into power, many households that relied on farming moved to towns. During the apartheid regime, with forced removals and the creation of townships, people migrated for work in urban areas (Mabin 16). As a result, the migrant breadwinners' financial contributions would eventually become a substantial source of income for rural communities in their homelands (Riley and Phaswana 2). Legislation such as the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, which was developed during apartheid rule in South Africa, led to migratory patterns, which have continued even after its abolition in 1994 (Partridge 7). The outcome is most apparent in rural-urban migration, where a circular labour migration pattern emerged. Rural households typically send one or more members to the city to work for a brief period before they return to the rural household as part of this labour migration (7). At present, people continue to move to the city to find jobs so they can alleviate the pressure on their families. Some move for higher education – a step towards becoming someone a family can rely on financially.

These migratory patterns have been included in South African literary culture, from film to Isicathamiya poetry and short stories in *Drum*. Most notable is the film *African Jim* produced by Eric Rutherford in 1940. Bosch Santana explains how this film inspired migrant stories in *Drum*. In the 1950s, when *Drum* magazine was started, the magazine published several stories that focused on African migration to the city to appeal to a diasporic audience. Many of these stories featured migrants as protagonists; they would go to the city to earn money and return to the rural areas, or to their countries with what they had earned. Eventually, this form of fiction came to be called ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’. In these narratives, the city is seen as a “means to an end” (173). Bosch Santana explains that the most central feature of these stories was that the migrant would always return to the village. Nevertheless, this return to the rural areas in the stories was connected to the apartheid government’s efforts to keep the black urban population connected to their rural homelands, so they would not settle permanently in the city. Thus, *Drum*’s attempt at reproducing the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ story failed; the first magazine issue centred on the theme struggled to sell. In response, *Drum* changed the style and content to appeal to South Africans who were choosing to settle in Johannesburg instead of participating in circulatory migration. Writers moved away from writing ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ stories to writing the city as the setting of their stories. In these stories, “the figure of the migrant was steadily replaced by that of the gangster, who was envisioned as a product of the urban township” (173). The characters would not return to the village but would permanently relocate. The decision to write these characters in this way was also political; the gangster or tsotsi’s criminality was presented as glamorous and an act of subversion to the apartheid order that restricted the movement, desire and consumer habits of black South Africans.

Considering the history of stories representing migration from rural areas to the village, I intend to focus on the representation of young women’s migration experiences in *fundza.mobi* stories. Before that, it is necessary to briefly overview the representation of young women in stories from the *Drum* era and beyond. Using research by Rachel Johnson, Edward Mgaya and Dorrit Posel, I argue that the characters in my chosen *fundza.mobi* stories symbolise a shift in the official narratives surrounding women’s migration from rural to urban areas.

Male protagonists typically dominated migration stories, and women were represented either as characters caring for the home, employed as domestic workers or as “good-time girls”. Johnson outlines the representation of young women in *Drum*. They were represented through the “trope of the ‘modern miss’” (Johnson 3), embodying both progress and the fear of moral breakdown in society. The magazine focused on their dress, economic empowerment and sexual behaviour as symbols of modernity. However, these young women were “defined and

discussed through the nature of their relationship to men” (Johnson 9). Mgaya’s article supports Johnson’s point about the positioning of women in migration stories or historical accounts. He argues that “female migrations were taken into accounts [*sic*] only if they fit into the same criteria as patterns of male labour migration”, and women were viewed as passive followers of male migrants (83). However, there was a shift in studies from the 1990s, where scholars began to focus on the female migration experience and more narratives that recognised women’s agency and their active roles as migrants in their own right. Carol S. Camlin, Rachel C. Snow and Victoria Hosegood’s study is significant in this regard; they outline what they call “the feminisation of internal migration” in South Africa and explore the intricacies of female migration in the country. They also give insight into the drivers of migration in South Africa, stating that “In the first decade of the 21st century in South Africa, the sending of a female migrant has become an essential livelihood strategy particularly advantageous to the poorest households” (Camlin et al. 531). I am interested in this shift away from gender-blind approaches when it comes to my selected texts. Most of my chosen *fundza.mobi* stories emphasise women’s agency or focalise female characters in migration narratives. In each story, the protagonist is a young woman who has chosen to go to the city to look for work or a better life. The young women in each short story represent different experiences of women moving to the city for work or a better future. Considering 71% of *fundza.mobi* readers are female (FunDza “Annual Report 2015” 15), these stories focus on young women as migrants, which is important for them to see, especially since *fundza.mobi* prioritises relatable stories for South African youth.

4.2.3 The Pervasiveness of Violence and the Persistence of Patriarchy

In my discussion of migration above, I mentioned that male protagonists dominated migration stories and women were either supporting characters or written with the “modern miss” (Johnson 3) or “good time girl” trope. While the gangster replaced the figure of the migrant as an act of subversion toward the apartheid government, these representations covertly carried certain attitudes towards women. The following discussion draws on scholars such as Pumla Dineo Gqola, Peter Glicke and Susan T. Fiske, Jessica Murray, Katherine Graaf and Lindy Heineken to make connections between gender relations, violence and South Africa’s history. In addition, I outline my chosen analytical approach to the short stories.

In her analysis on gendered violence in South Africa, Murray states, “When it comes to gender, epistemic and discursive violence can never be completely separated from their

psychic and physical manifestations on the minds and bodies of women” (24). Violence and threats of violence towards women are never separate from the beliefs and constructions of gender. In South Africa, this violence is attached to the country’s history of apartheid and colonisation. Apartheid norms justified violence enacted on disempowered groups by dominant groups across race and gender. In her essay about endemic gender-based violence, Gqola argues that the inability to dismantle the violent culture of apartheid means that violence is now considered a “constant” companion. The failure to deconstruct this violence, its roots and how it affects society continues to affect how South African society functions. Graaff and Heinecken explain that during apartheid, “South Africa [along with many other countries] had high levels of gender inequality alongside the more legislated racial equality” (627). After 1994, legislation and laws that affirmed the rights and dignity of women were only practised in the public sphere. Outside of the constitution and places where women, whom Gqola calls honorary men, are in positions of power, women still face inequality and violence in different ways.¹³

I return to Murray’s argument that violence and threats of violence towards women are never separate from the beliefs and constructions of gender. Glick and Fiske’s ambivalent sexism theory is useful here. They hypothesise that “prejudice toward women functions through ambivalent attitudes that encompass both negative and seemingly positive beliefs towards women” (776-777). This hypothesis implies that underlying beliefs can exist even when the beliefs seem positive. Glick and Fiske attribute the negative beliefs to hostile sexism, which is characterised by a negative and aggressive attitude towards women, often accompanied by a desire to dominate, control, or harm them. With hostile sexism, women who deviate from traditional gender norms are perceived as threats to men’s power and the social order (776). The seemingly positive beliefs fall under benevolent sexism, which refers to attitudes that idealise traditional gender roles and promote women’s and men’s interdependence in heterosexual relationships. It consists of three facets: heterosexual interdependence, complementary gender differentiation (the belief that women and men have fundamentally

¹³ Although statistics have decreased over the past few years, they remain high. SAPS recorded 9 516 rape/sexual assault and kidnapping cases in 2022, double from 2021. Nicole Ludolph quotes Loyiso Saliso, one of the founders of the #TotalShutdown movement that started in 2018, saying “We have a government with a PhD in drafting advanced policy, but an allergy when it comes to implementing it” (par.11). In 2022, there were plans to pass the National Council on Gender-Based Violence And Femicide Bill. However, there have been delays due to the lack of skills, money or power to complete it. According to Ludolph, the national council’s plan to tackle GBVF has not been established since it was promised in 2018. A previous version of an anti-GBV council was established in 2012 to implement the 2007-launched 365-day national action plan to eliminate gender violence. The Commission for Gender Equality discovered that the organisation disintegrated after two years because its legal authority was unclear, lacked sufficient funding, and had insufficient non-governmental representation (para. 3-6). The high statistics and the lack of transformative action prove that endemic gender-based violence remains a problem in South Africa.

different social attributes), and protective paternalism (the idea that men must protect and provide for women). These attitudes perpetuate traditional divisions of roles and status and are often manifested in courtship scripts and expectations around marriage and relationships (777). Leaper et al. also argue that, ironically, many courtship practices rooted in protective paternalism are perceived as desirable by both women and men who might otherwise reject sexist ideologies. However, as they argue, this sentiment belies the harsh reality that romantic relationships with men are often the context in which women face the most significant risk of violence.

Graaff and Heineken argue that the norms of more traditional or conservative societies tend to put women in subordinate positions to men, which often justifies violence toward women. In gender-unequal societies, “women are seen as less important than men, or as men’s possessions” (Graaff and Heineken 627). Ambivalent sexism is linked to the perpetuation of victim-blaming myths surrounding intimate partner violence, sexual assault and men’s aggression. According to Linda Mshweshwe, treating women as subordinates is rooted in strong patriarchal social structures that encourage men to “dominate, oppress and exploit women in the public and private sphere” (2). Most relevant to my argument are the norms in portraying romantic narratives. Mshweshwe refers to Lelaurain et al. who argue that romance narratives contribute to violence against women by portraying men as the rescuers who are “naturally strong, full of power and sure of themselves” (3) compared to women who are portrayed as needing to be rescued or complete and fulfilled by men. Women become objects to be taken hold of and owned rather than partners. The seeming contradiction of romantic love existing alongside the legitimization of violence towards women by romantic partners is determined by “the internalisation of patriarchal ideologies defining gender-symbolic roles and justifying male domination” (Lelaurain et al. 6). Gqola argues that “‘normal’ heterosexual ‘play’ contains codes that inscribe female passivity and masculine aggression” (117). She gives the example of the presumption that females “play hard to get” and should thus be pursued regardless of what they say and the absurd and oppressive claims that women cannot say what they mean and mean what they say (117). These norms turn into disregarding women’s agency when left unchecked, and women’s unwillingness is met with displays of dominance and violence. It is essential, then, to examine representations of gender relations within texts through feminist literary analysis.

Murray’s argument informs my decision to adopt this analytical approach to the portrayal of women and gendered violence in texts. She argues that “we should seize the opportunity to explore how textual representations shed light on the ongoing vulnerability of

women in our society, as a first step towards imagining a very different type of society (24). Murray also argues that literary texts open up “creative spaces where authors can expose the persistence of patriarchy” (24). On *fundza.mobi*, for example, readers can interact with texts that contain plots, themes or characters that demonstrate the persistence of patriarchy. Through questions and talking points within the short stories, they can start to think about these themes in relation to their own lives. At the same time, texts can challenge prevalent patriarchal beliefs by representing alternate, less oppressive perspectives on women and their experiences.

Murray also gives three reasons for exploring textual representations through feminist literary analysis. Firstly, feminist literary analysis uncovers the patriarchal assumptions embedded in texts, making the reader aware of “the unspoken, gendered attitudes that render women vulnerable to silencing and violence” (24). Secondly, analysing textual representations in this way shows how literature opens space for issues that historically have been difficult to discuss, such as gender violence, female sexuality and women’s bodies. Thirdly, it offers space for conversations opened by fiction for further exploration with theoretical interventions that give more insight (24). Observation of the *fundza.mobi* library and the chosen short stories reveal three types of stories. The first type of story is written to provide more understanding of gender relations and the oppression of women in society such as the “Bridging Divides” project, where authors wrote stories that spoke to gender inequality specifically. These stories opened up the space for discussion through questions at the end of each story. The second type of story is written for entertainment while shedding light on women’s experiences in society and potentially offering alternative representations of women from what has come before. The third story is a cautionary tale that unwittingly perpetuates gender norms or silences women in the way the author represents female characters.

4.2.4 The *fundza.mobi* Revolution: A Review of Research on FunDza’s Reading Platform

Multiple studies have been conducted on FunDza over the years. Each has a different focus, depending on the area of study. Johann Louw and Joha Louw Potgieter’s 2015 commentary examines FunDza’s program to see its effectiveness in “addressing the issue of low literacy rates in South Africa by leveraging mobile phone technology” (122). They review three other studies and conclude that FunDza improves reading material accessibility for young people in “book-poor” (121) environments. In the same year, Belinda Mendelowitz used *fundza.mobi* as a tool in a creative writing course for pre-service teachers. Her study aimed to show what kind

of creative freedom is most productive for imaginative writing when directed towards specific audiences. The pre-service teachers wrote short stories for the *fundza.mobi* website and reflective essays. When she examined the data, she found that the platform demonstrates how the digital revolution offers opportunities for writers to receive alternative peer feedback and re-imagine themselves and others in the writing process. The positive findings of Mendelowitz's study, along with celebratory articles like Jay Heale's "The Exciting Progress of South African Literature for Young Readers," indicate FunDza's widespread recognition. In this article, Heale explores South African children's literature in English, examining its characteristics during the apartheid era, its shifts after the pivotal year of 1994, its status in 2015, and finally, its potential future developments. He briefly mentions FunDza, citing it as the future of books for children and youth. To him, FunDza is a success story because of its ability to discern that the best way to reach teenagers is through their cell phones. Ashleigh Harris notes FunDza's success, too, and argues that an active, social space is key to FunDza's success. Writers can read and comment on each other's work, which "develops the literary quality of the work" (Harris 9).

Although some studies celebrate FunDza's achievements, others, such as those by Elizabeth Le Roux, criticise certain aspects of the platform or raise interesting points about measuring success. In her article titled "Concepts of Reading in South African Reading Promotion Campaigns", Le Roux evaluates the sustainability and effectiveness of reading promotion campaigns in South Africa. The article examines how these campaigns are conceptualised, the dominant ideologies and social meanings they reflect, and the metaphors used to promote reading. It also explores the mismatch between the aims of these campaigns and their actual outcomes, questioning whether the way they are framed affects their sustainability and impact. The article ultimately seeks to understand how reading campaigns can be better designed to achieve their intended goals. One of her main critiques is that campaigns will use quantitative terms such as the number of titles published, books donated or the number of participants to measure abstract concepts such as development, empowerment or improved reading levels. She argues that these numerical measures can show how many children were reached through a campaign, but they do not provide insight into the actual effects of the campaign on those children or on society at large. This mismatch may contribute to the perception that reading promotion campaigns have little or no lasting impact. The article suggests that more qualitative measures, such as surveys assessing improvements in reading skills, confidence, and enjoyment, could provide a better understanding of the true impact and sustainability that campaigns produce. Le Roux mentions that FunDza's focus is on

“achievement reading” (4), which is the concept of making progress through literacy, often visualised through the metaphor of climbing a ladder. This type of reading is associated with self-improvement, education, and attaining social rewards such as better jobs and higher social status. In contrast, “leisure reading” (4) is defined as the absorption of high culture in one's free time, specifically through literary appreciation, often visualised through the metaphor of consuming books. This type of reading is seen as a more passive activity, where readers enjoy books for pleasure and relaxation. She suggests that FunDza could measure aspects of enjoyment in reading, too. While Le Roux makes essential points about the impact of mismatched measurements, one could argue that her evaluation of FunDza is primarily from the perspective of a reading campaign, which may not fully capture the organisation's broader contributions and innovative approaches. FunDza has been releasing reports detailing readers' experiences and reading growth as an organisation. “Achievement reading” may have been reflected in FunDza's previous reports; however, in the 10 Years of Impact Report, some of the self-reported results from readers include improved or increased reading enjoyment.

There are also more in-depth quantitative gaps that show more tangible results from reader interactions with FunDza. Three studies stand out in this regard. Colin Tredoux, Johann Louw, and Joha Louw-Potgieter's study, “Mobile phones and reading for enjoyment: evidence of use and behaviour change,” investigates the impact of FunDza's mobile reading program on young South Africans' reading habits. The authors argue that mobile technology can effectively improve reading literacy by increasing access to reading materials, leading to positive changes in reading behaviour and enjoyment. Their research analysed computer logs of user activity, conducted pre- and post-tests to assess changes in reading habits and enjoyment and examined the correlation between program participation and self-rated reading proficiency, frequency, and enjoyment. The study found that FunDza successfully increased access to reading material in underserved communities, with high usage and significant amounts of material read. Program participation positively influenced various reading behaviours, with increased reading correlating with higher enjoyment, self-rated reading ability, reading duration, and out-of-school reading. Notably, the study observed a gender disparity in participation, with females demonstrating higher engagement, motivation, and reading volume. The authors conclude that FunDza effectively promotes literacy and promotes a love of reading, highlighting mobile technology's potential in addressing literacy challenges and advocating for further research on long-term impacts.

Kelly De Villiers, Colin Tredoux, and Johan Louw's study, “Gender Differences in Reading Preference: Evidence from a Mobile Phone Platform,” explores reading preferences

among young South African readers from low-resource communities using data from the *fundza.mobi* platform. The authors argue that distinct gender differences exist in these preferences, observable through both self-reported choices and actual reading behaviour. Analysing self-reported preferences from 2,775 readers and examining actual site visits, the study investigated genre preferences and their implications for reading promotion. Findings revealed shared preferences for genres like romance, drama, non-fiction, and South African content, with male readers favouring sports-related material and female readers preferring romance and drama. Female readers accessed material more frequently and read more overall. The most popular genres for both genders were drama, romance, biography, and action/adventure. The study concludes that while some gender differences exist, considerable overlap in genre preference also exists, emphasising the need for diverse reading material and further research to understand the long-term impact of mobile reading programs, particularly for engaging male readers.

Fatima Vally Essa and Mendelowitz's study explores how print-based and performative storytelling can help students work together in an English classroom. Their research focuses on understanding the unique benefits of each type of storytelling and how they help students use language, creativity, and social skills. By analysing data from a group of five students engaged in collaborative storytelling, the study shows that this approach creates multiple opportunities for students to engage and use various resources. This helps students reflect on their past experiences, imagine new possibilities for themselves, and use storytelling to take social action. The study highlights the potential of collaborative storytelling interventions to empower learners and offer rich opportunities for language and literacy development.

In my discussion of FunDza, I draw from these scholars to contextualise *fundza.mobi* as a counter-storytelling platform. I also draw from Oriole Friedemann's descriptions of *fundza.mobi* texts. I use her Master's thesis, to trace FunDza's mobi site interface and updates to the *fundza.mobi* platform.¹⁴ Overall, her thesis explores how digital media and the internet have empowered African storytellers to share their narratives directly with local and global audiences, bypassing traditional publishing gatekeepers. It examines various digital platforms and formats, including online literature projects (African Storybook Reader, FunDza, Long Story SHORT), blog-based novels, web series, and transmedia documentaries. While most of

¹⁴ A .mobi Web site or mobi site is "a regular Web site accessible from Internet browsers on any device, including desktop computers". However, "to register a .mobi domain name, a site must meet specific requirements that make it easy to view and use from mobile devices such as smart phones and personal digital assistants" (Hostway Team para. 1).

the studies reviewed evaluate FunDza and *fundza.mobi* from a reading achievement, impact, and educational standpoint, providing a solid foundation for my discussion, I intend to explore the operational aspects of *fundza.mobi* as an African YAL platform and offer a detailed analysis of selected short stories.

4.2.5 #LoveReading #LoveWriting and #LoveLearning: Introducing *FunDza*

Before examining the short stories on *fundza.mobi*, it is necessary to explore The FunDza Literacy Trust as a literacy organisation and explore the platform's writing and publishing culture. My contextualisation of *fundza.mobi* as a YAL platform draws from scholars such as Oriole Friedemann, Belinda Mendelowitz, Fatima Vally Essa and Johann Louw and Joha Louw-Potgieter. Additionally, I use Sandra Hughes Hassell's four purposes of counter-storytelling to present FunDza as a counter-storytelling platform.

In the previous chapters, I focus on the texts as counter-storytelling texts rather than the platforms themselves. Overall, I read *fundza.mobi* as a counter-storytelling platform due to its position as a South African platform and FunDza's goals as a literacy organisation. In 2011, Cover2Cover Books established FunDza, a non-profit literacy organisation dedicated to improving South Africa's literacy levels by encouraging youth to read for pleasure, write for meaning and learn for life (FunDza). The organisation was spearheaded by Siki Mgabadieli, Mignon Hardie, Lebogang Rangaka, Andrew Weeks on the board of trustees and Dorothy Dyer, Nicci Giles and Ros Haden on the management team (FunDza "Annual Report 2011-2012"). Research at the time showed that many children and young adults in South Africa were illiterate or could not read for meaning. In 2011, "82% of Grade 4 learners struggled with reading comprehension" (Oxford University Press para. 10). In addition, according to a 2016 national survey into the reading and book reading behaviour of adult South Africans commissioned by the South African Book Development Council, only 14% of the country's adults were identified as active readers, whereas 74% were identified as having "low potential" to take part in any reading activity (Final Report 4). The study concluded that two main barriers were the cost of books and access to reading materials, with 58% of households lacking any kind of book whatsoever (29). In light of this crisis, the trust started a literacy project targeted towards improving the reading culture amongst the youth in South Africa's impoverished and poorly educated communities (FunDza Literacy Trust). *FunDza*'s inception was a response to the literacy crisis and the lack of exciting and appropriate reading material for young South Africans.

Dorothy Dyer explains that “in South Africa, there was little exciting or accessible material available to teens in which they could recognise themselves and their worlds” (FunDza “10 Years of Impact” para. 5). As an organisation, FunDza realised that to grab the attention of the largely impoverished and poorly educated youth, there was a need for South African stories of “high appeal that are supported by an energised reading community” (FunDza “10 Years of Impact” para. 5). Both these statements point towards literacy as a social practice. It is not just about reading and writing but how people use language and literacy to construct meaning, interact with others and navigate their worlds. As Friedmann argues, if literacy is a social practice, then popularising it is much more effective if people are exposed to literature that appeals to them rather than being forced to read uninteresting material (30), which FunDza aims to do. This is evident in the types of stories found on the platform and the name and brand hashtags they chose. On the *fundza.mobi* library “about” page, they explain how the name came about: “

Take ‘Funda’ the isiXhosa word for ‘to read’ or ‘to learn’.
Add a ‘Z’ for our beautiful country: Za
And you get – FUN, READING and SOUTH AFRICA – FUNDZA!
That’s what FunDza is all about: getting teens and young adult South Africans reading for pleasure – and loving it! (*fundza.mobi*)

Their brand hashtags for social media are #LoveReading #LoveWriting and #LoveLearning, which reflect their mission as an organization. At the organization’s inception, FunDza also wanted to find innovative ways of making reading and books accessible to those who did not have easy access to them at home or in their communities. Thus, in its early stages, FunDza distributed original and locally written books to reading groups in schools and other organisations in the country. They also channelled content through a Mxit portal and weekly SMS to inform readers when new content was available (FunDza “Annual Report 2011-2012”). The primary hub for books, short stories and other content was the *fundza.mobi* website which attracted thousands of readers. FunDza also established the *fundza.mobi* online library where teenagers could access more stories on the internet.

Most of FunDza’s content and literature can be found on the *fundza.mobi* website. The organisation stopped distributing physical books in 2021 and moved its corpus onto the online platform. Readers can access *fundza.mobi* on cell phones, tablets and computers. While the site is open to all, readers must create an account and log in to comment or like a story chapter. Most of the stories are broken up into parts suitable for scrolling online. These parts are called

chapters, whether the text is a novel or a short story. The *fundza.mobi* site is also data-light, so those who cannot afford data can access the website through the Moya Messenger application and the Free Basics by Facebook application.

More than 100 users are online and reading on the mobi site at any given time as illustrated in Figures 10 and 11 below.



Figure 10: A screenshot of the number of users online at 2:08 pm on the 9th of March 2024.



Figure 11: A screenshot of the number of users online at 5:20 pm on the 19th of March 2024.

The platform caters to people of all ages, from 12 and beyond. In 2021 “22% were 18 years or younger, 43% were 21 or younger; 74% were 27 or younger and 83% were 30 or younger” (FunDza “Annual Report 2021” 15). Although it is a platform created for young adults, the oldest recorded reader in 2021 was 71 years old, which shows that *fundza.mobi*’s broad readership cuts across generations. In the “10 Years of Impact Report”, one respondent says, “Now I can read for my children if they bring their books, and I can explain to them what is written” (28). Readers older than 31 likely read to improve their literacy so they may read to their children or grandchildren.

FunDza publishes a report with statistics and articles highlighting the organisation’s achievements yearly. These statistics give insight into *fundza.mobi*’s reach and success as a literary platform. On the corporate website, FunDza’s data shows that 3 368 229 unique visitors accessed *fundza.mobi* in 2024, with an average reading session of 10 minutes in length. Over 84% of the readers are in South Africa, and 50% are from small towns and villages (FunDza “10 Years of Impact Report”). Currently (2024), *fundza.mobi* has 3919 titles in total in the online library. These statistics and quantitative insights give evidence of FunDza’s expansive reach and significant impact. Through the *fundza.mobi* platform, the organisation demonstrates a remarkable ability to engage with its target audience and produce and distribute literary material, thus fulfilling its objectives.

In FunDza’s Annual Reader Survey for 2020/1, an anonymous user comments on the impact of *fundza.mobi* on their reading habits:

[...] i fell in love with the stories and the content being offered. These are everyday South African stories written by South Africans for Africans. Previously, I've been subjected to American authors in my school library. Not really relating to them. FunDza has awarded me the opportunity to read content that I can relate to. It's also a platform for young, budding, future African authors to receive exposure and critique for their work in order to improve. (10)

This quote is the essence of FunDza. As discussed in the first two chapters, the digital space has made room for people whose lives have been underrepresented (particularly teenagers) to express themselves and write stories that are relevant to their experiences.

In the 10-year report, FunDza quotes Arthur Attwell from Bookdash who says that to get young people excited about reading, they must have opportunities to write since they are going through a time in their lives when they have to express themselves (5).¹⁵ To extend Friedmann's argument about literacy being a social practice, I now draw on Belinda Mendelowitz's understanding of reading and writing as "interdependent social practices" (2). In Mendelowitz's study, pre-service teachers were encouraged to view reading and writing as a social practice by analysing diverse texts in innovative ways. This ultimately expanded their understanding of the audience beyond the traditional teacher-student dynamic to encompass multiple, nuanced audiences, including young adults and peers, such as those found on platforms like *fundza.mobi*. For FunDza, this meant creating opportunities for readers to write and share their own relatable stories on the platform. FunDza encourages submissions for potential publication from readers to give them a sense of ownership over the content and to encourage engagement by making teens and young adults collaborators rather than just consumers. They call these submissions 'FANZ' writing and have held several workshops and mentorship programs to develop young writers over the years. Some of the workshops and programs FunDza started include the "Transition Stories" workshop in 2013, "The Bridging Divides" project from 2014 to 2017, the "Me With You" workshop in 2018, "Writing Me" writing clubs and "My Heritage, My Dreams" workshop in 2019. These workshops help teenagers with writing for expression by developing their writing skills to help them develop their unique writing voices and share their stories. FunDza then developed its first Fellowship Program in 2021 from these multiple workshops, and in 2022, the Fellowship Program became

¹⁵ Book Dash is a multi-award-winning project established in 2014 by founders Arthur Attwell, Michelle Matthews and Tarryn-Anne Anderson. The platform aims to improve early learning opportunities for preschool children in South Africa and globally. By prioritizing social impact in publishing decisions, the project creates contextually relevant, open-licensed, and affordable African books distributed to preschool children and their families. To date, they have created more than 100 books and distributed over a million copies ("Origins and recognition").

more streamlined, with writers choosing between fiction and non-fiction courses.¹⁶ Each writer completed an online course and virtual workshops on Zoom and WhatsApp to build a portfolio of writing on the *fundza.mobi* platform (FunDza “Our Programmes - Writing” para. 4). These workshops continue to build FunDza’s legacy of producing stories relevant to South African youth.

On *fundza.mobi*, teenagers and young adults who would have been underrepresented before can read stories about characters similar to themselves. Outside of the workshops, since 2020, *fundza.mobi* has received an influx of submissions from young adults and teens, which inspired them to create a self-publishing platform called *LoveWriting* where writers can self-publish their work instead of submitting it to the FunDza editors. *LoveWriting* demonstrates the attainability of FunDza’s mission to reflect South Africa’s diversity and affirm the value of every young person’s story. Incidentally, the short stories written by younger people in FunDza’s *fundza.mobi* library are “some of the most popular stories on the site – recording extremely high reads, completion rates, likes and engagement” (FunDza “10 Years of Impact Report” 15).

In a commentary on mobile phone technology and reading behaviour on FunDza in 2015, Johann Louw and Joha Louw-Potgieter state that the FunDza programme “[was] improving access to reading material to young people in “book poor” environments (122) and linked accessibility of texts to an increase in reading literacy, enjoyment of reading and confidence in reading material. FunDza’s reports demonstrate this too, with 66% of readers saying their reading has improved “very much” and 85% saying “they are enjoying reading more now than before” (FunDza “Annual Report 2021” 18). *fundza.mobi* is an excellent example of the accessibility that digital literature provides. For readers who cannot afford to buy books, there are options: the extensive library on the website and the FunDzApp with thousands of books, poems, and educational material are available through Free Basics on Facebook and Moya Messenger. Both can be accessed without mobile data and are available to users on various mobile networks, which makes it easy for readers to access content without exorbitant data costs. These data-free applications also make a significant difference for youth who do not have access to physical libraries.

In addition to *fundza.mobi*’s accessibility, the interface is youth-friendly and mimics how readers engage and interact on social media. The introduction page for “Storm Princess”

¹⁶ Eighteen young writers were selected for a ten-month writing course. The group was taught poetry through the ‘Wordplay’ module, storytelling through the ‘What’s My Narrative’ module, and non-fiction writing through ‘Writing My World’. Some of their mentors included Koleka Putuma, Sifiso Mzobe and Tiah Beauteament.

by Mathapelo Sibanda in Figure 12 shows a summary, publishing information, number of comments and emoji reactions.

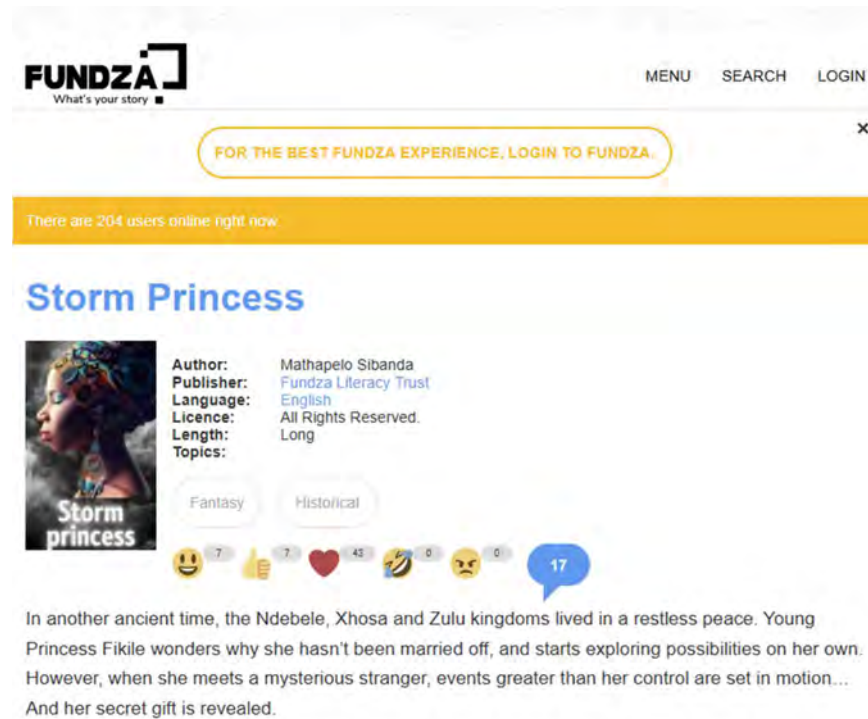


Figure 12

fundza.mobi has changed the chapter interface over the years. Initially, the first page of a story was “an introductory page which gives a brief teaser for the narrative, reveals the rating given to it by previous readers, and indicates length” (Friedemann 30). The first page of a story now includes emoji counts showing how people react to the story. This inclusion of emojis mimics Facebook reactions and shows engagement and interest in a text. New readers can gauge if they want to read the text based on these reactions after reading the introduction and other people’s comments.

Initially, readers could just like the story when they were done. As younger readers come in, they update their interface to suit what teens and young adults are familiar with on social media. This speaks to a lasting and evolving legacy of getting youth excited to read. In Friedemann’s description of the *fundza.mobi* texts, she mentions that “each chapter can be ‘marked as read’ so that readers can keep track of their progress in the story” and that this is a practical and affirmatory way to help reluctant readers have a sense of accomplishment as they read the story (30). This has changed slightly; when readers with *fundza.mobi* accounts return to the library home page, a tab at the top shows the story they are currently reading, as seen in Figure 13 below.

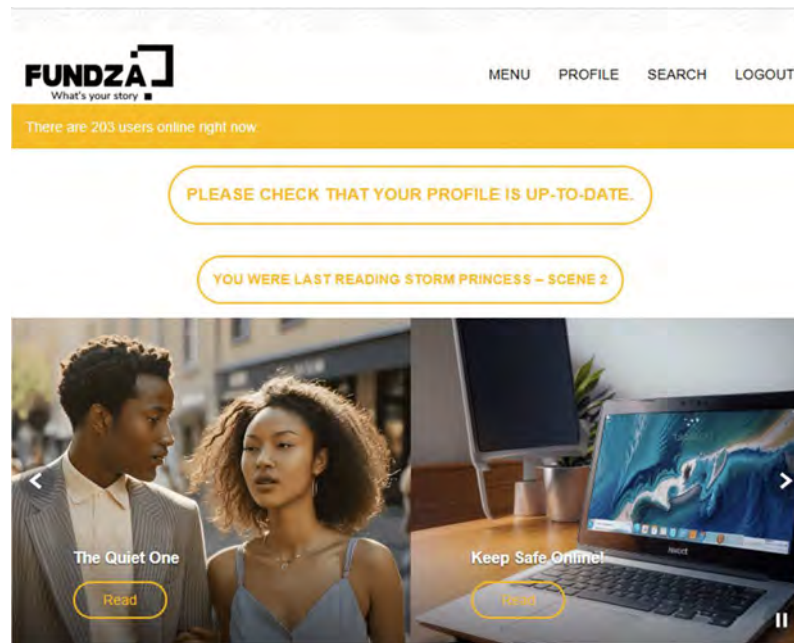


Figure 13

FunDza's most celebrated achievement is the organisation's goal of improving literacy levels through relatable stories, and its success can be seen in the research of scholars who engage with stories from *fundza.mobi*. Belinda Mendelowitz and Fatima Vally Essa's study offers insight into *fundza.mobi*'s efficacy as a digital storytelling platform. In 2022, Essa and Mendelowitz conducted a study with a grade 7 English Home Language classroom to see how storytelling, multimodality and creativity work in theory and practice. They used *fundza.mobi* as inspiration for a classroom exercise because writers on *fundza.mobi* produce "meaningful content that draws on the lives and experiences of the South African youths" (4) with topics such as love, crime, money, abuse, school, and success. Essa first divided learners into groups to produce a story about their lives and experiences with bullying. The learners were encouraged to write stories in ways that defied the boundaries of "traditional language practices of school writing" (4) and imagined their peers as the audience. The result was performances incorporating multiple languages and learners could tell stories in ways that best represented them. Essa and Mendelowitz observed that the classroom became a more agentic space, which points to *fundza.mobi*'s potential as an instigator for youth to express themselves freely. Furthermore, the collaboration between the learners "[enabled] creative reworking, reimagining and counter-storytelling of the bullying dynamic" (Essa and Mendelowitz 8), which supports the idea of *fundza.mobi* as a counter-storytelling platform.

Considering *fundza.mobi* was established as an alternative to literature in schools, it gives South African teenagers access to stories directly related to their experiences and inspires them to become writers who can communicate their experiences in meaningful ways. In this way, *fundza.mobi* is a counter-storytelling platform that allows local, relatable stories for South African youth that are different from Eurocentric literature in schools in South Africa. This prioritisation of local stories has seen writers like Jayne Bauling and Ros Hayden, who write for FunDza and Cover2Cover books, publish texts in the South African school curriculum for grades 10-12 (FET literature catalogue).

To reiterate, counter-storytelling is a “method of telling the stories of people whose experiences are not often told,” according to Hughes-Hassell (215). Counter-storytelling seeks to expose racial and ethnic identity formation's complexity, dispel prejudices, and provide a voice to marginalised people. Because young people's voices are sometimes silenced, this thesis considers their perspectives. Counter-storytelling serves four functions, according to Hughes-Hassell. First, youth whose experiences are frequently distorted or underrepresented are given a voice through counter-storytelling. Second, counter-storytelling offers a place of validation and affirmation while challenging the idea of a “single story.” It “presents the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation” (215), which is the third reason. Finally, counter-storytelling forces the privileged to think about the perspectives and experiences of injustice that historically oppressed groups have to deal with.

Overall, *fundza.mobi* fulfils the first and second purposes of counter-storytelling by giving young Southern African writers the opportunity to submit and publish narratives about themselves or themes related to their life experiences. The stories on *fundza.mobi* also fulfil the last purpose of counter-storytelling by providing representations which illustrate the life experiences of underprivileged youth in South Africa.¹⁷ In their article about gender and popular imaginaries in Africa, Lynda Gichanda Spencer et al. note that when it comes to popular literature, “there is often a contradictory blend of attempts to resist dominant readings of gender while sometimes simultaneously reiterating conservative gender logics” (4). While I interpret *fundza.mobi* as a counter-narrative platform, the unmoderated nature of *LoveWriting*

¹⁷ The four purposes of counter-storytelling:

1. It gives voice to teens whose voices have gone unheard and whose lives are at best underrepresented, but more often misrepresented, in the mainstream discourse.
2. It challenges the single story, providing “a powerful space of affirmation” and validation (Buehler 43).
3. It presents the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation.
4. It challenges readers whose lives have been shaped by race and privilege to consider how the world looks to groups of people that have traditionally been marginalized and oppressed, raising awareness of the inequalities those individuals face on a daily basis. (Hughes-Hassell 215)

and the open publishing model enable the dissemination of diverse stories, some of which are not counter-stories. Some stories may inadvertently perpetuate misogynistic ideologies, reinforce problematic representations of women, and even subject female characters to silencing and violence. Yet, other texts are empowering and creatively imagine better outcomes for their female characters. In my critical analysis of the short stories published on the platform, I engage with a diverse range of texts, intentionally juxtaposing different narratives to highlight the complexities and contradictions inherent in the platform's content. Given the coexistence of these narratives within the same digital space, it is essential to consider them collectively and to consider them with the reader's responses as well. As Spencer et al. argue

while popular art forms often appear on the surface to be conservative and unsophisticated - often featuring gender-stereotypical or stock figures for instance - consumers of these cultural forms go beyond the stereotyping to use the story-lines and insights they offer to interpret and make sense of social situations. (4)

As will be demonstrated in my analysis of comments, through their engagement, readers respond and make sense of situations in various ways to the stories they encounter. Some outright disagree or make different interpretations of the intended message, some provide alternatives writers may not consider, and others reflect on their own lives and choices through the text.

As I mentioned earlier in Chapter One, my analysis of comments is framed by reader-response theory, which describes two types of readers. The aesthetic reader engages with a text based on their personal experience and emotional resonance with the text. They actively participate in the narrative's dramatic arc, feeling the tensions, conflicts, and resolves as they occur, and they immerse themselves in the text, experiencing the subtleties of emotions, ideas, circumstances, and characters that emerge (Mart 81-82). Efferent readers follow the framework for constructing meaning given by the text, which results in the reader extracting a clear and definitive interpretation of the text. In addition, they contribute and take away knowledge, connections and associations from the reading process.

Before I analyse the texts, it is important to acknowledge FunDza's prioritisation of hopeful stories. One of the lessons that FunDza has learnt in the past ten years about their readers is that the way stories end is important. Through comments on stories, they have seen that readers feel less alone and hopeful after reading stories on the mobile site. Thus, readers often "object to sad endings, or endings that are unresolved" (FunDza "10 Years of Impact Report" 15). Furthermore, Elwyn Jenkins notes that "To end the novels hopefully rather than

in the form of happy endings is characteristic for narratives in the realist mode in the new South Africa” (118). For this reason, FunDza encourages writers to write stories that ultimately inspire hope and end with hope, even if the stories reflect the harsh realities of their lives.

4.3 From ‘Jim comes to Joburg’ to ‘Unolali in the city’: Migration Stories from *fundza.mobi*

The stories selected for analysis all have common themes and a similar plot. In each story, a young woman travels to the city to forge a new path for herself, or to find success to support her family in the village. As such, the title of this section reflects the shift in narratives about migration. I have used the word ‘Unolali’, which means village girl in isiXhosa, to highlight this shift. Each character faces different challenges with some succeeding in their efforts and others choosing to return home. Before I analyse the texts, I give a summary of each story and a brief introduction of each writer below.

In Oyama Comba's gripping short story “In Search of Greener Pastures”, 25-year-old Siphe makes the bold decision to leave her family’s rural home in search of greener pastures in the city. Upon arrival in Johannesburg, she catches the attention of Samkelo, a powerful figure in the city’s underworld, who offers her assistance and a place to stay. Unbeknownst to Siphe, Samkelo’s intentions are far from kind. Believing her father to be a rival who has been poaching his international clients, Samkelo plans to use Siphe as leverage to exact revenge. However, this is a case of mistaken identity, and Siphe’s father is merely a namesake. Samkelo decides to hold Siphe hostage. Nevertheless, she overhears a conversation regarding her capture and quickly plans her escape. Sophia, Samkelo’s helper, intervenes, helping Siphe escape and clear up the misunderstanding. In the end, Siphe returns to her family in the village. According to her writer profile, Oyama Comba is from Mount Ayliff in the Eastern Cape and is currently studying medicine at the University of Cape Town. She was part of the FunDza Fellowship Program in 2022 and has written several poems and short stories on *fundza.mobi*.

“The Hard Life” is a short story about Janet Moroka, who leaves her mother and siblings behind to find a job in the city to support them. For the first night, she is stranded, unable to find her host. After being found, the protagonist is brutally assaulted and coerced into prostitution, ultimately contracting HIV which leads to a tragic and premature death. “The Hard Life” was written by Philane Ndabe. In his writer profile he says that he grew up in Pretoria,

then moved to Johannesburg with his parents. He works at a retail outlet, but writing is his passion. He has also written several short stories on the platform.

In Akhona Mlenga's flash fiction story "Unlocked", a young woman embarks on a journey of self-discovery when she leaves her hometown to attend university. As she navigates her newfound independence, she falls deeply in love with a fellow student and moves in with him, sacrificing her academic pursuits to cater to his every whim. However, as she becomes increasingly entrenched in the relationship, she begins to realise the suffocating grip of patriarchal expectations and the oppressive dynamics at play. With a newfound sense of clarity, she breaks free from the toxic relationship and starts afresh, rediscovering her passion for learning and her identity. As she forges a path towards empowerment, she understands that her true purpose in the city is not to serve others but to unlock her potential. Akhona is a *fundza.mobi* FANZ writer and student at Nelson Mandela University working towards a degree in Environmental Health. In her *fundza.mobi* profile she says that she is "a very grounded and spiritual person who loves to spread love and happiness everywhere [and] touching hearts in a positive way" (Mlenga). Mlenga also has some of her work in the BNAP 2017 anthology and on Poetry Portion.¹⁸

Mogale Kgashane is also a *fundza.mobi* FANZ writer. The writer, songwriter and poet was born in Ga-Sekororo, Tzaneen, Limpopo. In his *fundza.mobi* bio he says:

I am a writer, poet and song writer. I'm very passionate about writing because I believe that change lies in power of reading and writing. It gives me an opportunity to pen down my emotions of love and pain with the rest of the world. Writing gives me that voice to silently express myself, it's a work of art that allows me to paint a picture using words. (Kgashane)

In Kgashane's poignant short story "Reneilwe", a young woman leaves her home in Tzaneen to pursue her academic dreams in Johannesburg. As she navigates the city's vibrant streets, she becomes increasingly entangled in the city's alluring club culture. Her newfound independence takes an unexpected turn when she finds herself facing an unplanned pregnancy.

Zukiswa Pakama's inspiring short story, "I Will Find My Way", follows Mila who embarks on a courageous journey to the city in search of employment during the COVID-19 era. However, she encounters multiple obstacles, and as she struggles to make ends meet, Mila faces a harrowing encounter with a man who poses as a modelling scout but is part of a human trafficking ring. He attempts to kidnap her, but she escapes, and eventually, he is brought to

¹⁸ <https://www.poetryportion.com/>

justice. With the help of her brother-in-law, Mila starts selling muffins, which provides her with a sense of purpose and stability. As she gains confidence, she also discovers an opportunity to showcase her hidden talent as a singer and secures gigs at a local restaurant. Through her resilience and determination, Mila proves that even in the darkest times, there is hope and always a way forward. This short story is part of the DREAMS Thina Abantu Abasha programme, which partnered with FunDza to create impactful stories.¹⁹ Zukiswa Pakama is an award-winning author who writes youth and children's novels, poems, and radio dramas in her mother tongue, isiXhosa, and English. She has published six books in isiXhosa; *IMpuku Ebawayo*, *Khawuncume Ndiyakucela*, *Inkosi etyebileyo Inja ebhityileyo*, *Ukucula Emvuleni and U-Akku Onomsindo*. She was also involved in making the film *Keiskamma, A Story of Love* in 2007. She then joined Sabido Productions as a production assistant and researcher in 2011 (IMDb). In 2022 she started a reading and writing project in her community in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, called Isitha Sokhanyo where she assists young learners struggling with literacy.

4.3.1 Looking for Greener Pastures in the City - “The Hard Life” by Philane Ndabe, “Reneilwe” by Mogale Kgashane and “I Will Find My Way” by Zukiswa Phakama

In this first part of analysis, I argue that “The Hard Life” and “Reneilwe”, in their simplistic and didactic nature as stories, inadvertently lead to perpetuating stereotypes about young women who migrate from the village to the city. By holding to the idea that the city is a place that corrupts and changes people, they fail to create stories that offer alternative portrayals of young women in the city. In contrast, “I Will Find My Way” presents a story of hope and empowerment that subverts common tropes to offer a counter-narrative. I show how Pakama's portrayal of a young woman's experience in the city inspires hope by allowing for hope and agency. Additionally, I use readers' comments to augment my analysis.

The short story starts with Reneilwe promising her mother that she will “behave and be the good girl she had been for so many years” and “[won't] let the city ‘change her’” (Chapter 1 para. 6). This promise, however, is rooted in a narrative convention that perpetuates the stereotype of the city as a catalyst for the downfall of female characters. Throughout the story, several plotlines caution against the dangers of allowing the city to exert its influence, a warning that often manifests as a loss of agency for young female characters, who are portrayed

¹⁹ <https://live.fundza.mobi/specials/stories-for-change-dreams-thina-abantu-abasha-programme/>

as making poor decisions or being placed in situations where they are powerless to resist the city's corrupting forces. In addition, at the end of each chapter or story part, readers are asked questions that guide them to a specific interpretation of the text. For example, at the end of Chapter 1, readers are asked, "Tell us: Do you think Reneilwe will be changed by the city? What do you think will happen?" Figures 14 and 15 show that most of the readers express that they think she will change. In Figure 14, CUTEMISHY and Rebone Phala's responses to the chapter are aesthetic. CUTEMISHY expresses that she can "feel it in her blood", and Rebone says she "cn [sic] smell it", which indicates that they are experiencing the story's tension as it unfolds. However, readers such as Masego M and Amalia respond efferently – pointing to the story's success in directing their reading towards the city as a corrupting force. In addition, their sentiments correlate with the events that unfold in the story.



Figure 14



Figure 15

Indeed, when she arrives in Johannesburg, she encounters all sorts of dangers all at once:

In a few hours she found herself between so many skyscrapers, her heart beating joyfully. Johannesburg; a city full of life. She stood there intrigued, looking at

the beautiful buildings, moving cars, taxis hooting and drivers shouting, and a young man shouting, “One Rand chocolate, one Rrrrrrrrand!” And all that was disturbed by a very loud cry of a woman who was knocked down by a taxi and another Gogo shouting, “My bag!” as a street kid ran away with it. But unfortunately everyone was busy with their own lives like nothing had happened. Reneilwe was left traumatized, her body shivering and eyes full of fear. Was Jo’burg a place she wanted to be? (Chapter 2 para. 10-12)

In the scene above, Kgashane juxtaposes the excitement of being in a new city with the dangers associated. For a few days after this experience, Reneilwe cannot leave the shared flat. It is only after meeting new people in university that she starts exploring the city. Eventually, she meets the “Nkandla Girls” (Chapter 1 para. 20) in her Psychology class who promise to take her to every “hip and happening place” (para. 22), and she becomes so accustomed to the city that she “knows every corner like back in her home, Tzaneen” (Chapter 2 para. 1). However, the dangers persist, and her choice of company leads her to increasingly risky situations. On one occasion, she ends up naked in a hotel after a night out with the girls. After this, Reneilwe decides to carry around condoms for the friend group, telling them “If anyone [*sic*] of you needs to have sex come to me, I’ve got protection” (Chapter 3 para. 19). In this moment, the writer presents Reneilwe as the responsible friend in their friendship group, however, a few paragraphs later, Reneilwe not only cheats on her boyfriend but falls pregnant after sleeping with Tshephang, a young man at a party. The pattern of these events aligns with the idea of the city as a corrupting place.

Instead of continuing the thread of responsibility, Reneilwe is portrayed as someone who cannot resist peer pressure, and in her inability to do so, she becomes the example in a cautionary tale. This is just one of the several instances where the writer could have made “Reneilwe” a counter-story. Another is when Reneilwe tells Tshephang that she is pregnant. Instead of taking responsibility, he calls Reneilwe a gold digger and says, “Just a one [*sic*] night with you, and you come back and tell me that you are pregnant, you rural girls are opportunists” (Chapter 4 para. 12). This exchange perpetuates the damaging narrative that women bear the sole burden of consequences, while men are absolved of accountability.

In addition, the story perpetuates specific representations of women or the “modern miss” trope of the *Drum* era. For example, after meeting her new friends, Malebo, Reneilwe’s cousin warns her about the city girls, and she promises not to let the city life change her. When Reneilwe tells her mother about the Nkandla girls, she says “I hope you are not misbehaving

with those girls. I know the city life, I was once a student like you. I hope you won't come back with a grandchild" (Chapter 3 para. 10). The Nkandla girls are represented as "good time girls" and are portrayed as characters that exert peer pressure on Reneilwe. When the Nkandla girls suggest they go out again, Reneilwe does not voice her concerns despite thinking that it is not a good idea. She is "so unsure about going out but peer pressure [doesn't] let her say no" (Chapter 3 para. 17). After she finds out that she's pregnant, Reneilwe calls her mother:

All I ever wanted was to make you proud Ma, but I have failed you. I let the city life change me. I came here looking for greener pastures but instead I let you down. I'm so sorry Ma, I should have been more careful," said Reneilwe sobbing. (Chapter 4 para. 15)

Reneilwe's confession implies that she finds something else other than "greener pastures". At the end of the story, she also says to her baby, "One day you will be a teenager and go to varsity. Don't let the city life change you," (Chapter 4 para. 18). This is a deliberate narrative choice by the author, intended to convey a cautionary message to readers about the perceived dangers and corrupting influences of the city.

Although "Reneilwe" is a cautionary tale and serves to warn readers, Figures 16 to 18 show several comments that challenge prevailing assumptions of 'the city's' ability to change people. At the end of the chapter, readers are asked, "Do you believe that the city can change people?".  lover , was born in the city and has a completely different worldview because it has always been her home and Ntombi+Lebohang suggest ways to be responsible in a university environment.²⁰ n.z, Lawtress, tobias and Regina emphasise choice and their comments suggest a more nuanced understanding of the city, one that acknowledges that it is not as inherently evil or corrupt as the narrative would have readers believe. While the city does present some dangers or risks, there are ways to navigate it. The comments also highlight a significant feature of digital literature by demonstrating social reading. When future readers engage with the text, they may read the comments, and it will influence their reading experience and how they think about the city. While the comments do not affect the trajectory of the actual text, they provide alternatives the writer did not consider for other readers to see.

²⁰ This specific username (Ntombi+Lebohang) seems to be an account that two readers use. Another one, ff1995+tamar+leigh-Anne appears at the bottom of the comments. Perhaps they were reading as part of a group or share a reading device, which highlights the nature of shared reading networks that extend offline.

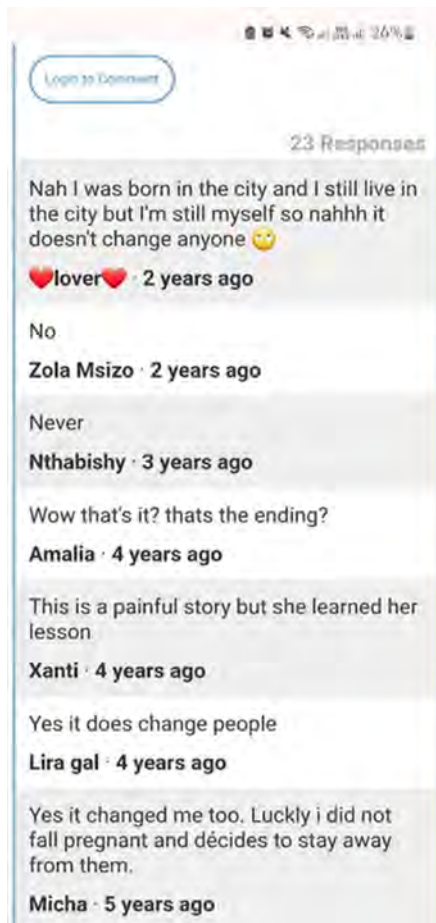


Figure 16

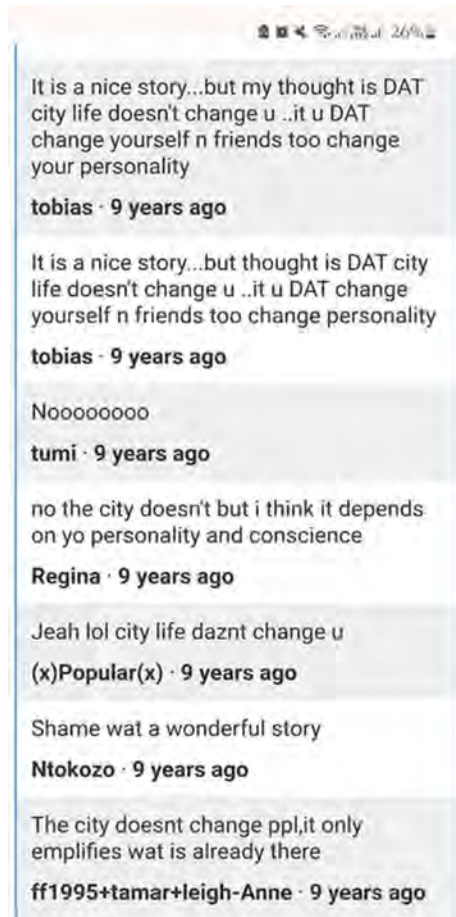


Figure 17



Figure 18

Similar to “Reneilwe”, “The Hard Life” is a cautionary tale. In her article, Murray notes that feminist literary analysis makes the reader aware of “unspoken, gendered attitudes that render women vulnerable to silencing and violence” (Murray 24). While readers feel “The Hard Life” is an inspiring story, I read it as a story with these unspoken gendered attitudes that perpetuate the silencing of women.

“The Hard Life” starts with an evocative opening that sets the tone for the rest of the story: “Janet was a young lady who had left the rural areas, leaving her family behind in search of greener pastures. Little did she know, the dangers out there” (Chapter 1 para. 1). As the oldest daughter, she is sent to Pretoria to get a job in order to support her family. From the moment Janet leaves home, she encounters disfavour and danger. When she arrives, her belongings are stolen and she has to spend the night under a tree because she struggles to find her intended host, Mamkhize’s daughter, Michelle. The next morning, a chance encounter with Michelle reveals a disturbing reality. Michelle was introduced to prostitution by a friend, and

this is her means of sending money home to her family. The first night that she spends at Michelle's place, Michelle returns with a client who rapes Janet and then leaves R600 as 'payment'. Initially, she leaves Michelle's apartment, but with no plan and no options, Janet returns to Michelle, who introduces her to her friends and clients. Eventually, she starts making enough money to send home. However, as time passes, Janet stops communicating with her family. This prompts her mother, Mrs. Moroka to follow her to Pretoria. Mrs. Moroka discovers Janet gravely ill in bed and a visit to the hospital reveals Janet's HIV diagnosis. The next morning Janet succumbs to her illness. The traumatic event proves too overwhelming for Mrs Moroka, who also dies, leaving Janet's siblings, John and Joyce, as orphans. Despite these harrowing events and the tragedy that ensues, the readers feel motivated or inspired by the story as shown in Figures 19-21. Their responses mostly include the hope the author offers at the end for Janet's siblings. As a cautionary tale, they feel it offers a "POWERFUL MASSEGE [*sic*]" as Mashau912 says and lessons on being careful and choosing the right friends. Weliele is saddened not by Janet's death but by what comes from it. She also shares how she may have done things differently by selling vegetables or hand crafts. The readers see the story as a lesson, and none seem to sympathise with Janet, who only falls into the position out of desperation.

What is worth noting is the difference in some of the comments. In contrast to Bright Grace and Youngsturna's responses, which suggest that Janet's story serves as a cautionary tale for girls to learn from, G-eyes and King Tyga's comments reveal a more nuanced understanding. While they acknowledge the story's appeal, describing it as "nice" and "dope", they also express a sense of familiarity and repetition, implying that the narrative relies on

stereotypes and overused tropes. This suggests that they have encountered similar stories before, and their response is mingled with a sense of recognition and fatigue.

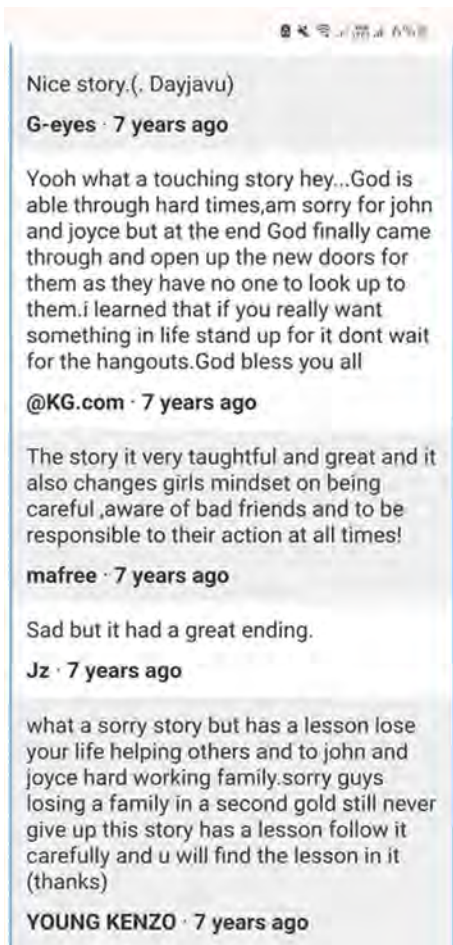


Figure 19



Figure 20

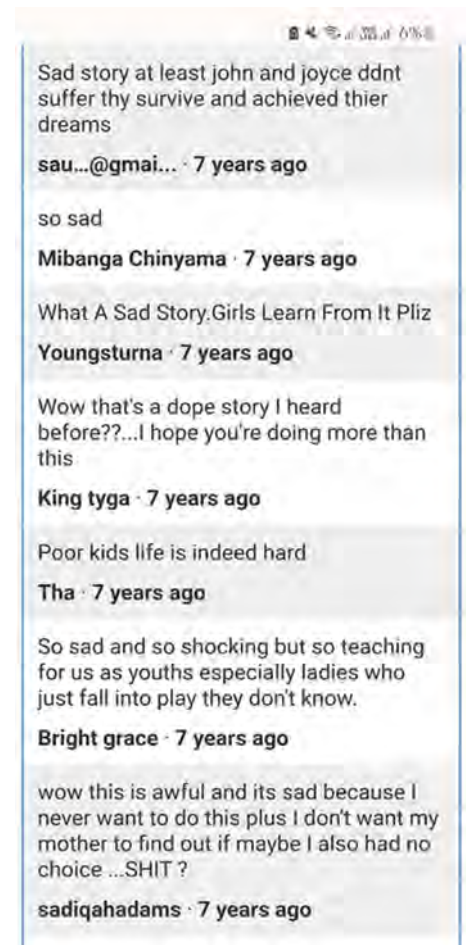


Figure 21

Although “The Hard Life” is perceived as motivational and inspiring by some readers, it actually perpetuates a limiting and damaging portrayal of Janet. Specifically, the narrative silences Janet’s voice and subjects her to violence. Janet is depicted as a passive victim, lacking agency and control over the events that shape her life. Furthermore, the story reinforces a problematic stereotype that the city is inherently a corrupting force, leading inevitably to prostitution, HIV, and death.²¹ This simplistic and stigmatising trope oversimplifies the

²¹ Compared to “Bad Reputation” by Yonela Gatyeni, which explores contraception and HIV/AIDS prevention, or “Mine to Tell” by Jayne Bauling, which addresses the stigma around HIV.

complexities of moving to the city and perpetuates negative and damaging attitudes towards individuals affected by these issues.

In contrast, “I will find a way” and “Unlocked” reveal that the stories written by more professional authors have greater nuance, complexity and creativity in their narrative structures. It is worth noting that these kinds of stories are female-authored. They also offer more hopeful and empowering outcomes for their characters. This disparity in narrative approach will be explored in greater detail in the following section, where I show how female-authored stories can be seen as counter-stories that challenge the dominant narratives presented in the male-authored stories.

Different from “Reneilwe” and “The Hard Life”, Phakama’s “I Will Find My Way” presents a story of hope and empowerment by subverting common tropes and offering a counter-story to the dominant narratives around migrating to the city. The protagonist, Mila, moves to the city and is confronted with similar dangers and risks, but hers is a counter-story that offers a place of validation and affirmation in portraying the struggle to find employment. Although at the beginning of the story, she is “armed with a matric certificate and no experience whatsoever” (Chapter 1 para. 5), the story ends with Mila finding employment in an unlikely place. Some of the challenges she faces are a lack of qualifications, no driver’s license and a near-kidnapping by Monza who poses as a model scout but is part of a human trafficking ring. Despite these challenges, she ends up working as a singer at a restaurant. The story also challenges the idea of a “single story”. As discussed above, in “The Hard Life” and “Reneilwe”, young women who migrate to the city are portrayed as victims, or they are changed by the city and end up veering off course. In this particular story, things are not just happening to Mila. She does face challenges, but she is also represented as a character with resolve and agency. Pakama writes a character who is not corrupted by the city while she looks for “greener pastures”, but one who uses her experiences and talents to make her own “greener pastures”. While hopeless circumstances are used in other stories to force characters down a path of destruction, Pakama uses circumstances as stepping stones to Mila’s eventual success. Considering the hundreds of comments on the story indicating the story’s popularity and multiple comments such as the ones in Figures 22 and 23, the story resonates with the readers and inspires hope. Thilisanai mentions that she has learned about resilience which she then

reinforces through the practice of positive affirmations while cho...@gmail.com details the emotions felt while reading the story.



Figure 22



Figure 23

Another way that the story challenges the idea of a single story is through a nuanced portrayal of male characters. In “The Hard Life” and “Reneilwe”, the male characters are reduced to one-dimensional figures, either faceless perpetrators of harm or mere plot devices that serve to perpetuate the suffering of the protagonists. By failing to give these characters distinct identities, agency, or motivations, the stories allow them to remain anonymous and unaccountable for their actions. This omission is a missed opportunity to hold them responsible for their harm and instead perpetuates a culture of blamelessness and impunity. By doing so, the stories may inadvertently reinforce a problematic narrative that prioritises the victim’s suffering over the perpetrator’s accountability. In “I Will Find My Way”, while Monza embodies a toxic and exploitative form of masculinity, the story also offers an alternate and positive representation of men through Jack’s character.²² Compared to Monza, who only offers help to lure Mila into a trap, Jack is genuinely helpful towards Mila. He teaches her how to drive and suggests that she monetise her baking skills at the school market day. Furthermore, Jack’s intervention in the situation where Monza attempts to kidnap two young girls (Chapter 8) demonstrates his commitment to challenging patriarchal violence. Notably, Jack’s character defies the ‘hero’ or ‘knight in shining armour’ trope. Instead, he functions as a man who supports Mila’s agency and autonomy. Ultimately, it is her baking skills and singing skills that secure her employment at the restaurant, which also emphasises self-empowerment and self-sufficiency. By depicting a protagonist surrounded by good influences, the story offers a refreshing alternative to narratives like “The Hard Life” and “Reneilwe”, which portray young women as vulnerable, prone to peer pressure and susceptible to harm. The coexistence of these stories on the same platform calls attention to the complexity of the rural-to-urban migration

²² Monza looks the part. He looks like a model, has tattoos, wears a gold chain and has the latest iPhone.

experience. There are dangers and risks which should be acknowledged — but there can also be hope and empowerment.

In addition to Mila's empowerment as a character, the story also offers empowerment for readers in their own lives. At the end of the story, there are 'Talking Points' where the author points out certain aspects of the story that could be relatable to the reader's experience as they look for employment. In addition, there are links to documents with helpful resources on *fundza.mobi*, such as "Writing a CV", "How to identify scams online", and "Entering the world of work" (Talking points). Considering that the story is part of the DREAMS Thina Abantu Abasha project, which "aims to help girls develop into Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored and Safe women" (iono.fm para. 1), these resources included in the story add to the offering of hope and empowerment for readers.

4.3.2 Disrupting the Fairy-tale Romance: Analysing characterisation in Oyama Comba's "In Search of Greener Pastures"

By subverting the fairy-tale romance trope in a contemporary South African context, "In Search of Greener Pastures" by Oyama Comba provides a thought-provoking commentary on the social issues that shape the lives of young women in the country. The disruption of the fairy-tale romance between Samkelo and Siphe demonstrates the "embedded patriarchy" that Murray writes about. Through my analysis, I will show how the representations and characterisation in "In Search of Greener Pastures" speak to the persistence of patriarchy, gender relations and the pervasiveness of violence and fear in South African society. Comba does not deal with this pervasiveness directly but uses characterisation to speak to the violence women in South Africa experience. I start by analysing her use of the fairy-tale romance trope and discussing how effective this technique is in engaging readers in the comment section. After that, I will discuss how the text highlights the fear of violence in South Africa due to gender-based violence. Within my analysis, I use comments made by readers to augment the reading and understanding of the text.

Comba first uses the fairy-tale trope in her descriptions of the characters and their homes. The main characters are described in contrasting ways, emphasising their roles as prince and princess.

That morning, [Siphe's] athletic body was covered in a black tracksuit with white stripes on either side, paired with white trainers. Her afro was tied up into a neat, fluffy bun. Her chocolate face was glowing from Vaseline. She had beautifully shaped

eyebrows. It is safe to say that she looked stunning, as well as comfortable for the sixteen-hour bus trip to Gauteng. (Chapter 1 para. 6)

The description of Siphe's beauty gives the impression of simplicity and modesty, in the same way, a princess in a fairy tale might be described. Samkelo's description connotes wealth and royalty; he wears a gold chain, "black short boots, black jeans, a black polo neck, and a pair of black glasses whose price would buy a house" (Chapter 2 para.4). It is worth noting that through this description, Comba foreshadows Samkelo's change of character when he plans to have Siphe abducted. The "black glasses whose price would buy a house" (para.4) come from his profits as a drug dealer. Still, he is represented as a charming young man who is kind enough to offer Siphe a place to stay for the night. On the car ride to his house, he thinks to himself, "How would I have left such a gorgeous girl stranded? I would have never forgiven myself. I hope she will love my house. I hope we will get to know more about each other" (Chapter 2 para. 17). At first, Samkelo seems like a young man with good intentions. He even offers to contact her parents and give them his address and car licence plate number. Samkelo then takes Siphe to his mansion (the castle), which contrasts with Siphe's home. When they first arrive, Siphe sees a "remotely controlled black gate opened to a grey double-storey mansion in front of her, with huge glass windows and some glass doors" (Chapter 2 para. 19), complete with four bodyguards. Inside:

The interior was painted white, with white couches and a black wall unit. The wall was hung with black and white themed paintings and a few family pictures. A sparkling chandelier swung above her head...They walked down a long corridor with a million doors and turned like it was a mall. They finally stopped in one of the rooms with a 'guest' tag on it. It opened to a white-linen queen bed, a built-in white wardrobe, and a black wall-mounted TV. It also had its own bathroom with a toilet, a bathtub, a shower, a basin, and a small chest of drawers. Siphe felt like she was in heaven. (Chapter 3 para. 6)

Samkelo's house fits the description of houses people would associate with Johannesburg as the city of gold. This setting also enhances the image of Samkelo as the wealthy prince who has come to save Siphe from poverty, especially considering that Siphe's home is a small farm in a village. Initially, the description given refers to the wealth that the family used to have:

At the age of 18, she dropped out of school to assist on her family's farm. They had huge kraals and large maize gardens. Each day they needed to milk the cows, lead the lamb to the fields, feed the chickens, take cows to the river, and ride on horses to carry the harvest and make a living.

But things had not been looking good for them because of global warming. (Chapter 1 para. 5)

When Siphe decides to go to the city, their home is described as “clay houses with grass roofs” and “small windows”; instead of huge kraals, a singular kraal is shared by sheep and goats (Chapter 1 para. 3). The Ncoko family’s struggles pave the way for what seems to be Siphe’s meeting with her wealthy prince. The family can no longer afford to sustain themselves, and it is up to her to find something better. The writer’s brief mention of global warming indicates a growing concern by young adults for the environment and the potential consequences of climate change. Siphe vows to leave her family behind and “look for greener pastures in the city” (Chapter 1 para. 5).

Siphe and Samkelo’s meeting seems like a modern fairy tale – Siphe is a beautiful girl in an unfamiliar place and Samkelo reverses to offer Siphe a ride. The instant attraction between the two characters and the impromptu “pizza, icecream and drinks” (Chapter 3 para. 10) date where they talk all night reads like a fairy-tale romance. An analysis of the story’s reader engagement proves the effectiveness of the fairy-tale romance trope. In this regard, I want to highlight five readers in particular: Nombuso Blose, Evah Ngobeni, Zanele Mathonsi, Lindy Theledi, and Viwe Sidubulekana. In the first chapter, their comments consist of one word or phrase as illustrated in Figure 24. They do not seem particularly interested in the plot but still want to comment to show their engagement and support. Their comments are aesthetic since there are no questions asked at the end of each part or chapter. However, In Chapters 2 and 3 their interest grows. This is a demonstration of how comments show the “development of thoughts and understanding in real time” (Rebora and Pianzola 2). Siphe has just met Samkelo, and they have been conversing for most of the night. In Figure 25, all the readers anticipate that Siphe is in danger and sense that Samkelo’s kindness is questionable. They are aware that this fairy-tale-like encounter between Samkelo and Siphe has a dark reality, given the violence and abuse that typically follows the kidnapping or abduction of women in South Africa.

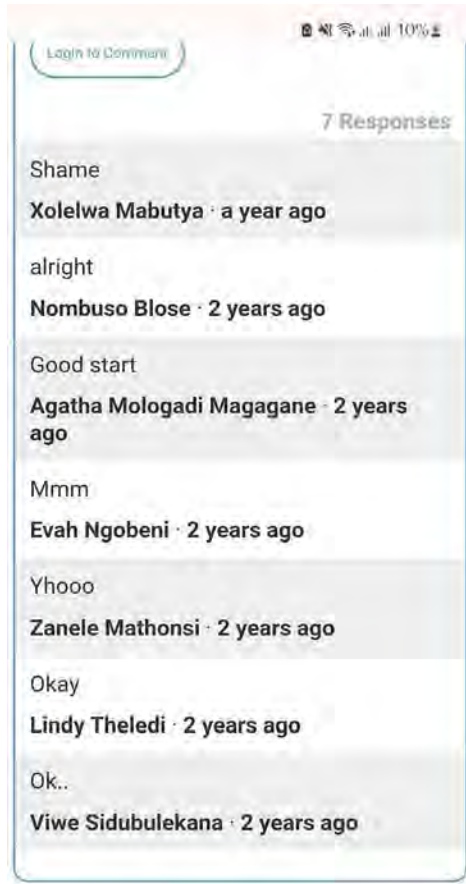


Figure 24

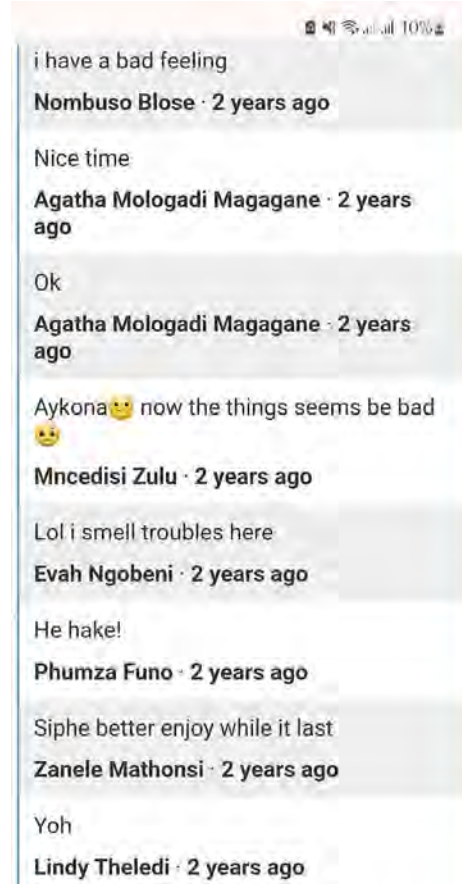


Figure 25

Although Siphe has planned to find a better life for her family, it is implied in their meeting that this better life is available to her through her romantic meeting with Samkelo. Their meeting demonstrates Lelauren et al.'s theorisation of romantic narratives, where the man is the rescuer and is portrayed as powerful. Although Samkelo does not physically display power, his position as a drug lord implies that his power comes from money and connections. For a moment, they live in a fantasy – until Samkelo realises that Siphe could be the key to his business' success. In their conversation, Siphe speaks of her father, who has the same name as the man stealing Samkelo's international customers. After they separate for the night, he calls Mr Galeka, his business partner:

“So I reserve a spot for us at a classy restaurant, take her on a fake date, and as we leave, your men will come and fake a hijack. Then you'll abduct and keep her until she gives us a lead to her dad. Is that correct?” Samkelo enquired. (Chapter 4 para.10)

Samkelo's willingness to orchestrate Siphe's kidnapping just as readily as he offers help speaks to Samkelo's perception of Siphe. He represents the kind of masculinity created by gender-unequal societies where "women are seen as less important than men, or as men's possessions" (Graaff and Heineken 627). Samkelo uses Siphe's attraction and trust in him to exploit her, which points to the pervasiveness of violence that Gqola discusses. Siphe is not safe alone on the street or in the house of the seemingly kind man who offers to help. It could be argued that Siphe does not exercise caution or discretion in letting Samkelo help her. However, his assurance of her safety by contacting her parents and giving them his address and number plate makes it seem like he is trustworthy. Unfortunately, in this situation, his role as rescuer automatically gives him power over Siphe, and she becomes his possession. He plans whatever he wants for her, and she becomes someone who exists only to fulfil his interests in growing his business.

Siphe overhears the conversation between the men, and when she returns to the guest room, she starts to panic and immediately plans her escape. In the typical fashion of aesthetic readers, each comment shows an engagement with the text and participation in the narrative trajectory. They are experiencing the tension as the story unfolds and all comment on her plans to escape. The comments reveal the formation of intertextual connections and personal relevance as readers actively engage with the narrative and draw parallels to their own experiences. One striking aspect of these comments is the emergence of four distinct variations of the word "run" as seen in Figure 29, highlighting the complexity and depth of the readers' interpretations. Each represents the reader as an individual, with their own background and personality, but also shows how the readers of the text feel as a collective. Some of the comments even refer to other texts. Zanele Mathonsi refers to a scene in *The Lion King* (video in Figure 17). After Mufasa dies, Scar blames Simba for the death and advises Simba to "run away and never return". This phrase invokes the image of the young lion cub running, filled with feelings of guilt and afraid for his life because hyenas are following him.



Figure 26

Similarly, Siphe is in an unfamiliar situation, wondering if she is to blame for putting herself in danger. Bee Kewuti's response makes reference to the song "Slyza Tsotsi" (video in Figure 27) by the South African DJ duo Major League DJz featuring Cassper Nyovest, Riky Rick, Okmalumkoolkat and Carpo. According to Khanyisile Mbongwa,

Slyza means to escape, to find a different route. The township is built with all these small passageways where you can easily get trapped. Tsotsi, a slang word common to most Southern African languages, mostly refers to 'gangster' but it can also mean 'street wise'. So the Slyza Tsotsi character knows his environment and how to navigate through it, he knows the in and out and is constantly aware of his environment and himself. (qtd. in Braat para. 10)



Figure 27

Elihle Mkhonto's comment in Figure 29 refers to the song "Baleka" by the Gospel group Joyous Celebration (video in Figure 28).²³ The song addresses the everyday situations that people put themselves in, where they claim to pray to God for deliverance from sin when the solution is to run, and refers to scriptures in the Bible.²⁴ Mkhonto comments with a line from the chorus, "Baleka ngezinyawo zombili" which means "flee with your two feet".



Figure 28

Throughout the text, all of Lindy Theledi's comments contain the word "yoh", an expression equivalent to "wow" that is used to express awe or surprise; her comments offer comedic relief to the drama of the text. This intertextuality in the comments shows that the stories are relatable but also illustrates how this generation of teenagers/young adults engage with texts online. The readers' mode of engagement is characterised by a fluid exchange between different popular

²³ The lyrics and translation of the song can be found in this link:
<https://africangospellyrics.com/2013/06/08/baleka-flee-lyrics-by-nobathembu-mabeka-joyous-celebration-17/>

²⁴ 2 Timothy 2:22, 1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:14 and James 4:7

culture productions and personal experiences, including their favourite movies, TV shows, music and social media platforms.

This intertextual exchange also reveals a complex and dynamic process of meaning-making, one that is shaped by the diverse cultural influences that surround the readers. All of these comments also become a part of the text, thereby influencing the outcomes of the text when new readers encounter it. New readers might be able to relate to what readers before would have been feeling and can join the conversation with their own response to finding out that Siphe is in danger. The comments also show the development of the reader's attachment to Siphe's character and to the story.

Another way that the text demonstrates the pervasiveness of violence in South Africa is in Siphe's escape. Out of the hundreds of people that disappear in Gauteng, the story turns this statistic into a narrative. In doing this, the story highlights this contemporary issue and speaks to the plight of women

in South Africa and the constant fear of violence. This fear of violence necessitates the responsibility that falls on women to protect each other. In the text, this can be seen in how the female characters go out of their way to help Siphe reach safety. The morning after Siphe realises that Samkelo intends to harm her, she escapes with the help of Sophia, Samkelo's maid. Sophia is aware of Samkelo's occupation as a criminal and still puts her life at risk so that Siphe does not lose hers. Evidence of her resolve to help Siphe is seen in her thoughts when Samkelo questions her about Siphe's disappearance. Samkelo asks Sophia if she saw a lady in one of the guestrooms, and Sophia pretends that she has not seen anyone:

In the kitchen, Sophia's whole body was shaking from fear and guilt. "What if the boss finds out I just helped that girl escape? Oh, poor little girl," Sophie thought to herself.

Samkelo ran out of Siphe's room and quickly grabbed his car keys. He was on the phone, deploying people to find Siphe. Sophia did not utter a word or look into his

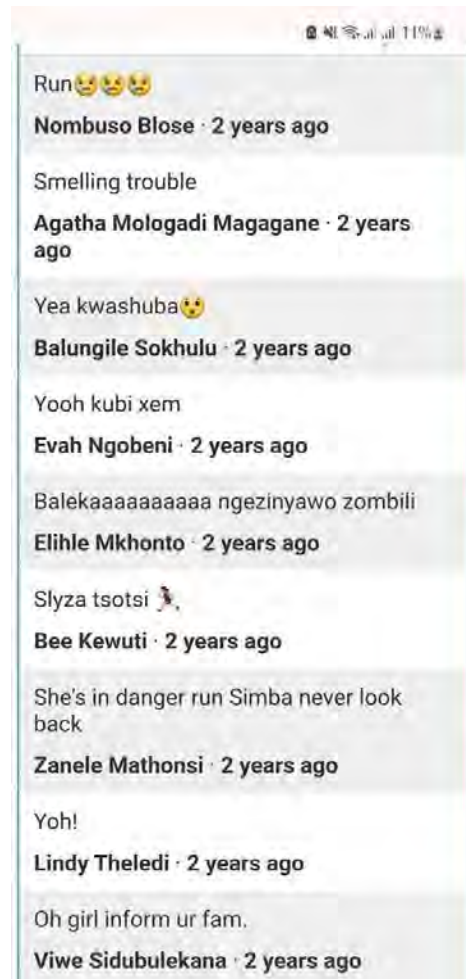


Figure 29

eyes. She was just praying that the desperate girl would get the protection she needed. (Chapter 5 para. 9-11)

Sophia is fearful but chooses to protect Siphe by pretending she is unaware of Siphe's escape. Although it is a dramatisation, writing the characters in this way shows the extent to which women's safety is entirely in their hands, even when it is out of their control. Siphe leaves the house and starts running. As she is running, Mrs. Galeka sees Siphe and offers to help, saying, "Darling, you can speak to me and I will help. It pains me to see a woman in such a state. Especially here in South Africa. Or at least allow me to drive you to the mall" (Chapter 6 para. 3). This statement reflects how gender-based violence has been normalised in South Africa. As Gqola says,

We know that today women do not feel safe in the streets and homes of South Africa, that women's bodies are seen as accessible for consumption — touching, raping, kidnapping, commenting on, grabbing, twisting, beating, burning, maiming — and control, that women are denied the very freedom that 'empowerment' suggests, the very freedom the constitution protects. And the problem is often made women's responsibility. (120)

Although there are no descriptions of violence, its pervasiveness is felt in Siphe's fear and Mrs. Galeka's words. The phrase "Especially here in South Africa", gives a clear impression of the fear of violence that comes with living as a woman in South Africa. After hearing Siphe's explanation, Mrs. Galeka intends to call the police, but just as she is about to call, her children call from home about an emergency. Mrs. Galeka drives Siphe to the mall, and when they arrive, she sees her husband coming out of the mall. Unaware of what is happening, she hands Siphe over to her husband, Mr. Galeka, Samkelo's partner and the man in charge of abducting her. When Siphe enters his car, Mr. Galeka locks the car doors and takes Siphe back to Samkelo's mansion. Both male characters in the text use the women's trust and innocence to exploit them. Samkelo plans to exploit Siphe's trust and attraction towards him to lure her into being kidnapped. Mr. Galeka also takes advantage of his wife's trust and innocence; Mrs. Galeka hands Siphe over to him and "unknowingly [delivers] Siphe to her hunter" (Chapter 6 para. 9). Still, Siphe has Sophia to fight for her. When Samkelo locks himself and Siphe in a room and begins to question and threaten her, it is Sophia who saves Siphe:

"You will kill the wrong person! Let the innocent girl go!" Sophia screamed. (Chapter 6 para. 20)

Sophia entered with a tear-stained face and a small photo album. She had been through Siphe's bag, which she had left behind. Sophia paged through it and showed them the pictures of Siphe's family, each page lovingly decorated and captioned by Siphe. Siphe had been in such a crisis that she completely forgot that she had proof that the man whose photo they were showing her was not her father. The two men shared the same name, Mziwethu Ncoko. But they were not the same person. They were not linked. (Chapter 7 para. 2-4)

Sophia's courageous decision to defy Samkelo and risk her own life to save Siphe is a powerful moment in the narrative. However, it is also a sobering reminder that, in reality, such situations often end in tragedy, with victims of abduction and kidnapping frequently meeting a devastating fate. In contrast, the story's conclusion, in which Samkelo is brought to justice and Siphe is reunited with her family, offers a rare and hopeful exception to this trend. By presenting a narrative in which Siphe survives her ordeal without physical harm, the author creates a counter-story that challenges the grim statistics surrounding abduction in South Africa, where many victims are never seen again.

At the end of the story, one reader, Nombuso Blose (Figure 30), expresses her relief that Siphe is safe. Karabo Kapo, Evah Ngobeni and Sparkle Kaye (Figure 31) ask questions or comment in a way that indicates they need more information for them to feel like the story is resolved. Given that *fundza.mobi* readers have a known preference for stories with a resolution, this example highlights the significant impact that reader feedback can have on the writing process. As future FANZ writers read the story and accompanying comments, they may be influenced to adopt this approach in their own writing, prioritizing plot resolution and crafting conclusions that will resonate with their readers.

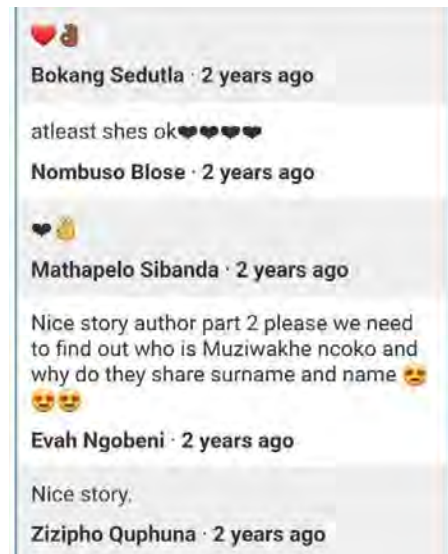


Figure 30



Figure 31

4.3.3 Exposing the Persistence of Patriarchy in Akhona Mlenga's “Unlocked”

“Unlocked” by Akhona Mlenga is also an example of the kind of storytelling that Murray advocates for, one that confronts the persistence of patriarchy. Through a poetic and evocative writing style, Mlenga employs a range of narrative techniques, including flashbacks and foreshadowing, to highlight the destructive impact of internalised patriarchal beliefs on young women’s lives. Moreover, the use of first-person narration enables the reader to experience the protagonist’s journey of self-discovery and growth, creating a deeply immersive and engaging reading experience.

To start with, it is important to discuss how Mlenga frames the story. She writes in first person perspective in a self-reflexive tone, as if in the eyes of an older protagonist looking back with an awareness of how her upbringing leads her into the abusive relationship that she encounters. The protagonist is unnamed and speaks as though the audience is a friend. The only character in the story that has a name is her boyfriend, Henry.

In Chapter 1 of “Unlocked”, Mlenga uses water as a symbol to illustrate how the protagonist was raised by her grandmother. When the story starts, she says “I used to dance in the rain a lot before I was given a lot of responsibilities at home, before I was fed with beliefs and a spoonful of culture” (para. 2). Her grandmother instils traditional beliefs about womanhood by imparting certain beliefs about gender roles and giving her multiple responsibilities related to her cousins’ and siblings’ care. In one scene, she reflects and watches her siblings and cousins dance in the rain:

Ladies didn't do that, that if a young man walked by and saw me dancing like a mad person in the rain they would see me as a child and not want to marry me, that's what my grandmother instilled in me at a young age. (Chapter 1 para. 2)

While the protagonist's siblings and cousins associate rainwater with dancing, laughter, joy and rejuvenation; water represents responsibility and duty in the family. Her grandmother uses three ways to influence or teach her to perform femininity associated with being a traditional wife. Firstly, through statements like the one above. Secondly, her grandmother uses superstitious beliefs such as "if a girl fetches water from the river when the sun had set, the spirits of the mermaid from the river would follow her" (Chapter 1 para. 5). These beliefs shape her understanding of what it is to be a woman and influence her decision-making and actions when she moves to the city for university.

A superficial reading of the grandmother's behaviour may suggest that she is callous, overly strict or cruel. However, her upbringing represents the benevolent aspect of ambivalent sexism that Leaper et al. discuss in their article. Her grandmother idealises traditional gender roles and reinforces this in her granddaughter. Moreover, the grandmother's behaviour and words can also be read as protective. Gianne Faye Macatangay et al. explain that "protective families, which are high on conformity and low on conversations, tend to expect family members to conform to the authoritative figures' (parents/older members of the family) beliefs" (4). The protagonist is expected to conform to her grandmother's authority so that she is better able to attract a man to marry her. Considering she has multiple siblings and cousins under her grandmother's care, this could be in her grandmother's eyes, the best way for her granddaughter to survive. It can be inferred that this is the grandmother's view because of her own internalised misogyny. This interpretation of the grandmother's words and actions highlights the complex nature of ambivalent sexism, which can manifest in ways that are both subtle and insidious. It is also an example of the multiple ways gender constructs continue to be transmitted and reinforced. Even though the protagonist is raised this way, she is aware that going to university and finding another way is the key to 'unlocking' her purpose. Still, the protagonist needs to first unlearn what she has been taught. As mentioned above, her grandmother's teaching influences her decision-making once she reaches university. From her grandmother's sayings, she creates a song to motivate herself to keep up with responsibilities. One of the lines is "don't let the team lose, do your part, don't let the team lose, many depend on you, don't be selfish" (Chapter 1 para. 6). This song also foreshadows her fall into subservience in her romantic

relationship in university. When she starts dating Henry, a final-year Law student from West Africa, the song comes up again:

I did my part every day, he did his and slowly our relationship became like an agreement more than anything. I unconsciously sang my old song, “do your part, don’t let the team lose, don’t be selfish, he depends on you.”

I and forever wanting my actions of submission to cut merit in people’s scrapbooks was getting worse. I was told what to say in public, what to wear, how to carry myself and the list went on. (Chapter 3. Par 9-10)

The protagonist starts taking care of her boyfriend in the same way she did her siblings. She “does [her] part” (para. 9) every day by cooking and cleaning for him and Henry dictates what she wears and how she speaks and behaves in public (Chapter 3). Although she calls their relationship an agreement, the agreement is more apparent on her part. The protagonist expends a lot of effort catering to him, even to the point of using more money than is in her budget to buy new clothes and hair extensions. In comparison, Henry only seems a suitable partner in the first few days of the relationship. She calls him her “newly found knight in shining armour” and recalls how they are inseparable within days and how she relies on him to navigate the city since he is well-acquainted (Chapter 3 para. 7). He seems like the ‘rescuer’ that Mshweshwe discusses in romance narratives. He is sure of himself because of his experience as a city-dweller and thus controls her behaviour to suit his image.

While this “agreement” is something instilled in her from a young age, it is also enforced through control and physical abuse. For example, she reflects in Chapter 4:

He promised to marry me so I was going to give myself to him anyway. He forever spoke and I listened, I was told never to talk back at home and back in the village, a woman’s word didn’t matter much so I saw nothing wrong in our relationship until I had no voice at all and if I ever objected to anything he said, a clap would close my mouth and leave my teeth vibrating. The thought of leaving appeared to me the first time he hit me over an argument about me reading books at midnight and disturbing his sleep with my bedside lamp. (para. 2)

When she attempts to voice her opinion, Henry hits her. In my reading of the protagonist’s experience, I draw from Gqola’s arguments about gender-based violence. Gqola argues that to address the root of gender-based violence, it is important to recognise how “‘normal’ heterosexual ‘play’ contains codes that inscribe feminine passivity and masculine aggression” (117). The narrator has been taught to play small, obey and do her part. She wants to make her

grandmother proud, “walking back home with a ring on [her] left finger, telling [her] grandmother all about it and being the perfect granddaughter who kept all her beliefs [. . .] and got what she was destined for” (Chapter 3 para. 6). While her grandmother implies that behaviour outside of traditional femininity will leave her alone and husbandless, there exists an element of violence that comes with it. The narrator’s perceived disobedience is met with displays of dominance through physical abuse. Accordingly, the dominating characteristic in their relationship is Henry’s control over her.

While I have already touched on the fact that Henry controls how the protagonist presents herself physically, I will now provide a more detailed analysis. Initially, the protagonist starts changing her physical appearance to prepare for life in the city. She wants to “fit in the city life, move with the rhythm of the city and lock the real me away” so no one can tell that she’s a “village girl” (Chapter 2 para. 4). Her makeover consists of straightening her curls, practising her walk in heels, applying makeup and learning “the city twang” (Chapter 2 para. 4). It is this image that attracts Henry; on the day they first meet she wears black kitten heels and “the cute red dress” (Chapter 3 para. 2) she wore to her matric dance. Unbeknown to her, it is this same image that will sustain their relationship. Henry often makes comments such as “I want you to look exactly the way I saw you the first time, every day, nicely done hair, makeup and please forever walk like a lady, never do anything to embarrass me (Chapter 3 para. 8). Though it does not align with who she wants to be, Henry replaces her grandmother and goes even further by picking out all of her outfits, makeup and hairstyles for each event that they attend together.

It is interesting to note that Mlenga keeps a self-reflective tone throughout the text. While the protagonist is a victim of domestic abuse, this self-reflection also positions her as someone with agency. She recognises that she allows others to have influence over her. For example, she is aware that she tries to “cut merit in people’s scrapbooks” (Chapter 3 para. 10) by being subservient. In addition, she is aware that her grandmother’s influence led to this relationship. An examination of Mlenga’s authorial voice in this context is relevant to this discussion. There are certain choices she makes, especially within the protagonist’s reflections that stand out. By revealing the protagonist’s inner thoughts about her situation, Mlenga begins to imagine a different world for the protagonist and creatively does the work of “exposing the persistence of patriarchy”. Not only does she give the protagonist a way out, but she also gives the reader an understanding of what that means practically: she needs to realise how her upbringing has affected her and make an active choice to leave the relationship, even if it means starting over by herself. This portrayal of the protagonist elicits a corresponding sentiment from

readers who empathise with her but also acknowledge her agency and complicity in the events that unfold. For example, at the end of Chapter 3, the readers are asked, “What do you think about the relationship she had with Henry?” Figure 32 shows some of the readers’ comments. While they all express the fact that the relationship is not good for her and that Henry is controlling, two readers share what they think about the protagonist as well. Margaret says that she is a “push over” and Tonny Nkosi says that she is “too submissive”. These two comments show engagement with the text beyond the question asked. Both readers have picked up on the protagonist’s introspective nature and have effectively mirrored this self-awareness back onto the text.

It is this introspective nature that plays a significant role in the protagonist’s break-up with Henry after a date. At the end of the story, the author revisits the water symbol with a scene featuring rain, which was also present at the beginning of the story. However, this time the protagonist decides to abandon the belief held over her and to dance in the rain.

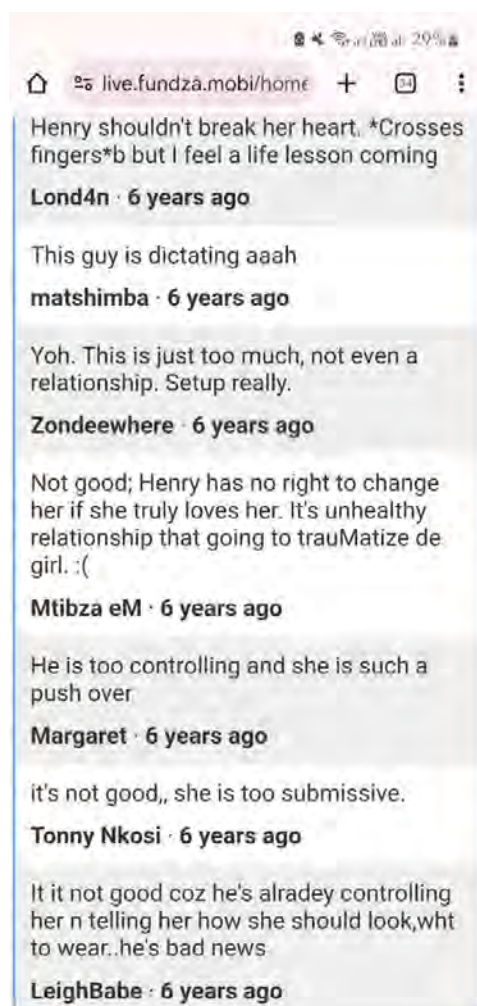


Figure 32

“Can I have this dance?” I asked myself.

“Yes, yes you can,” my heart gave me that response. I danced gracefully in my cute red dress, barefoot, with my hair wet and lazily hitting my face. For once I thought about myself only. I didn’t care about how angry Henry might be or how disappointed my grandmother would be if she were to hear I had jeopardized a chance of getting married to a young, learned young man from a royal family.

Yes, prince that is why he acted like that. I just didn’t care at all... (Chapter 6 para. 8-10)

The rain ceases to symbolise restriction and becomes empowering. In this scene, the protagonist also reveals that Henry is a real-life prince. While this detail is obscured until the last chapter, it is significant because it partly explains Henry’s behaviour. But this fairy-tale

romance is a failed one, and the romantic narrative is subverted, revealing a more problematic portrayal of the “knight in shining armour” trope. Henry’s character is depicted as controlling, abusive and too concerned with social status and appearance.

After this scene, the protagonist spends the night at a friend’s on-campus residence. That night, she reorganises her life in her mind and re-aligns herself with her original desire to find her purpose in the city. Determined to find her own place to stay and repeat the school year, the protagonist’s future appears hopeful as the story concludes. However, this redirection is sudden and only comes at the end, which means the reader is left with the potential for change and not a story of what the change looks like. Figure 33 shows responses that are both aesthetic and efferent. Family affairs, Lond4n, matshimba and Mtibza eM affirm the protagonist’s decision to start over, while one reader, nappl.e, says that they feel like the protagonist could have broken up with Henry sooner. The story’s direction is typical of YAL on *fundza.mobi*, where hope and resolve only come at the end. Still, the story is, in part, a reimaging that paints a different picture of what becomes of young women in the city. The writer presents an opportunity for change by writing beyond an unfortunate situation.

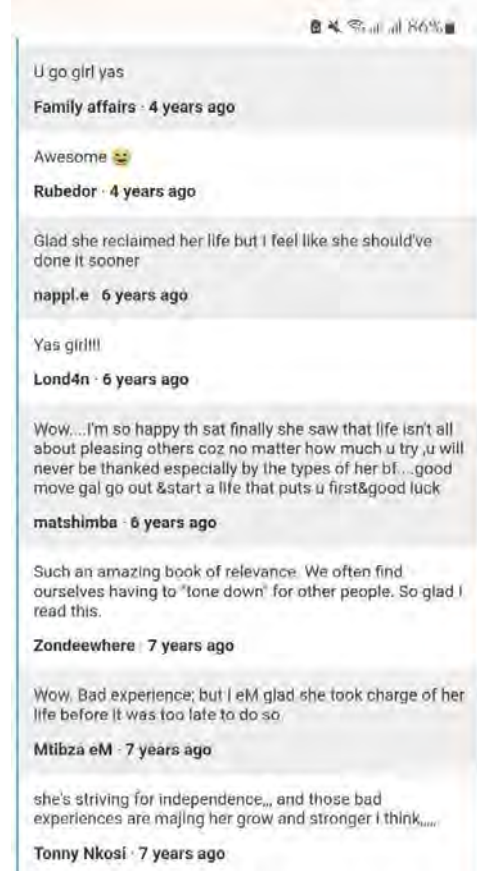


Figure 33

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter began with a historical and contextual background outlining YAL in South Africa and the history and literary representations of rural-to-urban migration. I argued that *fundza.mobi* is counter-storytelling platform because of its goals to provide accessible and relatable stories that appeal to South African youth and their experiences. However, my analysis reveals that not all texts are counter-stories on the platform because of the unmoderated nature of its self-publishing platform *LoveWriting* and the open-publishing model.

My analysis examines five short stories about rural-to-urban migration that focalise female characters. This focalisation of female characters demonstrates what Camlin et al. call

“the feminisation of internal migration” (531) as outlined in my discussion about migration stories in South Africa. I took my analytical approach from Murray’s discussion about the ways in which textual representations can shed light on the ongoing vulnerability of women in our society and potentially act as a first step towards imagining a very different type of society.

In the first part of the analysis, I argue that “The Hard Life” and “Reneilwe”, in their simplistic and didactic nature as cautionary tales, inadvertently perpetuate problematic assumptions about young women who move to the city. The stories’ cautionary approach often results in a loss of agency for female characters, who are depicted as making poor decisions or being powerless against the city’s dangers and influence. Comparatively, “I Will Find My Way” offers a more empowering narrative, using similar circumstances as a springboard for Mila’s success. Notably, this story also presents a nuanced portrayal of masculinity, featuring two contrasting male characters that embody both exploitative and supportive traits. This nuanced approach stands in stark contrast to the other two stories, where male characters are often nameless and unaccountable.

In the second part of my analysis, I show how Comba, using the ‘fairy-tale’ romance trope, explores gender relations and highlights the prevalence of violence and fear in South African society. Lastly, “Unlocked” portrays the destructive impact of internalised patriarchal beliefs on young women’s lives. Through self-reflective narration, the protagonist tells a story about how her grandmother’s internalised sexism and influence affect her choices in a romantic relationship, providing a thought-provoking commentary on the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal values.

In all five stories, the readers’ comments range from aesthetic to efferent. Readers experience the tensions and emotions in the stories as they happen, and share their thoughts based on questions asked. My analysis of these comments reveals that the reading process is multi-faceted, with readers expressing support, disagreeing with some of the writer’s choices, asking questions and drawing from their own personal experiences and popular culture. This shows a willingness to be involved and to be part of a reading community, which is exactly what FunDza wanted when they established the platform.

Ultimately, the coexistence of these stories on the same platform calls attention to the complexity of the rural-to-urban migration experience for young women. This co-existence also raises some fundamental questions. What happens when stories written by youth and young adults perpetuate the ‘persistence of patriarchy’ and stories that are ‘didactic’ in nature are the counter-stories? Despite these complexities, the positive responses from readers to all the stories suggest that they are drawn to relatability, authenticity and honesty, even when the

subject matter is difficult or traumatic. As Michael Cart notes, “another value of young adult literature is its capacity for telling its readers the unvarnished truth, however disagreeable it might sometimes be, for in this way it equips readers to deal with the realities of impending adulthood” (11). After all, YAL reflects and shapes the values and experiences of its readers. By drawing on shared experiences and emotions, these stories create a sense of connection with their audience, making them both impactful and memorable. As a whole, these stories exemplify FunDza's mission to provide stories that captivate and resonate with young South Africans. By empowering youth to tell their own stories and commissioning narratives that tackle pressing issues, *fundza.mobi* promotes a community of readers and writers who can engage with relevant themes, develop their literacy skills, and connect with others who share similar experiences and perspectives.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

As someone who first encountered digital literature in its earliest forms as a teenager, I wanted to explore this ‘new’ phenomenon called digital literature, which has since become an established genre. In an era that is increasingly technological, young people are using digital platforms to tell their stories online and make their mark on the literary landscape.

In this study, I have demonstrated how digital methods of writing and publishing are becoming more influential by focusing on three online platforms, namely *fundza.mobi*, *JAY Lit* and *Wattpad*. I have argued that since the digital space allows for self-publishing, it enables young African writers to use online platforms creatively to engage with and represent contemporary themes. As my analysis of the selected short stories shows, young African writers are using the digital space to write counter-stories by constructing original stories that centre unique perspectives and actively reclaiming and reimagining African narratives, themes and experiences. This creation and recreation of African narratives cultivates a more inclusive literary landscape in Africa. As these platforms grow, they offer young African writers increased visibility and recognition, potentially leading to income generation within a challenging publishing environment, or even the future publication of their work in print. While each platform has its own agenda and each writer addresses vastly different themes, all three platforms allow young African writers to express themselves and develop their writing.

When I set out to do this research, I had five questions to answer. The first question was, ‘How is the online space changing YAL or the way young adult writers express themselves?’. The online space has expanded how writers can express themselves. This ‘expansion’ in its allowance for young writers to write on their terms also expands how they connect and interact with their readers.

The second question I wanted to answer was, ‘How do readers influence the processes and outcomes of online writing?’. While Frederico Pianzola, Simone Rebora and Gerhard Lauer have previously analysed digital social reading on a larger scale, this study sought to analyse individual comments in depth, thus filling a gap in the previous research. In my analysis of readers’ responses, I noticed two significant outcomes. With *fundza.mobi*, readers add to the meaning or understanding of a text through their own personal experiences and cultural references. On *Wattpad*, readers increase the reach of novels and stories through their interactions with the texts through votes and comments. It is this engagement that not only increases how many other people will read, but where the story will end up - as a book in print,

a graphic novel or a film/movie series. This reader interaction also translates into monetary value on the *Wattpad* platform. The ‘processes of online writing’ are more complicated to analyse because this would require following a particular text from its beginning to its end as the author uploads chapters, interacts with readers and edits their work.

The third question has to do with the kinds of diverse writing styles that are emerging from the digital turn. Ibrahim Babátundé Ibrahim and Akhona Mlenga’s writing styles are relevant in this regard. Ibrahim’s representation of Ewa’s bodymind allows the reader to see the effects of discrimination and psychosocial disablism while Mlenga’s reflective and evocative style is a deeply personal account that allows the reader to understand how internalised misogyny works.

I also wanted to explore the kinds of themes and subjectivities that are represented in YAL and narratives written by young African writers. Examining these three platforms provided a valuable combination of counter-stories with different themes including psychosocial disablism, the non-disabled imaginary, rural-to-urban migration, gendered violence, sacrificial love and the complexities of ethnic identity and interreligious encounters. All these themes that emerged from the study show the diversity of what one can find on digital platforms. In some cases, the short stories resonated with established theoretical concepts, highlighting young African writers’ valuable insights and perspectives regarding experiences and the realities of the young adult world. Thus, this research sought to illuminate these insightful perspectives and contribute to a deeper understanding of the contemporary African experience as seen through the eyes of a new generation.

Lastly, I wanted to show how young writers engage in the fluidity of movement from the online space to print publishing. While none of the writers are published in print— there is much evidence on the platforms themselves that demonstrates the fluidity of movement. As discussed in Chapter Three, *Wattpad* has started its own imprints so writers can publish and several *Wattpad* original books have ended up as films. This 18-year-old platform shows the potential that digital platforms can reach where African producers and publishers can find talented writers and create or join literary networks.

Examining all three platforms beside each other allowed me to show how digital literature appears on three levels. *fundza.mobi*, as a local platform, has a South African homegrown focus that caters to youth who want to improve their reading and writing skills. The platform aims to be accessible to most South African teenagers through a data-free mobi site and data-free distribution through channels like FreeBasics.com. It has an inward focus that allows for the development and increase of South African stories by the youth and for the

youth. *JAY Lit*, a growing platform that published its seventh issue in the second half of 2024, allows young African writers to tell stories through poetry, plays, short stories and non-fiction stories. It is a gathering place for upcoming writers on the continent, and its existence showcases the new generation of writers. Although *JAY Lit* is not necessarily a community-based platform such as *fundza.mobi* and *Wattpad*, the journal showcases the work of young writers on the continent and is valuable for encountering and examining “literature written by, about, and/or for born-in-Africa youths” (*JAY Lit* para. 2). *Wattpad*, as an international platform with features akin to social media, such as writer bios and conversation boards, facilitates multimodal storytelling and embodies key aspects of social authorship. The inclusion of social media handles within the platform directly connects the digital work to the author’s online identity and creates the opportunity for regular interaction with the audience. As an international platform, *Wattpad* serves as a channel for African writers, providing them with access to a global audience and enabling the dissemination of African stories beyond geographical boundaries.

In Chapter One, I outlined the development of digital literature in Africa, tracing its origins to the 1980s and 1990s, discussing debates, and explaining the ideas of social authorship and reader-writer interaction, which were important in understanding my analysis of the comments online readers make on stories from *Wattpad* and *fundza.mobi*. I also defined counter-storytelling and explained its four key purposes for analysing each short story.

Having established the groundwork in the previous chapter, in Chapter Two I analyse Ibrahim Babátundé Ibrahim’s short “When the Sun Is Up” from *JAY Lit*. I examine the short story as an alternative representation of a character with albinism. The narrative is a prime example of counter-storytelling, as it challenges privileged individuals to consider the worldviews and experiences of those historically oppressed and marginalised. Instead of focusing on the main character’s impairment or difference, Ibrahim highlights society’s ignorance and intolerance towards that difference. “When the Sun Is Up” effectively challenges and redefines the narratives surrounding albinism and other forms of marginalisation. It showcases how contemporary African literature, particularly that of young African authors, can be fundamental in reshaping societal perceptions. As a product of contemporary culture, “When the Sun Is Up” highlights the potential for different representations and conceptions of marginalised people. It also reflects *JAY Lit*’s goals as a platform to break from painful histories and create better images of Africa than what has been seen before.

In Chapter Three, I analyse a short story titled “Inter-Tribal Union” from Mercy Kalu’s *Wattpad* anthology. My choice to analyse a less popular short story from a writer whose other

works have gained millions of readers shows how the digital space allows writers to do both – write personally satisfying narratives that are meaningful to them while also producing popular prize-winning works and becoming popular through *Wattpad*'s algorithms. Kalu combines her goal of writing contemporary love stories while giving a glimpse into the Nigerian every day to present a counter-story that explores an interfaith relationship in Nigeria. Kalu's social media presence allowed me to illustrate social authorship, which contributes to a complete picture of the dynamics of digital self-publishing. She writes her stories and makes content for social media accounts to advertise her story, demonstrating how emerging authors accrue social capital to raise awareness of themselves and their work. Her interactions with readers also give insight into reader-writer interaction and how readers add depth and meaning to online texts.

Chapter Four's analysis of short stories from *fundza.mobi* reveals that while a platform may aim to present counter-stories, individual stories do not necessarily reflect this fact. I looked at five short stories that focalise female characters in rural-to-urban migration to show the complexity of the migration experience. The first part of my analysis suggests that "The Hard Life" by Philane Ndabe and "Reneilwe" by Mogale Kgashane are simplistic and didactic, perpetuating assumptions about young women in cities. These stories often lead to a loss of agency for female characters. At the same time, "I Will Find My Way" by Zukiswa Phakama offers a more empowering narrative with nuanced portrayals of masculinity and male characters. The second part of my analysis examines how Oyama Comba employs the 'fairy-tale' romance trope in the short story "In Search of Greener Pastures" to explore the complexities of gender relations and the pervasive presence of violence and fear within South African society. I also analyse how the short story "Unlocked" by Akhona Mlenga narrates the detrimental effects of internalised patriarchal beliefs on young women's lives. Through a self-reflective narrative, the protagonist exposes the story of her grandmother's internalised sexism and its profound impact on her own romantic choices. The short story serves as a commentary on the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal values, emphasising the cyclical nature of such societal issues and their lasting consequences on individual lives. While I intended to present counter-stories, this mix of stories points to the multifaceted nature of YAL, particularly in South Africa. It highlights how the coexistence of diverse narratives on a single platform, such as those depicting the rural-to-urban migration experience of young women, can illuminate the intricate and often challenging realities of this demographic.

While the research and conclusions presented in this thesis have achieved their primary objectives, it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of the study. My goal was to highlight how reader-writer interaction, unique writing styles, and self-publishing—key

features of some digital literature—are present on these three platforms while acknowledging that these features are not common to all digital publishing spaces. Each platform, among the hundreds available, has its own features, rules of submission or self-publishing and ways of creating a community around writers. The short stories I chose were primarily stories from two specific geographic regions, South Africa and Nigeria, and as such my analysis considered these contexts to present my points. This may limit the generalisability of findings to other countries. Moreover, I could only examine a select few stories from each of the three platforms for analysis. Each has numerous short stories and other literary forms that could be analysed. I chose short stories for these studies, but novels may more accurately reflect some of the points in terms of popularity, reach and potential to be published in print. It is also important to note that one of my primary goals was to highlight counter-storytelling and how it appears in the digital space. Future studies could examine texts from other African countries or focus on long-form works like novels. There are also many more themes that future research could explore which do not fall under the counter-storytelling umbrella. As I mentioned in Chapter One, digital literature also requires multimodal analysis, since some stories come with images, videos, and other features that fall outside of literary analysis. Future research could include texts with these multimedia features. Although I intended to show how texts move from digital to print, my chosen short stories do not reflect that fact. I do mention how some *Wattpad* novels have been published in print or made into films, but an in-depth analysis of this transition would be insightful.

Another challenge that I faced with this thesis was the ephemeral nature of digital literature. While my analysis is based on the stories as they currently exist, it is important to acknowledge the inherent mutability of literary works, as authors retain the prerogative to revise their texts. There are also features that each platform may choose to remove or add. I did my best to discuss these changes, especially in my outlines of *fundza.mobi* and *Wattpad*, but these platforms are ever-changing. Writers may also choose to delete their work, as evidenced by the Facebook writers I briefly discussed in Chapter One. In addition, the platforms will update their websites, interfaces or processes. when I started my research, *JAY Lit* was in its infancy and had only published two issues of the journal. They have since published seven issues, updated their website and now publish the submitted texts on their website. They also have a blog and annual awards for some of the submissions. My discussion of the platform is based on the information I had at the time, and time constraints do not allow me to expand on their journey up to 2025. As a growing platform, there is much that future studies can work with. Nevertheless, I have recorded as accurately as I can within my time of study.

In closing, it is my hope that this study sheds light on the innovative ways that young African writers are occupying the online space. As counter-stories, these short stories have indeed given voice to youth whose lives are underrepresented or misrepresented, they have challenged the single story, demonstrated the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation and are a challenge to readers whose lives are shaped by privilege. The digital realm is no longer the future of African literature; it is its vibrant present, shaped by the dynamic contributions of young African writers.

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