

## PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

### RECONSTRUCTING FEMALE VOICES AND IDENTITIES IN THE DEMOCRATIC ARENA: A STUDY OF GORDIMER'S NONE TO ACCOMPANY ME

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**Malesela E. Montle, Mphoto J. Mogoboya. Reconstructing Female Voices and Identities in The Democratic Arena: A Study of Gordimer's None to Accompany Me - - Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 19(1), 1094-1107. ISSN 1567-214x**

**Keywords: Apartheid, Democracy, Femininity, Identity**

#### ABSTRACT

This paper sought to explore women's construction of identities in the democratic space. The democratisation of South Africa saw the essentialisation of human rights, dignity and freedom. This abetted the previously marginalised South Africans to reconstruct their identities within the margins of democracy. Women, in particular, had their voices limited especially in the days of colonialism and apartheid South Africa where patriarchal dominance was at its pinnacle in socio-economic and political positions. The democratic forces that advocated for equality amongst diversified races, cultures and genders empowered women to reconstruct their identities. This saw the reassertion of new identities, shifting of gender roles and women raising their voices in male-driven spaces. This is portrayed in Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*, which the study has used as a primary lens to explore women's authentic voices and reassertion of identities in the democratic arena. The paper is qualitative in nature and uses a literary text to fulfil its objective. It finds that women's liberation in the socio-economic and political dimensions is an ongoing discourse that demonstrates positivity as many democratic avenues are opening for women, however, it is worthy to point out the ills of patriarchy such as gender-based violence that are menacing women's reconstruction of identities.

#### INTRODUCTION

The democratisation of South Africa enthused the previously ostracised citizens of the country to reconstruct their identities as per democratic decrees. Women appear to have been the most marginalised group amongst the previously

relegated South Africans in the times of apartheid rule (Montle, 2020). Their participation and authentic voices in many socio-economic and political spaces were limited and rejected. The apartheid system's disregard for human rights, especially those of black people cemented patriarchal notions. During these times, women's roles were reduced to domestic work. However, the advent of democracy sought to dismantle inequality amongst diverse races, cultures and gender. As a result, the era of democracy saw women rising to reconstruct their identities, raise their authentic voices and thrive in what was formerly institutionalised as male-driven platforms. The reconstruction of women's identities met with demeaning challenges, which are reflected in Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*. Most of Gordimer's novels have mirrored the remnants of apartheid that hinder democratic progress in South Africa and her novel, *None to Accompany Me* explores the issues of gender, power and identity-crisis. Women's identity-crisis in the democratic period is one of the many challenges that South Africa in the present day is attempting many efforts to remedy. Rafapa and Mahori (2011, 156) aver that "the danger of continuing, even beyond 1994, to be spectacular and boil everything down to the effects of apartheid is for real." This noted, the paper specifically explores women's reassertion of their identities in the democratic period and it unpacks the societal, cultural and religious underpinnings that sometimes menace the women's reconstruction of identities.

## METHODOLOGY

The study has used a qualitative approach to navigate through the assertion of women's identities in the democratic dimension. It has sampled Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* as its main source of data coupled with critical works amongst Gordimer's fictional work. The novel addresses women's search for identity in the democratic South Africa, hence, it is chosen for this study due to this relevance. A textual analysis is utilised to comprehend, present, interpret and analyse Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from Gordimer's sampled narration for this study, *None to Accompany Me* are presented and discussed in line with the main objective of the study, which is to explore women's assertion of identities in the democratic period:

### *None to Accompany Me*

*None to Accompany Me* is an enthralling tale that reflects on the culminating moments of apartheid in South Africa. It portrays the odds stacked against radical transformation in the newly democratic South Africa through the lives of two powerful women, Vera Stark and Sibongile Maqoma. Gordimer's characterisation of Vera and Sibongile as leading forces is a demonstration of "both black and white women's empowerment within South Africa's national transformation during the period of dramatic change in political power from white dominance to the first democratically elected government" (Sakamoto 2007, 1). Vera is a white political activist who uses her legal expertise to help black people to reclaim their land while Sibongile, also known as Sally, is a black revolutionary that came back from exile subsequent to the dispensation of

democracy. Both Vera and Sibongile have upheld employment positions that surpass their husbands' and are friends. Vera is presented as a successful lawyer while her husband, Ben appears as a failed artist. Sibongile on the other hand is the deputy director of the redeployment programme and her husband Didymus is striving to attain a position of power and is dependent on his wife. Furthermore, Dimitriu (2003, 18) depicts *None to Accompany Me* as a:

...response to the vexed question of the value Gordimer's fiction has as the society seeks to extend its concerns beyond those of overtly political struggle. As all of the actions are set in the climate of civilian as opposed to revolutionary times, the novels [Gordimer's first three after-1994] help clarify Gordimer's interest in matters that have emerged from the socio-political imperative. In the last decade racial issues, for example, have not disappeared, but have become more entangled in the wider functioning of the society.

### *Sibongile's Identity-Crisis*

Sibongile and her husband, Didymus are confronted by cultural underpinnings that often defines wives and husbands' roles. Phillip and Suri (2004) assert that there is even a theoretical and biblical perception that women's roles and contributions in communities need men's approval if they are not on behalf of them. However, Sibongile held a powerful position in the society that Didymus and she was an influential political activist than her husband:

Didymus kept in himself a slight tartness, the tug of a string in the gut ready to tighten in defence of Sibongile-he was troubled that her frankness would be interpreted as aggression; her manner, sceptical, questioning, iconoclastic, would be taken as disrespectful of the traditional style of political intercourse that had been established in the higher ranks of the movement through many years of exile, and would count against her advancement at the level to which she had, for the first time, gained access (*None to Accompany Me*, 77-78).

Didymus admires Sibongile's abilities but also has fears about her influence, identity and fact that she is above him in terms of money, power and status in society. Didymus's perception of Sibongile, according to Hryniewicz and Vianna (2018), is an inherent notion that women should not assume some employment positions. In most cases, women who somehow manage to occupy these positions will be under intense pressure as any mistake they make would be not only be used against them but also against any woman who would, in future, desire to hold positions of great influence and power. Moreover, Didymus' reservations seem to validate that culture tends to inspire the comprehension between femininity and leadership roles, and the self-depictions of men and women in terms of leadership traits (Sczesny, Bosak, Neff & Schyns, 2004). In the novel, Sibongile's role as a director impelled her to make compromises in her marriage. Her devotion shifted from her marital duties to the demands of her job:

Although Sibongile spoke of her job as it were quite humble-it was the democratic vocabulary, hangover from exile with its brave denial of hierarchy-

she was one who could not be reached except through a secretary these days. She had her offices and battery of command- computers, fax, assistants whose poor education and lack of skills she was attempting to tolerate while disciplining and training them. When there were complaints about her she said to her comrades in high positions what they themselves thought it better not express (None to Accompany Me, 74).

Sibongile's demanding job, which, she is so dedicated to, instigated changes in the Maqoma's household; alterations which are direct opposition to cultural depictions which often reduce a woman's role to domestic work, motherhood and submission to her husband. Thus, Heilman (2001) states that one of the platforms where gender stereotypes unfold is the recognition of abilities. Furthermore, Sibongile, a black African woman has become to be a validation that there are fallacies against women's roles such as that they cannot be successful leaders. Hadjithedorou (1999) postulates that the underpinnings womanhood and marital roles defined the lives and identities of African women and it was anticipated of women to get married and give birth to children where they would have their families and rip the rewards of motherhood:

Home was set up; but she did not have time to do the daily tasks that would maintain it; it was Didymus who took the shopping lists she scribbled in bed at night, who drove Mpho (their daughter) to and from her modern dance class, to the dentist, to the urgent obligations that school girls have to be here or he who called the plumber and reported the telephone out of order. His working day was less crowded than hers. She would be snatching up files, briefcase and keys in the morning while he was dipping bread fast in coffee, changing back and forth from local news to BBC. Their working life was housed in the same building; sometimes he came to look in on her office: she was talking fast on the telephone, held up a hand not to be interrupted; she was in the middle of briefing the fieldworkers through whom she had initiated research into the reintegration of returned exiles (None to Accompany Me, 74-75).

From the situation above, Lazar (1993) opines that Gordimer appears to be developing resistance against the traditional norm for female success such as marriage and motherhood but she is actually constructing empathy for the employed woman who finds herself fulfilment outside domestic identities but within intellectual and public concerns. In this case, Gordimer has used the character of Sibongile to redefine women's identities within culturally orientated spaces. Sibongile has thrived in a previously male-dominated world and set a different identity in her home where her husband Didymus had to perform domestic duties of the house since his wife's demanding job has her busy almost all the time. For many years, women in different societies were obligated to perform domestic duties and secondary roles whereas positions in the public space were usually reserved for men (Ibinga 2007). However, Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* presents a turn of events. It is the husband, Didymus who performs domestic duties, which are culturally assumed to be women's roles. To this note, Rowbotham (1992, 6) notes:

Feminism is sometimes confined to women's struggles against oppressive gender relationships. In fact, however, women's actions, both now and in the

past, often have been against interconnecting relations of inequality and have involved many aspects of resistance around daily life and culture that are not simply about gender.

### ***Money And Power***

Didymus's dependency on Sibongile financially seems to be the cause of the shift of roles in their matrimonial affair where he is responsible for domestic work-a duty that is culturally associated with femininity. This brings the relationship between money and power in marital or intimate relationships to evaluation. Unemployed men, who do not have money are disempowered, afforded little or no respect and are not regarded as real men (Radebe 2012). Didymus's disempowerment manifests in his inability to sexually satisfy Sibongile who confides in her friend Vera about her problem. Radebe (2012) states that money is one of the tools that men use to exercise authority. Given the role that money plays in men's lives, it becomes anticipated that lack of it can cause devastating effects such as loss of interest and a sense of authority.

It is Sibongile's position, which she has used to draw power from. It is because of her busy schedule that impelled Didymus to do house chores. Kroliczek (2012) postulate that when women overcome hurdles to assume leadership responsibilities, they become victims of prejudiced evaluations that emerge from nonconformity to the cultural notions of femininity. Similarly, a participant in Radebe's (2012, 12) study exclaimed: "I tell him to clean the house: he is not working, and I provide, so he must do house chores." The case of the participant above and Didymus's both attest to how financial stability becomes a determiner of power in a relationship. In both cases, the men are disqualified from exercising authority as a result of depending on their partners financially. Rosaldo (1995) argues that men's power depends on their reign over women in domestic concerns. However, it is Sibongile who seems to have dominion over Didymus in domestic space and this qualifies Sibongile to have power in the relationships. Thus, Ibinga (2007, 199) notes that Gordimer's novel provides:

a painting of a starkly new domestic power structure within the family unit, more precisely the household. Two couples exemplify the reformation of the traditional relationship between a woman and her husband. Gordimer through the couple Sibongile and Didymus Maqoma takes the reader into the transformation process taking place in black families...After facing some difficulties in order to settle in their formerly only dreamed-of homeland, the Maqomas quickly find economic stability thanks to Sally's achieved status in the political arena.

### ***Religion And Culture***

Gordimer's female empowerment in *None to Accompany Me* and the re-defining of gender roles through the Maqomas is a rejection of the fundamental assumptions of religion and culture about married women. Cultural educational aspects such as proverbs and idioms demonstrate resistance to female leadership. For instance, African cultural proverbs specifically from the

Northern Sotho tribe reinforce the reduction of a woman's role under the authority of a man. Some of these proverbs are:

- Tša etwa pele ke ya tshadi di wela ka leopeng [A herd that is led by a cow (female) will fall into a pit].
- Mosadi ke tšhwene, o lewa mabogo [A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten].
- Monna ke peu, ga a swarwe manenolo. [A woman should honour her husband].

The proverbs above point out the patriarchal notions that are upheld in Northern Sotho cultural societies. The proverb, Tša etwa pele ke ya tshadi di wela ka leopeng warns against appointing a female as a leader. It states that female leadership will only result in chaos. Gordimer's presentation of the character of Sibongile appears to declare the message behind this proverb a fallacy. Sibongile thrives as an influential political figure in her community and scholars such as Sakamoto (2006, 231) view her as:

a new agent of post-apartheid politics who goes beyond her husband's experiences. She has her own expectations and ambitions to be realised. Given her new power within the changing political scene, Gordimer seems to suggest that it is only in politics that women can experience liberation and empowerment.

The second proverb, Mosadi ke tšhwene, o lewa mabogo defines a real wife as the one that conforms to her domestic duties. Masenya (2004) avers that a woman's value, beauty and respect depends on her diligence in performing domestic duties and taking care of her children and husband. Correspondingly, the proverb, Monna ke peu, ga a swarwe manenolo encourages women to honour and submit to their husbands. It recognises the man as the possessor of authority and head of the household. This could be complemented by religious underpinnings:

### *Women in Christianity*

Many leadership roles in the organised church have been prohibited to women, but the majority of churches now hold an egalitarian (men and women's roles equal) view regarding women's roles in the church. In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, only men may serve as priests, elders, or deacons; only males serve in senior leadership positions such as pope, patriarch, and bishop. Women may serve as abbesses. Most mainstream Protestant denominations are beginning to relax their longstanding constraints on ordaining women to be ministers, though some large groups, most notably the Southern Baptist Convention are tightening their constraints in reaction. Most of all Charismatic and Pentecostal churches were pioneers in this matter and have embraced the ordination of women since their founding (Southern Baptist Convention > SBC Search ([www.sbc.net](http://www.sbc.net)) Retrieved October 2020).

### *Women in Judaism*

Marriage and family law in biblical times favoured men over women. For example, a husband could divorce a wife if he chose to, but a wife could not divorce a husband without his consent. The practice of levirate marriage applied to widows of childless deceased husbands, not to widowers of childless deceased wives; though, if either he or she did not consent to the marriage, a different ceremony called chalitza is done instead, which basically involves the widow's removing her brother-in-law's shoe, spitting in front of him, and proclaiming, "This is what happens to someone who will not build his brother's house!" Laws concerning the loss of female virginity have no male equivalent. Many of these laws, such as levirate marriage, are no longer practiced in Judaism (chalitza is practised in lieu of levirate marriage). These and other gender differences found in the Torah suggest that biblical society viewed continuity, property, and family unity as paramount; however, they also suggest that women were subordinate to men during biblical times (Hauptman 2001, 1356-1359).

### *Women in Islam*

I was hoping that perhaps you could help me understand why a menstruating woman is not allowed to touch a Qur'an, or I suppose more so why a menstruating woman is deemed "impure". Somehow it has been bothering me that all women would be considered impure for so many days and months, such that they are too impure to touch Allah's book. Even the verse that talks about nobody touching the Qur'an except the pure ones make one feel so dirty to have no way at times of becoming part of the pure ones. I suppose it reminds too much of the Hindu and Christian concept wherein a menstruating woman is dirty. Is there wisdom that you have that would provide some comfort? (Yilmaz 2010, i).

### *Women in Mormonism*

Nineteenth and early 20th-century accounts of Mormon history often neglected women's role in founding the religion. The 1872 history *The Rise, Progress, and Travels of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* does not name any women. B.H. Roberts's famous seven-volume history, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* only mentions a few women (Brekus 2016). A notable exception to this was 19th century historian Edward Tullidge, who Claudia Bushman said "stood alone as a Mormon feminist historian before the revitalization of the women's movement in the 1970s. However, a number of women had significant supporting roles; for example, Joseph Smith's wife, Emma Hale Smith, served as a scribe during translation of the Book of Mormon and was the subject of one of the church's early revelations, which included direction to compile the church's first hymnal (Smith 1830). Emma Smith also served as head of the Relief Society, originally a self-governing women's organization within the church, which is one of the oldest and largest women's organizations in the world (Müller 1889, 6)

### *Women in Buddhism*

According to Diana Paul, the traditional view of women in Early Buddhism was that they were inferior (Paul & Wilson 1985). A misogynist strain is found in early Indian Buddhism. But the presence of some clearly misogynist doctrines does not mean that the whole of ancient Indian Buddhism was a misogynist (Gross 1992, 43). There are statements in Buddhist scripture that appear to be misogynists, such as depicting women as obstructers of men's spiritual progress or the notion that being born female leaves one with less opportunity for spiritual progress. However, in societies where men have always been the authorities and the ones given wider choices, a negative view of women might be seen as simply reflecting the empirical political reality. Furthermore, the religious literature is more likely to be addressed to men. Hence we find the Buddhist emphasis on renunciation of sensual desires expressed in terms of the male's attachment to women more frequently than we find the reverse (Sablin 2016). The mix of positive attitudes to femininity with blatantly negative sentiment has led many writers to characterise early Buddhism's attitude to women as deeply ambivalent (Cabezón 1992, 3).

The voices from a variety of religions have a common depiction of the role of women. Men seem to be favoured more than women and regarded as stronger than women. However, Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* points out "the possible interchangeable structure of power between genders. The female person is often referred to as being the weaker sex in terms of the patriarchal mindset, becomes in this particular text the stronger sex. Gordimer assigns lofty roles to her female characters while men occupy subservient positions in the plot" (Ibinga 2007, 213). Furthermore, in Roman Catholic, a woman is not permitted to serve as an elder and priest while in Judaism a woman needed a husband's consent to divorce but a man did not. Likewise, in Mormonism and Buddhism, men were given favour over women in terms of roles in the church and society while in Islam women's faults are treated with greater strictness than men. Nomani (2003) states that in the Islam religion, women are the ones who often made targets of these punitive sex decrees, whereas, men are sometimes excused. Hence, De Beauvoir (1953) avers that religious faiths encouraged women to be meek, to put up with inequality, exploitation and suffering and doing so will bring rewards in the afterlife. This researcher further pointed out several ways in which religious scriptures and teachings promote patriarchy:

- In several religions, women are presented as temptresses who distract men from the serious business of worship. In the bible, it is the first woman, Eve, who disobeys God and then goes on to tempt Adam and bring about his downfall too.
- In many religious teachings across a wide range of religions, women are given the role of nurturing, caring and giving birth. While these roles are presented positively and as essential, they reinforce the gender norms in society and the patriarchal power structures. If women choose not to conform to gender stereotypes, they are not only deviating from gender norms and family expectations but deviating from God's will too.



- Religious texts are full of male Gods, male prophets, male saints and male heroes. The books are written by men and interpreted by men.
- The rules of religious organisations – which are often more about culture and custom than scriptures – include a lot of rules that restrict the freedom of women. Rules on abortion, contraception, etc. alongside unequal rules relating to marriage and divorce, all put significant restrictions on fundamental life choices for women that are not placed on men.
- The purdah in Islam, where religious women are secluded from society, including the wearing of veils, etc. is seen by some feminists as exemplifying and entrenching patriarchy (De Beauvoir 1953, 111).

### *Vera's Identity-Crisis*

Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* presents another powerful female character, Vera Stark, that aims to redefine women's identity in the democratic society. Vera is a white lawyer who uses her skills to contribute to rebuilding the newly democratic South African society. As a result, she becomes an influential public figure alongside Sibongile. Vera is almost in the same position as her friend, Sibongile as she becomes more successful than her husband Ben who fails as an artist. Her intervention in resolving societal challenges also affects her domestic duties as a wife, thus, giving her an authoritative role both in public and in her household. Ibinga (2007) states that the portrayal of domestic duties in the Starks' household unveils that Vera is the one who wields power, unlike her Ben who appears to be weak as it is the wife who gives authority in the house and on family matters. Like Didymus who submitted to Sibongile's call for him to assume domestic work, Vera was like a goddess to Ben:

Ben had created Vera for himself as a body, a torso without a head. As such it was (indeed, connoisseur Lou had observed) exceptionally explicit of the power of the body. It had no identity beyond, and so the body that was Vera, Ben could not live without, was transformed into the expression of desire between woman and woman. In Annie's house the headless torsos became household gods (*None to Accompany Me*, 228).

Vera portrays characteristics, which most societies have institutionalised, as men's territory such as resistance, leadership, power and political success. She becomes aware that Ben is worshipping her. Hence, she states, "when someone gives you so much power over himself, he makes you a tyrant (*None to Accompany Me*, 310). Today, there are many debates regarding why many countries in the world have not or produced few female presidents over the years of democracy. Hryniewicz and Vianna (2018) state that women are usually deemed communal, showing traits such as kindness and empathy while men are thought to be aggressive, confident and autonomous. However, the character of Vera seeks to falsify the above perception as Gordimer presents her as:

a strange woman because in some ways she is unconventional. She attacks her daily work; even though it is unconventional work she goes about it in this rather strict, direct way, rather authoritarian. She doesn't seem to belong to any women's movement. She's a woman's movement in herself, I think. And she

bluntly asserts her sexuality. She even quotes Renoir at one point—"I paint with prick". But she has her fill of sexuality, she works her way through it. She's had a very active kind of sensual life; she hasn't cared too much about the morality of it (*None to Accompany Me*, 436).

Vera's identity reconstruction and freedom in the democratic society manifest in her sex life. She confronts sexual behaviours and taboos in her search for identity in the post-colonial world. Vera is presented as a very sexually active woman who justified her promiscuity as an identity of sexual freedom to an extent that despite being married, she continued having sexual relations with her former lover. Gordimer presents Vera's sexual behaviour to unmask stereotypes against women in the negotiations of sex, thus, the novel brings several aspects such as the relationship between money, power and sex as well as cultural notions on matters of sex to examination. There seems to be a compelling validation that rich and powerful men tend to be more promiscuous than powerless men despite being married. Radebe (2012) confirms that men who do not have money are often disempowered. Sibongile's husband Didymus whom his wife held a powerful position in society and money while he did not, as a result, he could not sexually satisfy Sibongile who ultimately confessed to her friend, Vera that she no longer enjoys sex with Didymus, substantiates this. Furthermore, the South African community and the world at large saw the trending phenomenon christened 'blessers' and 'blessees'. Mampane (2018, 1) defines this 'blessership' as a "transactional sex in which older rich men ('blessers') tend to entice young women ('blessees') with money and expensive gifts in exchange for sexual favours. In most cases, these older men are married men who secretly engage in extramarital affairs with these young women." Therefore, it becomes convincing that money and power can influence an individual's sexual behaviour. With tables turned, money and power favouring women than men in Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*, Vera elucidates:

Yes, I love me. I mean exactly what I'm saying: how can there be love-making without the penis. I don't care what subtleties of feeling you achieve with all those caresses—and when you caress the other partner, you're really caressing yourself, aren't you, because you're producing in her, you say, exactly what you yourself experience—after all that, you end up without that marvellous entry, that astonishing phenomenon of a man's body that transforms itself and you can take in. You can't tell me there's anything like it! There's nothing like it, no closeness like it. The pleasure, the orgasms—yes, you may produce them just as well, you'll say, between two women. But with the penis inside you, it's not just the pleasure (*None to Accompany Me*, 158).

Gordimer highlights the height of Vera's obsession with sex. It is her money and power that activate her sexual freedom in the democratic world. Thus, Wagner (1994, 90) perceives sexuality as a "primary signifier—both a powerfully recurrent motif and a centrally determining metaphor." In the times of political oppression in the novel, Vera said, "sex only meant getting marriage...between the end of necessity to get married" (*None to Accompany Me*, 272). This substantiates the decline of marriages and the rise of *vat-en-sit* (Cohabitation) in the world today. Baloyi (2016) postulates that *vat-en-sit* poses a threat to marriages. A participant in the aforementioned researcher's study

said, “Many men wanted to have sex with me, but I told them that a man who wants to sleep with me should pay Lobola first” (Baloyi, 2016, 7). In Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me*, sexual liberation ends up comprising marital value. Vera had divorced her first husband before marrying Ben whom she later decided to leave for Zeph Rapulana. Gordimer presents an institution where women in power make choices and define their sex lives outside social norms and standards. Vera asserts:

Yes. And of course, who can say? People’s sexuality dies down at different ages. Some people seem to be finished with sex in their mid-forties, or fifties. Terrible! Others take on lovers, both male and female, at seventy (*None to Accompany Me*, 436).

Vera’s case can be complemented by stories of independent or women who are proven to have money and sometimes reported to have been motivated by their money to be sexually active. On *Daily Sun* (09/09/2016), a man has claimed that women, particularly those who hold professional positions such as nurses, teachers and executives request and pay him handsomely for sexual services: “It started when I was approached by a single woman who asked if I could help her. I have been servicing her since then. And she has also told other women about me.”

Another man in *Daily Sun* (31/08/ 2020), also noted that women including those aged 45-50+ also pay him for sexual services. So one of the women, aged 53, claims that she has been married for about 30 years but her husband could go on for five months without sleeping with her and as a result, she pays for sexual services without any strings attached. Similarly, Vera who reaches the stage of menopause chooses to maintain a sexually active lifestyle despite social notions that “some people seem to be finished with sex in their mid-forties, or fifties” (*None to Accompany Me*, 436). She acknowledges that she leads a promiscuous life: “I’ve only loved men” (*None to Accompany Me*, 436). Thus, Ibinga (2007) notes that Vera is a representative of heterosexual women whose sexual delight is dependent on the penis.

Cultural notions define a woman as a weaker vessel and a man as stronger but in Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me*, a man is portrayed as weak and the woman strong. Thus, in matters of sex, cultural depictions such as Northern Sotho proverbs appear to accept and institutionalise men’s extreme sexual activeness, whereas, women who are intensely sexually active like Vera in Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me* would be rejected by the society and be viewed as loose, whores and just sex objects. For instance, the Northern Sotho proverbs below seem to embrace promiscuity among men:

- Monna ke thaka wa naba [A man is pumpkin; he stretches]
- Monna ke selepe re a adimišana [ A man is an axe; we lend each other]
- Monna ke kobo re apolelana [A man is robe; we exchange amongst each other]

The proverbs above seem to perpetuate male promiscuity. It is through some of these proverbs that men often justify their actions of having many sexual

partners. A man is compared with a pumpkin that stretches beyond boundaries, an axe and robe that different people share and use. Scholars such as Masenya (2004), Serudu (1991) and Makgamatha (1991) aver that these proverbs assert that it is acceptable for a man to have multiple sexual partners. However, it is not the same women, whereas, women like Gordimer's character of Vera who chooses to seize power through their sexual freedom are often victimised by cultural stereotypes. In cultural-dominated societies, the non-virgin woman before marriage is exposed to 'slut-shaming'. In a news24 article (05/05/2017), it is stated that "have sex and you're labelled a whore...slut-shaming is still a problem many face on a daily-basis especially in more traditional environments-it is becoming more and more frowned upon to judge people for being sexually inexperienced." Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* opposes these cultural structures by reasserting women's sexual liberation and breaking the taboos:

The extent to which sexuality is a primary signifier-both powerfully recurrent motif and centrally determining metaphor-in Gordimer's narratives of personal and political transformation deserves closer analysis to illuminate the complexity of her vision, to begin with, the willingness to transgress certain sexual taboos, in particular those which are centred on religious and racial distinctions, becomes an indicator throughout ten novels of the white protagonist's potential of political redemption (Wagner 1994, 90-91).

### CONCLUSION

This paper has, through Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*, probed how democratisation has created a space for women to seek, assert and reassert their identities by breaking oppressive socio-cultural and political structures against them. Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* has fictionalised the clash of femininities and masculinities with an attempt to indicate that the democratic dispensation paved a rhetorical platform for the thought of women's feminism and liberation (Manicom 1999). It has sought to debunk the myths and stereotypes about gender roles. Moreover, Kalu (2001) notes that women's role has been questioned for many years as they strived to assert their identities in male-driven worlds. In the novel, the characters of Sibongile and Vera explore the clash of femininity and masculinity in search of their identities in the democratic dispensation.

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