



## **#Blessed: An analysis of writing-back-to-self on the emerging issues of transactional sex relationships in *The Blessed Girl* (2018), *Bare: #The Blesser Game* (2017), *Sweet Medicine* (2016) and *The Y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1* (2019)**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper offers an analysis of writing-back-to-self on the emerging issues of transactional sex relationships in the following selected works of fiction: *The Blessed Girl* by Angela Makholwa (2018), *Bare: #The Blesser Game* by Jackie Phamotse (2017), *Sweet Medicine* by Panashe Chigumadzi (2016) and *The Y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1* by Yvonne Maphosa (2019). The writers explore the lifestyles of women, colloquially referred to as blessees and side-chicks, who engage in transactional sex relationships in post-independent South Africa and Zimbabwe. Although a postcolonial analysis the paper employs the self-reflexive paradigm of Mwangi (2009) in which he advocates for African text to be read from the perspective of writers writing back to themselves or each other and not ascribe them to the West, in an effort to reflect on the post-independence issues that emerge in Africa. He further argues that the notion that African literature writes back to a European other does not recognize how emergent themes are addressed by these works of literature. A desktop qualitative literary analysis was the selected methodology. The paper categorizes the findings as psychological and physical and the results suggest that depression, social media, tolerated sexual violence, safe sex complacency and body grooming are the emerging issues in the selected works of fiction. The paper concludes that as a self-reflexive measure, Africa has to craft ways to combat the effects of beauty standards perpetuated by social media and ensure that youths craft unique identities for themselves. The paper recommends further studies on the identified emerging issues.*

**Keywords:** *transactional sex relationships, blessees, postcolonial, self-reflexive, writing-back-to-self, emerging issues, fiction*

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## Introduction and Background

This paper aims to analyse how contemporary African writers self-reflect on current issues in their environment by writing back to themselves and each other on the topic of transactional sex relationships in the selected works of fiction. According to Ashcroft et al. (2002), since *The Empire Writes Back* debut in 1989, the postcolonial theory has emerged as one of the most varied and divisive areas of study in literature and cultural studies. They add that the term "postcolonialism" now encompasses a wide range of concepts and analytical approaches. Thereafter, numerous postcolonialisms have claimed to be postcolonial studies, each with a different set of objectives that are occasionally in conflict (Ashcroft, 2002). *The Empire Writes Back* focused on postcolonial African texts that were written back to the West regarding colonial experiences. The majority of African countries were colonized by European countries and thus the post-independence literature of many African writers often focused on writing back to the colonial masters. The essence of postcolonial theory has primarily been Eurocentrism whereby the empire or former colonies write back to the colonial masters using different perspectives.

However, as explained in his seminal book *Africa Writes Back to Self*, this paper employs Mwangi's (2009) paradigm shift of African writers writing back to themselves as an empire or former colony. The book titles *The Empire Writes Back* and *Africa Writes Back to Self* are primarily the same except that Mwangi has specified which empire vis-à-vis Africa and added who they are writing back to. The former focuses on writing back to the West whilst the latter focuses on writing back to Africa. The paradigm aims to correct the impression disseminated by the conventional postcolonial theory that advances that African literature writes back to the colonial centre and thus proposes that novels be read as writing back to themselves and one another. In addition to novels being read as writing back to themselves, they could also be written as writing back to themselves. Thus, Mwangi's paradigm has inspired the interrogation of the selected contemporary African novels that have shifted their focus from issues of external colonialism to a self-reflexive interrogation of gender and sexual relations.

Several years ago, the hashtag #blessed started trending on different social media platforms and women were claiming to be beneficiaries of blessers. The #blessed hashtag falls under the category of transactional sex relationships, colloquially known as the blessers, blessees, sugar daddies, sugar babies and side-chicks. The selected novelists seem to self-reflexively present data on transactional sex relationships in detail and also through the use of authorial intrusion as a literary device which invites the reader and by extension the writer, to self-reflect. Thus, with this paper, the researcher aims to identify and discuss the issues that emerge as a result of transactional sex relationships.

The paper employs postcolonial theory not in its conventional sense but rather as texts 'writing back' to themselves and one another because African literature in English draws attention to its literariness as it endeavours to address the challenges of its local environment.

## Literature Review

This section presents a brief literature review on transactional sex relationships, the writing-back-to-self paradigm and emerging issues of transactional sex relationships.



Transactional sex relationships have been defined in various ways. Different scholars define transactional sex as intercourse that is given or provided in exchange for something (Choudry et al., 2015; Formson & Hilhorst, 2016; Hunter, 2002; Wamoyi et al., 2019). Formson (2016) argues that defining transactional sex relationships is not straightforward because definitions are culturally determined and constructed. According to Choudry et al. (2005), such relationships could mean different things, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. The definition thus adopted for this paper is the one provided by Wamoyi et al. (2019) who also define transactional sex relationships as sex that is given in exchange for something but posit that these relationships are neither prostitution nor marital. Additionally, the two scholars who emerged with aspects in their definitions that relate to the #blessed hashtag are Varjavandi (2017) who adds 'overseas shopping trips' to his definition of blessed relationships and Mampane (2018) who is distinct because of the added adjective 'expensive' to the definition. Although in the past sugar daddy relationships might have been defined by giving gifts, the distinction from blessed relationships is that the gifts given are expensive.

The term self-reflexive, which is used in Mwangi's paradigm of writing-back-to-self, stems from self-reflection which denotes thinking about or interrogating an individual's actions. In his explanation of the term self-reflexive, Mwangi (2009) posits that the focus of some contemporary African writers has shifted from writing about external colonialism to a more current self-reflection or introspection of gender and sexual relations. He further argues that self-reflection means that writers are focused on a state of being in African society and not on retaliating, parodying or negating Western discourses. Thus, Mwangi suggests that instead of attributing current problems to colonialism and preserving themselves from censorship, the novelists interrogate societal issues such as homosexuality or transactional sex relationships that are traditionally taboo. In addition to the writers writing about the aforementioned issues, because they are reflecting on the current issues African societies face, they employ literary devices to engage the reader to ponder these issues.

Regarding the emerging issues of transactional sex relationships, social science research identifies three main issues: the risk of young women contracting HIV/AIDS, their limited negotiating power, and their advocacy to change partners. On the issue of contracting HIV/AIDS and changing partners, Wamoyi et al. (2010) indicate that transactional sex relationships support a change in partners because transaction varies during the relationship with quantities given being more at the beginning of a relationship. They concluded that social science research has thus investigated and primarily substantiated the belief that transactional sex is immoral, promotes prostitution and advances the spread of HIV and AIDS.

Secondly, regarding the issue of limited negotiating power, one of the first scholars to research the emerging issues of transactional sex relationships, Luke and Kurz (2002) explains that young women are portrayed either as active agents that are in control of their decisions and resultant behaviour or as passive victims for whom broad socio-cultural and economic forces are at play. Another seminal scholar (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003) corroborates Luke and Kurz (2002) by elaborating that firstly, young women are portrayed as active agents because they actively participate in decisions regarding sex from which they get a sense of power by exploiting their sexuality. Conversely, they are portrayed as passive agents because of various outside influences such as peer pressure and a pre-existing system of gender inequality. This inequality influences the



young women's ability to challenge the terms of the sexual relationship and this often leads to unsafe sexual practices (McIlwaine & Datta, 2004).

Luke and Kurz's (2003) study concludes that sexual relationships between adolescent girls and older men are imbalanced because the men are older and have higher economic status giving them more power whilst the young age of the girls is a pointer to reverence and ignorance. They also conclude that the girls can negotiate the formation and discontinuance of the relationship if they no longer receive gifts. However, in the relationship, the men seem to control the conditions for sexual intercourse such as whether condoms or contraceptives will be used (Luke & Kurz, 2003). This conclusion is validated by McIlwaine and Datta, 2004 who added that young women find it difficult to negotiate the use of contraceptives.

It is evident from the emerging issues presented by social science researchers that there is a dearth of data regarding the emerging issues presented in this paper. It is in light of the above that the paper offers an analysis of writing-back-to-self on the emerging issues of transactional sex relationships in the selected works of fiction as there are no studies that have investigated these emerging issues in fiction.

### **Methodology**

The content analysis of four contemporary African literature texts in English was the focus of this qualitative desktop position paper. Qualitative literary research was suited for this position paper since it gives textual descriptions and non-numerical data about transactional sex relationships categorized as blessers, blessees, sugar daddies, sugar babies, and side-chicks in the selected novels. The textual descriptions of transactional sex relationships in the selected novels have enabled the researcher to conduct an analytical reading and interrogation of the issues presented in the texts and to categorize them as emerging issues in African society using Mwangi's (2009) postcolonial paradigm of writing-back-to-self. The purposive sampling technique was used to select and analyse the four novels by southern African writers based on their representation of transactional sex relationships. The selected novels were *The Blessed Girl* by Angela Makholwa (2018), *Bare: #The Blesser Game* by Jackie Phamotse (2017) and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1* by Yvonne Maphosa (2019).

### **Discussion of Findings**

The analysis found that the selected writers write back to themselves and each other in a covert manner due to the sensitivity of the issues presented and preserving themselves from censorship. Thus, the reader vis-à-vis the researcher has not just read the novels self-reflexively but presents in this discussion emerging issues that need further research. The issues that emerge in the novels have been categorized and discussed under the main themes of psychological issues and physical issues. The psychological issues are further categorized in the subthemes of depression and social media whereas the physical issues are categorized in the subthemes of painful sexual intercourse, safe sex complacency and body grooming.

### **Emerging Psychological Issues**

Firstly, this section employs the critical lens of Mwangi's postcolonial theory of writing-back-to-self to interrogate and discuss the emerging psychological issues which are depression and social media. Depression is the foremost emerging psychological issue



revealed in both *The Blessed Girl* and *Bare: #The Blesser Game* as a result of transactional sex relationships.

### Depression

Firstly, depression is evident as an emerging psychological issue as a result of transactional sex relationships, in two of the selected novels. Bontle, the main character and lessee in Makholwa's (2018) *The Blessed Girl* experiences her first battle with depression at the age of 14 due to peer pressure. However, as an adult, she becomes a regular patient with her psychologist because of her transactional sex relationship troubles and is diagnosed with extreme narcissism. Her depression is exacerbated by her lifestyle in which she has an almost obsessive need to constantly update her social media platforms with pictures and hashtags. In addition, the lessee lifestyle leads to her spending holidays lonely because she has isolated herself from her family. She experiences several depressive episodes that cause her to be institutionalised in the psychiatric ward due to the different pressures of her transactional sex relationships.

Another novel in which depression is evident as an emerging psychological issue as a result of transactional sex relationships is Phamotse's (2017) *Bare: #The Blesser Game*. Treasure suffers from depression after her unconsented abortion, arranged and forced on her by her blesser. The blesser leaves her to deal with the physical scars left by the abortion, the emotional scars of neglect and the lack of knowledge of what was done to her at the clinic. Her depression is further aggravated when she discovers her blesser's sexual endeavours with both men and women. The following quote summarises the lessee's feelings accurately; she was "*existing on the edge of a breakdown held together with makeup.... Weary and out of hope, her dreams sailed away on Tim's ridicule and controlling nature*" (p. 278). Tim's ridicule of her dreams intensified her depression because she held him in high regard. Depression is a serious emerging reality in *The Blessed Girl* and *Bare: #The Blesser Game*. The popular belief among black people has been that black people do not suffer from depression but the evidence in the novels is enough to prove that it is an issue that deserves attention. Depression has surfaced in an Africa that is independent and governing itself and can thus not be attributed to the *other*. Contrary to popular beliefs perhaps depression has always been there and suppressed and is now yielding its head in an outspoken and self-aware youth. It is perhaps for this reason that Makholwa (2018; Phamotse, 2017) wrote about it, obliging readers to self-reflect.

### Social Media

Secondly, social media can be categorized as a social issue but it is categorized here as an emerging psychological issue which contributes to the stress experienced by the lessees in *The Blessed Girl*, *Bare: #The Blesser Game* and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1*. Haddad (2018) argues that social media is a by-product of neoliberal capitalism and lessees or sugar babies use it to demonstrate "*a new form of sacral consumption that seems to embrace gender inequality and ignore potential vulnerability to HIV*" (p. 15).

In *The Blessed Girl*, Makholwa (2018) employs allusions to social media as an integral part of the plot because it reveals how Bontle updates her followers on different platforms and it is also covertly the reason she lives the blessed life, to show it off to others. The following are examples of allusions to social media: "*I've got a decent clientele thanks to the following I've amassed on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook*" (p. 6). The lessee, who



also imports and sells weaves has used her transactional sex relationship posts on different social media platforms to amass a good following which increases her customers for her hair business. Apart from sharing her blessed lifestyle, she also posts pictures, “...*share this look with my Instagram fans*” (p. 7) which also serves as an advertisement for her hair business. In addition, Bontle uses Photoshop to her advantage because she Photoshops not only her appearance but fake holidays as well and although it is an illusion this often creates an impression of it being real to her social media fans. The last example in the category of social media in *The Blessed Girl* is FaceTime. “*FaceTime means I have to do my hair and put on make-up...*” (p. 125). Although the general public might use FaceTime to call family and friends, the blessee employs FaceTime as a tool to sexually entice her blessers when they call and thus the need to always wear make-up and be ready for the camera. Makholwa (2018) employs all the aforementioned allusions as integral parts of the plot because they create the setting in the mind of the reader and portray the role of social media in the life of the blessee.

Furthermore, to keep the content of this novel realistic Makholwa (2018) employs hashtags every time the blessee updates her social media platforms for instance; “*#DropTopThings#Windinmyhair!*” (p. 7) to refer to her convertible car’s open roof and the fact that she just did her hair. Similarly, she posts on Instagram “*#FabFriday, #FabMe, #FabNails!*” to refer to the day, herself and just having gotten her nails done. (p. 56). Another example is when the main character refers to a holiday with one of her blessers; “*#Sunshine & good loving #Baecation*” (p. 111). Some hashtags are employed to market her transactional sex relationships, whilst others focus on her appearance and the impression of a luxurious life she creates for her social media followers. She also employs youthful language such as *drop top* instead of the open roof, *fab* instead of fabulous and *bae* instead of a boyfriend.

In Phamotse’s (2017) *Bare: #The Blesser Game*, social media is diversely portrayed concerning transactional sex relationships. In the blessee culture, it is crucial to take selfies of new hairstyles, vacations and outfits for posting on Facebook or Instagram. The following quotes substantiate the above; “*...life is only as good as it looks on social media. If it's not on Facebook, it never happened...*” (p. 165). Another quote that substantiates the importance of social media is:

*“Treasure realised that to this crowd, sharing pictures was less about sharing moments with friends and more about showing what you had, the people you knew, and how much you could spend in one go. The lifestyle had to be opulent - having countless followers on social media, with thousands of likes, comments and retweets, showed how powerful and influential a person was. Treasure was surprised to find that she wanted a piece of that life, with that kind of power and influence”* (p. 165)

The implication is thus that the number of likes, followers and retweets are directly proportional to living a blessed life. It is not a life that can or should be lived privately because if people on social media have not seen it, it probably is not true or never happened. Phamotse (2017) also implies that because of the opulent lifestyle one would seem to live and post on social media, society would validate you and treat you with a certain level of respect.



Thus, social media has been identified as one of the most significant and pervasive local forms of oppression according to Mwangi's postcolonial paradigm of writing-back-to-self. Almost every young person has access to at least one of the following social media platforms; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or WhatsApp where transactional sex relationships amongst others are advertised like they are a norm. Social media is influential because authentic and inauthentic information is readily available and for a young person who does not possess emotional intelligence or cyber security awareness this could lead to them making unwise decisions. Although these platforms are Western inventions their usage and impact on African youths are undeniable.

In contrast, in Maphosa's (2019) *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1*, social media platforms are used as a tool by the blesser's wife to victimize or bully the side-chick. In the first example, the blesser's wife shows Fierce nude photos on her phone asking her:

*"[d]o you recognize these?", she says scrolling through her phone. My jaw drops! It's naked pictures of myself that I sent to Elik sometime back. ...I'm going to post these on the internet and make sure everyone sees you for who you really are!"* (p. 175)

The example above is an attempt by the wife to intimidate and blackmail the side-chick with nude photos she had sent to the blesser. The wife threatens to post the photos on social media. This could mean that the wife has tried to dissuade her husband from seeing the side-chick but failed and has thus resorted to extreme measures to save her marriage. In another example, Fierce is shamed on Facebook:

*"... 'Dude! Is this you?', he points at a picture on some Facebook page called 'Expose the Whores'. Apparently, it's where wives expose their husbands' side-chicks. ...The writer of the post is asking someone called 'Fierce' to leave her husband alone."* (p. 133)

In the quote above, the side-chick is exposed on Facebook by the blesser's wife. The blesser's wife after years of trying to keep the side-chick away from her husband resorts to exposing her on social media which is a form of bullying. To her dismay and embarrassment, the side-chick is informed about the social media post by a fellow student.

Assessed through the critical lens of Mwangi's (2009) postcolonial paradigm, materialism in transactional sex relationships is a pervasive local form of oppression because it is directly linked to social media. It is on these social media platforms that youth are exposed to concepts like Instagram models, unrealistic beauty standards like a yellow complexion being beautiful, images of a luxurious life that entices them and get-rich-quick schemes. Social media is one of the greatest vehicles through which youth are enticed to a life of materialism tempting them to engage in anything that promises to give them their desired life. Although this is not a generalization, if Africans do not self-reflect and address the local form of oppression that appears as materialism advanced through social media it will produce lazy youths with no core values and lack a sense of identity.



### **Emerging Physical Issues**

Secondly, this section employing the critical lens of Mwangi's postcolonial theory of writing-back-to-self interrogates and discusses the emerging physical issues which are painful sexual intercourse, safe sex complacency and body grooming.

#### **Painful Sexual Intercourse**

Regarding the emerging physical effects; physical abuse is evident primarily in the form of sexual violence in *The Blessed Girl*, *Bare: #The Blesser Game* and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1*. The three texts reveal that women suffer sexual violence from their partners in the form of painful sex. This is often non-consensual as the partners want to either realize their fantasies or relieve their frustrations through sexual intercourse. Similarly, in Makholwa's (2018) *The Blessed Girl*, the main character compares herself to an injured animal to describe the pain she endured during sexual intercourse with one of her blessers: "*I was screaming like an injured animal*" (p. 81). The aforementioned example attests to how women use their sex appeal for profit which, however, comes with its consequences as is evident in the example above when the blessee had painful sexual intercourse but could not tell the blesser to stop. The women refrain from objecting because of what they benefit from in the relationship.

Another example, in Phamotse's (2017) *Bare: #The Blesser Game* is when Tim sends the blessee a gift box, with a note informing her that he will pick her up: "*...why wasn't he this nice when he first forced anal sex on me? ... he thinks he can just splash out on some gifts and then dictate what I do*" (p. 218). The anal sex could not have been forced if they had consensual sex and she did not refuse or get up and leave when she realized that Tim was forcing himself on her. Perhaps she was naïve and did not know what was happening, but that was questionable as she had been a victim of gang rape and through that had been exposed to anal sex. Nevertheless, it seems that Treasure is still traumatized by the painful sex for which she hoped Tim would apologize. Moreover, Treasure's inner turmoil intensifies when she begins to question her motives for staying with Tim after he engages in painful sex with her on the car's bonnet.

*"Why do I still want every part of him so badly when I also want to punish him so desperately? He took and never asked... He hurt me and never said sorry, yet I'm here in this fancy hotel; I'm still with him."* (p. 234)

The above quote describes Treasure's inner turmoil and how divided she feels because Tim forces her to have painful sex for which he never apologizes. Treasure asks the right questions but remains in the relationship because of the benefits she reaps.

Phamotse (2017) provides more examples to demonstrate the pain that Treasure had to endure every time she had sexual intercourse with her blesser. "Tears flowed down her burning cheeks, dripping onto the carpet, yet she still kept her screams in. The rough carpet slowly peeled her skin off her knees" (p. 202) and she "*... kept her pain stifled in her gut; tears skated down her bare cheeks ... He moaned, oblivious to her pain, then dragged his fingers down her back, ripping the dress...*" (p. 229). Treasure felt like she was merely a body because he confirmed her feelings when he would tell her "*...that is my cookie*" (p. 201).

In another novel by Maphosa (2019) *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1*, there are also examples of painful sex:





*“He picks me up and throws me on the bed and is not even trying to be gentle about it. I think he means to give me a love bite... He actually bites me and I wince. It hurts. His fingers are digging deep into my skin and his weight is crushing me. I close my eyes and bite hard on my lower lip. I bite so hard I taste blood. This is my way of saying ‘I’m here for you baby’. I would actually say those words out loud if he wasn’t choking me so hard. I’m gasping for air. I can hardly breathe”* (pp. 322-323).

The example above describes the nature of the sexual intercourse that transpires between the side-chick and the blesser. He grabs her neck to the point where she almost chokes, he kisses her hard to the point of bruising her lips and the sexual intercourse is rough and painful. The imagery describes how every time the blesser has an emotional burden he violently uses sexual intercourse as his outlet. Despite the painful sexual intercourse, the side-chick remains in the transactional sex relationship.

The examples substantiate the argument by different scholars that women have limited negotiating power because men being older, are often, revered and economically advanced (Luke & Kurz, 2002; Hunter, 2002; McIlwaine & Datta, 2004). The blessee or the side-chick rarely has decision-making power about sexual intercourse; how and when it will transpire because it is often about the blesser and how women are passive receivers of the sexual action whilst men are proactive. Mwangi’s (2009) paradigm of writing-back-to-self demonstrates how blessees’ desire for a luxurious lifestyle results in them tolerating violent sexual behaviour and sexual complacency.

### **Safe Sex Complacency**

Another emerging theme under physical effects is safe sex complacency across the four novels. Firstly, in *The Blessed Girl*, *Bare: #The Blesser Game*, *Sweet Medicine* and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1* there is a similar physical aspect where the blesser and blessees do not use condoms. This results in HIV infection for the blessee in the first novel, pregnancy for the blessee in the second novel, a miscarriage and pregnancy for the side-chick in the third novel and pregnancy for the blessee in the fourth novel. Safe-sex complacency is thus an emerging issue in Africa as revealed in the selected texts. The belief that transactional sex relationships advance the spread of HIV/AIDS has been investigated and substantiated by social science researchers (Wamoyi et al., 2019). This could be because young women do not have the agency to negotiate safe sex with older partners or it could also be that they use their agency to make decisions to not use protection because they want the maximum benefit from the partner, especially when partners request not to use protection. The question then remains how Africa can mobilize safe sex in the interest of curbing the HIV infection rate as well as protecting young women from unplanned and unwanted pregnancies.

### **Body Grooming**

Another emerging sub-theme of the physical effects of transactional sex relationships is body grooming or the importance of physical appearance in *The Blessed Girl*, *Sweet Medicine* and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1*. *The Blessed Girl* presents the most extreme evidence of skin, vulva and anal bleaching as well as buttock implants. Below are examples of how the blessee explains the procedures she asked her surgeon to perform on her. *“I asked my surgeon to do fillers on my skin and I also did some skin bleaching so that my complexion can be as luminous as possible”* (p. 61), *“I want my*



*skin to be lighter*” (p. 235). Then, when she finally goes to the clinic she has additional work done on her body. “*When I was at the clinic, I decided to do some anal bleaching just to make sure my lady parts are in porn-star condition*” (p. 62). Apart from having her face bleached to be a lighter complexion, she also has her anus bleached for the same reason. For example, she says “*The yellower the better, is what I always say. And I haven't taken care of my lady parts in a while, so I will need anal and vulva bleaching as well*” (p. 98). This means that the blessee is well acquainted with pornography and thus wants to present her private parts in ‘porn-star condition’ to her blessers. “... *I need more skin bleaching*. The ‘confidence booster’, performed at a cosmetic clinic also entails vulva, anal bleaching and the purchase of Kegel balls. She assumes that her blessers are pleased by a light-skinned vulva, anus and tight vagina. Hence, her efforts because she considers being a blessee as the source of her income. In a different incident, Bontle thinks that two of her lovers treat her like a business partner instead of a lover and thus feels that she is losing her sex appeal and needs to bleach her skin. Bontle also had a buttock implant performed which after four weeks of insertion was still painful. The aforementioned examples highlight the blessee’s need to please the blessers physically and prove that she would go to any length to do so. Although the blessers have not articulated their preference for a lighter complexion, a tighter or light-skinned vagina or bigger buttocks the main character’s assumption covertly gives the blesser control over the blessee.

In addition, both the blessees in *Sweet Medicine* and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1* have to upgrade their physical appearance. In Chigumadzi’s (2016) *Sweet Medicine*, before her transactional sex relationship, Tsitsi had previously not vested time into make-up and appearance because she had no money. However, when she starts dating Zvobgo she “... had now made her beauty and upkeep her full-time occupation. She ensured that her hair was always well maintained, ... she had now taken up membership at a gym” (p. 112). Tsitsi quit her job and spend her days maintaining her beauty, practising her make-up routine and keeping in shape at the gym – all for Zvobgo’s pleasure. In *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1* the side-chick devotes a lot of time and effort to her appearance as evidenced in the following quote: “*You look good! He says... I know! It took me changing five times to settle for this dress and I'm glad he noticed. I even had my makeup done...*” (p. 51). She changes up to five times until she is satisfied with the way she looks and also has her makeup done at the airport. The aim of all the effort is so that the blesser will notice and be enticed. Similarly, in the next example, she buys brand-name clothes: “*I have a weakness for H&M... so I buy a casual dress and boots. I go for an express facial, I need to glow. I get a nice dress at YDE, buy a Brazilian wig and I'm done*” (p. 53). Brand names such as H&M, YDE and Brazilian wigs are popular in the transactional sex relationship culture and she invests in them to impress the blesser with his money. Body grooming and physical appearance are important aspects of transactional sex relationships as presented in the findings. The blessee’s agency to choose the products they want to apply on their bodies or the complexion they want could be seen as liberatory. Similarly, these women’s agency to choose their buttock size could also be considered emancipatory. However, when these decisions lead to health problems, attacking dark-skinned women and performing different, dangerous sexual activities to maintain a luxurious lifestyle with the aid of men, it contributes to the disintegration of women’s emancipation. The researcher concurs with Gurrieri and Drenten (2019) who argue that women have been conditioned by the beauty industry to focus, work on and change their appearance to achieve a dominant feminine ideal which results in an unhealthy obsession with body image.



## Conclusion

This paper has discussed the emerging psychological and physical issues in the following selected works of fiction: *The Blessed Girl* by Angela Makholwa (2018), *Bare: #The Blesser Game* by Jackie Phamotse (2017), *Sweet Medicine* by Panashe Chigumadzi (2016) and *The Y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1* by Yvonne Maphosa (2019).

Under the first main theme of emerging psychological issues depression has surfaced prominently in Makholwa (2018) and Phamotse's (2017) texts, obliging readers to self-reflect. Depression in an Africa that is independent and governing itself can thus not be attributed to the *other*. Contrary to popular beliefs perhaps depression has always been there and suppressed and is now yielding its head in an outspoken and self-aware youth. In addition, social media has emerged as a local form of oppression under the theme of emerging psychological issues. It has influenced the youth's perception of beauty, resulting in the use of skin-lightening or bleaching creams to conform to the standards upheld by social media and further resulting in the booming of the cosmetic industry.

Regarding the second main theme of emerging physical issues, painful sexual intercourse has emerged prominently in the following three texts: *The Blessed Girl*, *Bare: #The Blesser Game* and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1*. The three texts revealed that women suffer sexual violence from their partners in the form of painful sex and that they remained because of the benefits they gain from the relationship. On the other hand, safe sex complacency is evident in all four novels: *The Blessed Girl*, *Bare: #The Blesser Game*, *Sweet Medicine* and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1*. Safe sex complacency has led to HIV infection, pregnancy and miscarriage. The writers demonstrate how the blessees' desire for a luxurious lifestyle results in them tolerating violent sexual behaviour and sexual complacency. The last sub-theme of the physical effects of transactional sex relationships discussed is body grooming or the importance of physical appearance in *The Blessed Girl*, *Sweet Medicine* and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1*. *The Blessed Girl* has presented the most extreme evidence of skin, vulva and anal bleaching as well as buttock implants whilst both the blessees in *Sweet Medicine* and *The y in yOUR Man is Silent: Book 1* upgraded their physical appearance.

In reflecting on self or interrogating the emerging issues, Africa has to craft ways to combat the effects of beauty standards perpetuated by social media and ensure that youths craft unique identities for themselves. Similarly, social media has also perpetuated materialism resulting in the desire for a luxurious life which sometimes comes through engaging in a transactional sex relationship. This is a result of people constantly posting pictures of new cars, new homes, expensive vacations and a life that seems to be problem-free. However, the reality is that people only post images of how they want to be perceived on social media and hardly pictures of hardship or sad moments; either way, social media is an influential reality in our societies. The data also reveals the extent and effects of safe sex complacency through the blessees' lack of agency about decisions of using protection during intercourse. The results yielded by the paper are a benefit of a qualitative study because although fictional, it mirrors what happens in society and could be beneficial in assessing real-life situations.

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