



## **Incestuous Relations in Bessie Head and Sindiwe Magona: The Perversion of Apartheid and the Migrant Labour System**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Apartheid and the migrant labour system affected the residential stability of black South African families in terms of wife-husband and father-child relations. The control exerted by apartheid laws made it impossible for generations of fathers for over one and a half centuries to raise their children (Wilson, 2006), affecting their personal and social behaviour. This article contends that in their use of literature as a political tool, writers Sindiwe Magona and Bessie Head offered a similar vision about the father-daughter relationship. Magona's short story "It was Easter Sunday the day I went to Netreg" (1991) and Head's short story "The Cardinals" (1995) portray a daughter and a father who do not know each other and who, years later and unknowingly, establish a sexual relation. This article will claim these incestuous relationships can be interpreted as the writers' representation of the use and abuse the state exerted on its black citizens.

**KEYWORDS:** Head; Magona; Apartheid; Incest; Migrant Labour System; South Africa.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Apartheid, as a political system, is associated with the oppression and obliteration of the cultures of the majority of the population in South Africa. Within this context, one must acknowledge the migrant labour system –as an instrument of apartheid– and its connection to

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the destruction of the black South African family. The South African migrant labour system during the apartheid years was subject to enormous debate in terms of the reasons that drew black South African men into migrant labour. The two major perspectives were those of the ‘voluntarists’ and the ‘revisionists.’ Christo Vosloo, in his study of migrant labour hostels (2020), established that the main difference between both was that “[w]hereas the voluntarists ascribed the phenomenon of migrancy in South Africa to market forces [...] in tribal areas, the revisionists stressed the critical role of conquest, dispossession of land, increasing taxes aided by draconian pass laws, centralised recruiting, compounds, and divide and rule tactics” (Vosloo, 2020: 4). But it is a second wave of ‘revisionists’ the one that actually connected the migrant labour system to apartheid, arguing that “the need for cheap labour [...] was the seed that spawned the systems of segregation and apartheid” (Vosloo, 2020: 4) and underlining the undeniable connection between racial segregation and capitalist demands or impositions.

In the migrant labour system, workers left their rural homes to work in industrial areas for eleven months a year. This pattern of “circular migration” (Leliveld, 1997; Murray, 1981; Spiegel, 1980) affected the residential stability of families in terms of wife-husband and father-child relations. Family life was also determined by the destruction of and forced relocation to suburbs, as migrant workers who established new relationships in urban spaces could also be separated from them by the apartheid legislation the moment their couples were relocated to a different area, or the work permit these men had no longer allowed them to return to that specific location. Protests over the destruction of suburbs, common from the 1950s to the 1970s, were collected by the press, academics, and civilian organisations, who also drew attention to the social, personal, emotional and familial consequences of removals. Robin Hallet’s study on forced removals during apartheid (1984) signals the interest generated:

[I]n 1977 the Black Sash produced a map [...] which provided a graphic overview of forced removals in the country as a whole. In the late 1970s the South African Institute of Race Relations gave Gerry Mare a research grant to conduct a preliminary survey, the results of which were published in *African Population Relocation in South Africa* (Johannesburg 1980). [And] a group of academics and community workers coming together in February 1980, organized the seminar at which the Surplus People Project was born. [...] Between 1960 and 1962 SPP estimate[d] that 834,000 people were affected by the application of the Group Areas Act. (1984: 302-303, 308)

According to Francis Wilson (2006), the control exerted by apartheid laws as regards migrant workers made it impossible for generations of fathers for over one and a half centuries to raise their children. Its major consequence was that it “prevent[ed] their developing close ties” (Ritcher & Morrell, 2005: 86). In fact, some industries, like the mines, “have always been blamed for apartheid’s attempt to destroy the black family” (Shober, 2017: 1). This does not mean that all children lacked a father figure; quite the contrary, social anthropologists, like Nicholas W. Townsend (1997), have established that in Southern Africa, for example among

the Tswana from Botswana, mother's brothers, grandfathers, sons and sons-in-law had a social role in the education of children, acknowledging the existence of biological and social fathers and children. Nonetheless, this social role was also affected. Townsend's study, which compared men in 1973 and in 1993 in the same Botswana village, determined that "[o]f the ten men aged between thirty and forty in 1973, seven were at the mines in South Africa, but all had established unions and social children" (1997: 415). Quite the contrary, men aged between twenty and thirty, whether they worked at the mines in South Africa –like men in 1973– or had a variety of occupations –like men in 1993–, coincided in the lack of social children. In fact, "only one of ten young men in 1973 had social children" (Townsend, 1997: 415), seriously endangering the social and cultural connection between generations that every community needs.

Robert Morrell and Linda Richter's studies on fatherhood in South Africa (2004, 2005) claim that a positive or negative relationship affects both fathers and children in their personal and social behaviour as well as in their future lives. In the case of engaged fatherhood, the positive consequences extend as well to their couples and their communities, as "[f]athers who are positively engaged in the lives of their children are less likely to be depressed, to commit suicide or to beat their wives. They are more likely to be involved in community work, to be supportive of their partners and to be involved in school activities" (Morrell, 2005: 86). On the contrary, the lack of a father-child relation due to the absence of the paternal figure had a negative impact on fathers and sons, or men and boys, who would "have very different experiences of and models for fatherhood" (Morrell, 2005: 86). Seen from this perspective, the combination of the labour system and apartheid controlled and perpetuated the imposed double role of black South African men within the family and society; in other words, it "separated reproduction and production and made explicit and visible the distinction between the two domestic functions of maintaining and renewing the labour force, which is usually concealed" (Madhavan, Townsend & Garey, 2008: 649) in the apartheid system.

The paternal role established during apartheid persisted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the new generations would eventually perpetuate the pattern imposed. After the abolition of apartheid, "the Natural Fathers of Children Born out of Wedlock Act (86 of 1997) [appeared as] an attempt legally to define the rights and obligations of paternity" (Morrell & Richter, 2004: 37), yet Debbie Budlender's study on *Women and men in South Africa* highlights that "[o]fficial statistics indicate that close to half (42%) of South African children grow up living only with their mothers (Budlender, 1998)" (Morrell & Richter, 2004: 38). In fact, in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many South Africans still leave their households to look for a job or to work, transforming the domestic organization of families and kin groups and suffering the consequences of "the spatial separation of employment and family" (Madhavan, Townsend & Garey, 2008: 649).

Some studies (Draper & Harpending, 1982; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Garber, 2000) specifically consider how the absence of fathers affect the “maturational and behavioral outcomes for daughters [suggesting that] girls from father-absent homes who perceive paternal care to be less important should be ‘less coy and reticent’ and choose faster life history strategies, including earlier sex and childbearing” (Shenk, Starkweather, Kress & Alam, 2013: 78). This behaviour can be connected to the type of relationships many black South African men and women established from apartheid onwards, signalling the hegemonic and patriarchal conceptions of masculinity that determined South African manhood and that attached the reproductive work to women exclusively. In an interview with Renée Schatteman, South African writer Sindiwe Magona asked herself questions about the role as fathers and husbands that migrant workers were forced into during apartheid and about the consequences this had in families for generations. Magona seemed especially concerned with the fact that many South African men pursued young women and how this added to the destruction of the nation:

How is the father supposed to be a husband? How is the father supposed to be a father to the children he doesn't raise? [...] And today we are surprised our men are sleeping with babies. They have forgotten what babies are. Part of our being human is the bringing up of another generation. African men have been shut out of that for decades [...] they have been primed for this disaster. [...] The cornerstone of a nation, the bricks that make this strong thing that is called a nation, are the families<sup>1</sup>. Break down the families, you'll never have a nation. (Schatteman & Magona, 2004: 180-181)

In her recent keynote addressed to the *Sindiwe Magona: A Hybrid Scholarly Conference* (2023) at Georgia State University (USA), Sindiwe Magona expressed her concern with the current social and economic situation in South Africa, specifically in connection to the effects of apartheid in the father-child relations. As a contribution to Magona's emerging call for a more nuanced understanding of the South African family, this article examines Bessie Head and Sindiwe Magona, two of the most acknowledged South African women writers, and their representation of father-daughter relations during apartheid.

In their use of literature as a political tool, whether one considers these authors are purposely politically active or not, they offer a similar vision on the black South African family and the father-daughter relationship. Bessie Head (1937-1986) and Sindiwe Magona (1943-) alike lived under the constrictions of apartheid, which affected both their personal and professional lives from a very early age. In her introduction to Bessie Head's short story collection *The Cardinals. With Meditations and Short Stories*, Margaret J. Daymond alludes to the Immorality Act and the consequences of South African legislation, which directly affected Head and her family:

In 1927, the first country-wide prohibition on sexual union between white and African people outside of marriage was passed [...] In 1957 the amendments [to the Immorality Act] were passed. In them, most behaviour of a sexual nature involving white and black people was criminalized – imprisonment of up to 7 years could follow from just inviting a person of another race to perform the illicit sexual act. [...] 6000 people [were] convicted under its provisions between 1950 and 1966. But, as the further amendments of 1967 and 1969 suggest, laws such as this could not prevent all racial contact of a sexual nature. (1995: viii-ix)

Born from what apartheid laws considered an immoral and illegal relation between a white woman and a black man, Head was taken from her mother at birth. As a baby, Head was first fostered by a white family until she was reclassified as mixed-race and given to a coloured family. It was at the missionary school she attended that she learned about her real family and the cruelty that apartheid laws had meant and would mean in her life. Head was, in fact, very much affected by not having met her parents: her mother died at the mental asylum she was confined in under the premise of madness and her father mysteriously disappeared (Daymond, 1995). In the late 1950s and 1960s, her experience as a journalist provided Head with the opportunity of witnessing the oppression and political resistance, until she abandoned the country with her son in 1962 to exile in Botswana (SAHO, 2022). Cherry Clayton describes Head's decision of leaving as an "act of protest within a celebration of a freer, more benevolent culture and society [that] wins for herself and her project a degree of freedom," allowing Head to escape from the constrictions that apartheid entailed for black South African writers (1988: 56).

Quite similarly, Sindiwe Magona –abandoned by her husband at a very early age– learned that her only way out of the South African townships was education. She earned her secondary and undergraduate degrees by correspondence while working and raising her family on her own. It is understandable, then, that her work is "informed by her experience of impoverishment, femininity [and] resistance to subjugation" (SAHO, 2021). In the late 1970s Magona took several short trips outside South Africa and in the early 1980s she continued her studies in the United States with the idea of providing a better future for her children, yet "[d]istance from her home country [also] gave Magona an opportunity to reflect [...] on her experiences as a black woman" (Koyana, 2004: 11). Gugu Hlongwane further insists that "[t]he literary space that Magona achieves for herself is of great significance as far as the issue of agency and the rewriting of history are concerned" (2004: 38). In fact, as Bessie Head had done before, "[b]y confronting a South Africa that is not a homogeneous monolith, [Magona] 'writes home' to a future South Africa which will eventually, if gradually, have to learn how to transgress the stubborn boundaries of race, class and gender" (Hlongwane, 2004: 50).

Sindiwe Magona's short story "It was Easter Sunday the day I went to Netreg," published in *Living, Loving & Lying Awake at Night* (1991), and Bessie Head's short story "The Cardinals," published in *The Cardinals. With Meditations and Short Stories* (1995), take the

role of apartheid and the migrant labour system a step further, portraying a daughter and a father who do not know each other due to this pervasive system and who, years later and unknowingly, establish a sexual relation. Numerous studies (Foucault, 1978; Russell, 1999; Tyson, 1982; Fischer, 2003; Hipchen, 2009) have analysed from a psychological perspective the reasons behind certain relations and behaviours of fathers and daughters; namely sexual relations that many societies consider(ed) at the very least socially inappropriate. Around 429 BC, ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* discusses “[t]he immorality of incest, based on the idea that blood relatives should not mate and the progeny of such unions are tainted and unnatural” (Fischer, 2003: 92). Michel Foucault (1978) also discussed sexuality in terms of blood relation, what he called the ‘deployment of alliance’, and explored, as well, what he called the ‘deployment of sexuality’. In his understanding of both terms, the role of sex and its connection to the family moves from procreation and the establishments of boundaries within families in the first one, to its connection to pleasure, desire and perversion in the latter. As I address in further sections, Emily Hipchen (2009) also places special attention to desire, emphasising how desire arises between children and their parents when they meet each other as adults, leading to episodes of incest. This article will claim Magona and Head denounce the destruction of the family and the corruption of the father-daughter relations in South African history –with high levels of incest (Russell, 1999)– as a direct consequence of apartheid and the forced migrant labour system. In my understanding of the stories, the unconscious father-daughter incestuous relationships both authors explore in the above-listed works can be interpreted as the writers’ representation of the extreme and intolerable nature of the use and abuse the South African state inflicted upon its black populace.

## **2. INCEST AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN FAMILY**

As a writer, Sindiwe Magona is concerned with the idea of “heal[ing] those psychic wounds that apartheid brought upon [the South African society as a whole]” to the extent that she uses literature “to name them, confront them, analyse them and then reverse them” (Schatteman, 2004: 181-182). Her short story “It was Easter Sunday the day I went to Netreg” (1991) describes the life of a Xhosa family in a Cape Town township. The family, which lacks a father figure, is conformed by three generations: an old grandmother who stays at home taking care of the grandchildren; a mother who works for a white family and only comes back home a day a week; and several grandchildren. Magona used this background to portray a mother and a daughter that get pregnant by the same man unknowingly, uncovering some realities of family life in South African townships and connecting them to the perversion of apartheid and the migrant labour system.

Linda, the granddaughter and narrator of the story, vividly describes the poverty that surrounds them in the African township of Guguletu. The use of an adolescent character, a still

innocent “speaking voice that does not interrogate its ontological or hermeneutic status [...] has always been important for the literature of witness” (Callahan, 2004: 86), enabling Magona to signal the social and economic difficulties of the black population in South African townships. Ill-dressed children, falling houses and second-hand clothes sent by the white family the mother worked for, together with the figure of the grandmother who had to raise Linda “from the age five when [she] became too old to stay with Mother at her place of employment” (Magona, 2003 [1991]: 108), coincide with the experiences Magona herself lived and that appear in several of her stories and autobiographical novels.

David Callahan claims that Magona wanted to prevent future generations from forgetting how life in South Africa was, “especially stories concerning the unspectacular, the daily, the details of family and working life, above all the details of the lives of women not directly involved in the political struggle but in the more pressing struggle for material survival” (2004: 85). In fact, Magona herself collects that her “concern was that in the writing that was coming out, the so-called ‘protest literature’, our lives were being lost” (Magona, 1996: 92 in Callahan, 2004: 84). In this respect, the nearly fourteen-year-old narrator describes, as the title of the story foreshadows, her trip to Netreg, a coloured township ten minutes away from Guguletu by car. Rather than explaining the reason for this trip, Linda concentrates on the adventure itself, revealing information one step at a time; yet her innocent comments plainly reveal life in South Africa. For example, the facts that, as a student, she does not leave Guguletu and this is the first time she travels by car, directly allude to an important aspect of apartheid history: the impossibility for those who lack a work permit to ever abandon the township where they live.

In her use of a circular narrative structure, Magona focuses on two women, mother and daughter, who fall in love with the same man in an effort to denounce the circular migration black South African men were forced into, blaming the South African government for destroying the family life of black subjects and explaining how migrant labour affected social behaviour. The narrator thus explains the living conditions of labourers in the Single Men’s Quarters –“barracks used to house African men forced to leave their wives and children in the village when they get ‘permission’ to come and work in the cities” (Magona, 2003 [1991]: 109)– to further highlight the attitude of the South African government towards the black population. In this sense, Magona insists that the government did not care for the personal and familial status of these labourers, as they were not in fact acknowledged as human beings (109).

The lack of a father figure in the story is addressed when Linda confesses to her grandmother that she is pregnant, and the girl discovers her father was a migrant worker that had a relationship with her mother until she got pregnant. The image of her father as a “hero who was felled by the heartless boers during the 1960 riots” (108) disappears in favour of a sexual relationship outside marriage. In fact, the grandmother’s words are used to signal these relationships were against tradition, emphasising the importance of not getting “any payment

for damages from that man” (109) as well as not receiving the bride price for marrying her daughter. The fact that this young man never returned, as according to the grandmother he was probably already married, leaves Linda and her mother in a difficult social position. Women in this situation became *idikazi*, a term that alludes to “an unmarried female ... a term of reproach to all women who are husbandless [and therefore] morally bankrupt” (Magona, 1992: 1, 80) and unable to properly raise their children. Consequently, in the grandmother’s eyes, Linda is “a she-dog’s illegitimate child” (Magona, 2003 [1991]: 108) and therefore predestined for sin, as expressed in the question “Doesn’t a she-dog beget another she-dog?” (108).

The gap between the imposed regime and the Xhosa cultural traditions is further highlighted when the story introduces the reader to the custom of male relatives –from a woman’s clan– visiting the boyfriend to settle the wedding arrangements. Magona thus emphasises the importance of family and clan, as “[t]he clan ensures our survival. Everyone belongs to a clan and because of that, no one can ever be without kin” (110). These male clan members understand the problems that migrant labourers can entail for their families, but they are unable to solve the situation because, within the apartheid system, “white people don’t listen to [them]” (110). According to the grandmother, Linda’s father did not take responsibility for his new family, but “as soon as he knew that the she-dog was riding with his pup, he did what all these men from the zones do. Went back to his village and made sure he never again took a contract to Cape Town” (109). Quite the contrary, Linda’s boyfriend, Mteteleli, also a migrant labourer, “wanted to meet [her] parents and not only pay damages but pay lobola, the bride price” (109). He was, in fact, very distressed with her father’s past attitude.

The trip that opens a new world to Linda, as she is able to visit Netreg, also becomes her worst nightmare when she, her mother and her mother’s white employer enter a house where a woman practices her an abortion. Magona’s description of the procedure explains the sanitary difficulties of illegal abortions; not only was Linda taken to a hospital that same night, but the reader learns that “years later, [she] would come to know that [she] would never bear a child” (113). It is at this point in the story that the reader can interpret what the real problem is: Linda has fallen in love (and conceived a child) with a man that was her biological father. However, it is only at the very end that the character verbalises the truth, disclosing how when the family went to arrange their marriage, they learned the story had repeated itself and Mteteleli was the same migrant labourer her mother had an affair with: “Fifteen years before, Mteteleli, then a boy of sixteen or so years old, had come to Cape Town as a migrant labourer [...] Mother saw Mteteleli and recognized my father” (113).

Even though the story does not explain whether Mteteleli had previously realized he was Linda’s father or not, and therefore one cannot establish if Foucault’s concept of the ‘deployment of sexuality’ can be properly used to describe this father-daughter relationship, it seems Mteteleli feels responsible for his previous experience in the conversation he has with



Linda: “‘Your poor mother’, he said, ‘all alone, bringing you up by herself’” (109). However, his decision to marry her, his attempt “to redeem his past” (Callahan, 2004: 99) or, to put it in other words, his attempt to confront apartheid and the migrant labour system “is invalidated by the perversion the system has facilitated” (Callahan, 2004: 99). The story concludes with the harsh reality and some of the consequences of apartheid and the migrant labour system in the South African family, albeit Magona also includes some hopeful notes. Female education—a recurrent device in Magona’s stories—becomes a way out for Linda. By becoming a midwife, the character provides herself with new opportunities that would help her to escape from the constriction of apartheid. This new role will also allow Linda to give something back to her community, preventing women from suffering the same loss that she suffered in *Netreg* and disclosing the humanity of the South African communities that the apartheid system tried to annihilate.

### 3. INCEST AND THE CORRUPTION OF THE FATHER-DAUGHTER RELATION

When Bessie Head’s short story “The Cardinals,” published in *The Cardinals. With Meditations and Short Stories* (1995), presents the story of an orphan girl who becomes the lover of her biological father. As in the previous story, the narrator provides and hides information, allowing Head to present flashes of the lives of the characters and to disclose the most relevant and transforming piece of information—the fact that the characters are father and daughter—almost at the end of the story.

Head’s third-person narrator describes the slum where the daughter is raised as “a large slum area of tin shacks, bounded on the one side by a mile-long graveyard and on the other by the city refuse dump and the sea” (Head, 1995: 3). The extreme living conditions relate to those described by Magona: undernourished children who “had to walk a mile from the slum [...] to collect water for household use” (5); only working men are allowed to leave the slum to work as labourers; and the slum was surrounded by a refuse dump, where children “would spend the rest of the day ranking around [...] for edibles or discarded clothing” (5). As a way of signalling the powerlessness of the black South African population during apartheid and of pointing to the deprivation of a recognizable identity for this population, the girl in the story does not even own a name. She will be addressed as Miriam, as a child, Charlotte, as an adolescent, and Mouse, as a young adult; names that have been provided by other characters, her adoptive mother, the social worker and finally her father-lover Johnny, who decide for her and, therefore, impose identities on her, which very possibly thwarts her attempts at self-determination<sup>ii</sup>. The relationship Head portrays between Miriam/Charlotte/Mouse and Johnny also represents the destruction apartheid entails for the black population. Portrayed as negative for both characters, this relationship is especially destructive for the daughter, as the father’s concern for her is transformed into the imposition of his will and life understanding over hers.

At the beginning of the story, the reader learns Miriam/Charlotte/Mouse's mother was about to marry but got pregnant from another man. Her boyfriend, conscious about the situation, did not accept the baby, so the family decided to give the baby away to the woman who did the washing for them. The real story of the mother and her lover is not explained until the character of Johnny is introduced, yet it is the reader who must connect both characters, as the narrator makes no allusion to this lover being Johnny. The rest of Miriam/Charlotte/Mouse's life until the present time of the story is briefly presented: she escapes the slum after her foster father tries to abuse her; she is found in a suburb in Cape Town and as "no one came forward to claim her [...] [t]he social worker placed her with a family in the slums of Cape Town ... Until the age of sixteen she was placed and re-placed in ten homes" (10).

This article concerns itself with father-daughter relations during apartheid and not education *per se*, but it is important to bear in mind the role of education for Head and how it is presented –as in Magona's story– as a way out of the slums for the female character. Nonetheless, this character's fragility and sense of non-belonging, which constantly leads her to nullify herself, prevents her from fully embracing the job opportunity she obtains at the African Beat magazine where she meets her father. Johnny is one of the journalist fellows at the magazine, an impetuous and intransigent character that seems both attracted and repelled by her attitude to life. It is Johnny the one who names her Mouse, her attitude being that of a frightened creature who does not really know where she is or what she is doing by accepting that job offer. It is highly significant that Johnny names his daughter belatedly, not only because it reveals part of his paternal role, but because it signals how he sees her. For Johnny, Mouse is a powerless, submissive, controllable and easily destroyable creature –or rather child– who needs someone to take care of her and guide her –or rather impose how to behave– in order to become, in Johnny's own parametres, a full writer/journalist. In Elleke Boehmer's terms, Mouse assumes a secondary role, associated to women in colonial and even postcolonial countries, while the "key national 'actors'", Johnny in this case, "are cast in conventionally masculine, typically 'alpha-male', roles" (2005: 28).

Although they do not know each other and none of them predicts their family relation, when Mouse tells Johnny she grew up in the slum near the National Road, he believes she was not really born there, as "[e]veryone knows it's the dumping ground for illegitimate babies" (Head, 1995: 25). As in Magona's short story, where the father-lover was concerned with his daughter-lover's past, Johnny is intrigued by Mouse's life and, the same as Mteteleli, he is resolute to change her life conditions. In a conversation with their boss, PK, Johnny describes Mouse as "remote, unapproachable, inhuman and eccentric" (26). He believes this was caused by "[y]ears of struggle, under-nourishment and a complete lack of love or happiness" (26) and even recognises he is sexually interested in Mouse, though he is decided to constantly illtreat her, provoking fear and disgust in her. Boehmer (2005) has called attention to the

representation –in male literature– of Africa as a Mother, as a place for the male character to recover from the colonial power, and yet as a place that has to be controlled, moulded and guided at the same time. In her analysis of Léopold Senghor’s poem ‘Femme nue, femme noire’, Boehmer alludes to the poet’s description of the land as “both the place of his childhood dreams, associated with his mother, and the cherished object of his present need and future hope” to describe the simultaneous “sexual desire and [...] filial adoration” felt (2005: 25). In this light, Johnny rejects Mouse and the passivity she represents in connection to a nation that is undergoing the political and social pressures of apartheid, but at the same time Mouse symbolises the future, the possibility of evolution that both the character and the country have, and therefore a sexual body Johnny is attracted to.

In one of their usual fights, journalist colleague James uncovers Johnny’s past love experience and relates it to his current attitude towards Mouse: “something that happened to you in the past is still eating you up. [...] Being emotional you take love seriously so [...] [t]he fact that you’ve been messing up high-society bitches proves that it was one of them who gave you the knock. [...] There are just one or two pieces that don’t fit. [...] Your desire for a cause and the game you’re trying to play with Mouse” (40). It is at this point that the narrator offers the story of the two lovers –Mouse’s parents– a poor fisherman and a high-class young woman. The reader is given all the details about how the woman would reject her lover “because in the eyes of others he would appear poor and lowly” (49), concealing her pregnancy from him and taking the baby to the slum to give her to the woman who washed her family’s clothes, yet the question of race remains unsolved.

Head rejected the laws during the apartheid system such as the Immorality Act because it “sought to entrench white power in South Africa by keeping the races apart,” as Daymond asserts in the Introduction to her short story collection (1995: x), probably due to the consequences it brought to her parents and herself. In this respect, even though the young woman’s race is not determined in the story, the facts that she was high class and that the woman who took her baby would be in trouble “[s]hould the authorities get to know” (Head, 1995: 4) suggest a reading of the main character as white. Moreover, the tragic ending of this woman, who prefers to return home to commit suicide rather than marrying an old friend, not only would help connect the two apparently independent stories, transforming Mouse and Johnny’s relationship from lovers to father and daughter, but it would allow Head to signal the consequences of the Immorality Act, symbolically connecting apartheid’s legislation and incest. In this sense, I agree with Daymond’s reading of such an incestuous relationship as “dramatizing and defining [Head’s] political anger” (Daymond, 1995: xi-xii).

In her study on “Genetic Sexual Attraction and the Creation of Fatherhood,” Hipchen (2009) relies on Betty Jean Lifton’s experience in psychology practice to study the attraction that arises between adoptees and birthparents in reunion. Hipchen explains how the physical disconnection of these birthparents and children, “the natural loss of the maternal and paternal bodies” suffered after the adoption, is transformed into a “physical consumption [where

parents'] bodies become versions of their children's, thus inseparable for them" (2009: 9) when they reunite. In Head's story, when Johnny shares with PK that he loves Mouse, he also admits a sexual attraction, a connection that he cannot explain and that simultaneously attracts and repels him:

She's got something inside her that agrees with my system [...] The feeling is too fleeting but I know it's there. Somehow it's all tied up with her eyes. On the surface they're just big and dark and unfathomable but they react on me in a terrible way. *They horrify me; they fascinate me; they revolt me, but why? Why?* I've looked into many women's eyes; I can't ever remember feeling this way. When I talk to her and she just looks back at me with those eyes, I get a wild feeling inside. The whole thing is driving me crazy because she's so remote and unattainable. (1995: 56, *emphasis mine*)

Although apartheid's intervention in the black family dynamics prevents Johnny from being aware of where his desires come from, by establishing a relationship with his unknown daughter, this character, the same as Lifton's patients, "deploy[s] the imagery of emptiness filled, interpenetration, consumption of the other, destruction of otherness" (Hipchen, 2009: 9), fully assuming –in Boehmer's terms (2005)– his role as a national hero. In fact, Johnny's offer to help Mouse become a 'real' writer entails certain conditions –"[t]hat [she] give[s him] complete control to guide and direct [her] the way [he] think[s she] should go, and that [she] come[s] and live[s] with [him]" (Head, 1995: 62)– which would allow him to establish a closer relation and to take control of her life. Desiree Lewis understands Johnny's mentoring role as a threat to Mouse's self-definition as a mixed-race woman, in the sense that Johnny "interprets her desires as his own determined will [and therefore] Mouse can discover an authoritative 'self' only by speaking his word and constructing herself in his image" (1996: 75). However, even though Johnny's behaviour may constrain Mouse's role as a writer and a woman (and deprive her of any form of agency), one should also notice this comes as a direct consequence of his psychological identification with her; even though he does not know she is his daughter, Mouse somehow reminds him of himself.

To further complicate the father-daughter relationship, Head introduces in the story a second incestuous relationship in Johnny's past. In his attempt to seduce Mouse, Johnny seems to fulfil Foucault's notion of the 'deployment of sexuality' (1978) and confesses that he used to kiss his sister when they were very young "the way a man kisses a woman" (Head, 1995: 67) without apparently reprobating this behaviour. More interestingly, he fantasises with an imaginary daughter and how society would condemn an incestuous relationship, either with a sister or a daughter –"All I can say to society is that it's just as well I have no daughter. I'd probably make love to her too" (68)– to further explain he "can't take the sham and hypocrisy and false values any longer" (68). Rather than questioning the morality of Johnny's act, as society would presumably do, Mouse accepts his fantasies, and without their knowledge,

makes them come true. In her process to self-discovery as a writer, Mouse acquires an identity that belongs to her father or, as Lewis puts it, “[s]he will have to continue the word of her father at the same time that he ‘engenders’ her and penetrates her sexually” (1996: 75). As the daughter Anna-Leena Toivanen describes in her exploration of father-daughter relationships and the failures of the postcolonial nation-state in Chimamanda N. Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), Head’s protagonist also “remains passive and submissive in the face of familial and national tragedies and is far from becoming a genuine protagonist in the national narrative” (Toivanen, 2013: 113).

At the end of the story, the love relationship blurs, portraying mixed attitudes where both Mouse and Johnny behave as a couple and as a father and daughter. Her childish behaviour leads Johnny to worry about Mouse’s eating habits, or to slap her when he considers she has misbehaved, as his words reveal: “I’m damned if I’m going to tolerate such stupidity [...] Clear off your room and get out of those wet clothes’. Her child-like look of guilt half-amused, half-exasperated him. Her body looked child-like too in the clinging wet clothes, as he watched her walk quietly to her room” (Head, 1995: 77-78). Interestingly, Johnny tries to explain his mixed feelings to Mouse, but his words have several layers of meaning, as can be seen when he confesses that: “I just want you to get it clear that I’ve got a fixed idea in my head that you belong to me” (72). The duality established in this relationship is not conceivable for Johnny. He describes “two strong, conflicting emotions [...] at the same time - a fierce masculinity and a paternal protectiveness” (113) to later fight this duality by rejecting and trying to, figuratively, kill their father-daughter relation in favour of the romantic one: “[Johnny] placed one hand lightly on her throat. [...] I’m only going to kill the child in you, by degrees. I don’t want the child. I want the woman.” (113). Yet his subconscious mind still shows the true nature of their relationship, and when he confesses his love to Mouse, he ends up literally explaining their real connection: “You are all I have left to keep my love and faith alive. Without this love and faith in some living thing, I cannot live. [...] You are a part of me” (117). Unable to escape their inevitable fate, promulgated by apartheid in its destruction of the black family, the story ends with the couple in bed, about to consummate their incestuous affair, unaware of their father-daughter connection.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

By presenting stories where a father and a daughter have lost the family relation that would otherwise unite them and have engaged themselves into an incestuous sexual relation, Sindiwe Magona and Bessie Head confront their readers with the harsh reality that apartheid and the migrant labour system have established for part of the South African population. According to Callahan, Magona “writes insistently about events and experiences that may serve as metaphors for the violence of South African society, with special emphasis on that perpetrated against women” (2004: 98); nevertheless, in the story “It was Easter Sunday the Day I Went

to Netreg” (1991) one must also consider the violence exerted to the family as a whole. Although it is the adolescent, Linda, the one who is forced to abort “on the day consecrated to the Resurrection in the Christian calendar” (Callahan, 2004: 99), the violence is also perpetrated against the figure of the mother and the father, as both lovers and parents, as well as against the father-daughter relationship, which “demonstrates the intimate ways in which apartheid impacted upon personal lives” (Callahan, 2004: 99).

Even though Bessie Head’s story “The Cardinals” (1995) seems to suggest Mouse’s identity could ultimately be developed and acknowledged in her own terms through her writing (Lewis, 1996), this seems to be prevented by the fact that Johnny and Mouse do not discover their real father-daughter relationship, and therefore one can assume that they will consummate the incestuous relationship they have established. These characters cannot elude the apartheid constraints that surround them, becoming the victims of this political system as individuals defined by their familial and sexual bonds. In fact, the final lines of the story –“Life is a treacherous quicksand with no guarantee of safety anywhere. We can only try to grab what happiness we can before we are swept off into oblivion” (Head, 1995: 118)– acknowledge the difficulties the black population endured and signal the justification provided by Johnny to establish a relationship with Mouse as the only escape possible, without understanding the irony of the situation.

Sindiwe Magona and Bessie Head’s short stories have depicted the use and abuse suffered by migrant workers as well as the consequences of apartheid and the migrant labour system in the stability of the black South African family. In fact, these patterns are very much present in the domestic organisation of family life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to the extent that “the upcoming black middle class has to address the legacy of colonial-apartheid systems that still shape the experiences of most working-class black parents and families” (Oyedemi, 2021: 219). Because families are fundamental in the preservation of cultures and traditions, the father-daughter incestuous relationships engendered have been portrayed in the stories to unravel the perversion and responsibility of this political system and its instrument in the destruction of the black family and, by extension, in the destruction of the South African nation to these days.

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> In this interview, Sindiwe Magona seems to make reference to the conventional and nuclear family, signifying the South African nation in heteronormative terms.

<sup>ii</sup> This idea can also be read in a national key.

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