

**THE AGENCY OF THE SERVANT:
REFRAMING DOMESTIC SERVICE
IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN
POPULAR FORMS**

by

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ABSTRACT

Representations of domestic workers and their relationships with employers occur in several fictional/non-fictional post-apartheid narratives in South Africa, including chick-lit, self-help literature and television series. This study explores how popular genres reinforce, challenge or reframe existing depictions of domestic workers (which have historically often been one-dimensional and superficial), by analysing Zukiswa Wanner's chick-lit novel *The Madams* (2006), Zukiswa Wanner's self-help text *Maid in SA: 30 Ways to Leave Your Madam* (2013), and the television drama *Housekeepers* (2018) directed by Grant Atkinson and produced by Portia Gumedede. These works are examined against their genre conventions to investigate what these popular forms might open up for the representation of domestic workers and their relationships with employers. The study aims to highlight unique ways in which popular genres such as chick-lit and self-help engage with the subject of domestic service, opening up new spaces for previously marginalized characters and complicating stock figures. Including analysis of a television series underscores similar innovations in South African television, focusing on crime drama's distinctive contribution. This dissertation shows the expansion from representations of domestic workers in South African apartheid literature as silent, peripheral figures to multi-faceted depictions that underscore their identities and experiences outside of their jobs as domestic workers. It demonstrates a shift from focusing on the intimate nature of domestic work to acceptance that it is essentially a job and should be treated accordingly. Moreover, it demonstrates how the portrayal of the domestic worker/employer relationship now showcases the possibility of friendship rather than simply depicting them in pseudo familial terms. Popular forms, adapted to the South African, and wider African context, are thus clearly able to engage with social and political themes in complex and dynamic ways.

KEY TERMS

The Madams , *Maid in SA: 30 Ways to Leave Your Madam* , *Housekeepers* , Zukiswa Wanner, Grant Atkinson, Portia Gumedde, domestic work, African popular culture, chick-lit, self-help, television series, crime drama

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Domestic work in South Africa has been, and continues to be, a major sector of employment for black¹ semi-skilled or unskilled women² (Cock 1989, King 2007). For the purposes of this study, the term “domestic work” will be used to refer to “the work of an individual for another individual or family, in carrying out personal household tasks such as cleaning, cooking, childcare and carework in general.” (Haskins and Lowrie 2015: 1). Despite the large number of women employed to do this work, the job remains one marked by unfair treatment and exploitation. In her study on domestic work in South Africa, *Maids and Madams* (1989), Jacklyn Cock refers to domestic workers as victims of “ultra-exploitation” (1989:6). Cock bases her argument on the fact that since black women make up the vast majority of domestic workers in South Africa, “[t]hey are situated at the convergence of three lines along which social inequality is generated - class, race and sex” (1989:5). Thus resulting in their ultra-exploitation. This exploitation is seen in how “[t]hey are deprived of a negotiated wage, of reasonable working hours and of family and social life” as well as other forms of exploitation (Cock 1989:6). Since the time of Cock’s study, the apartheid system has been dismantled and the government has made efforts to include domestic workers in protective labour legislation (King 2007). According to Alison King (2007), however, despite the inclusion of domestic workers in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) 1994 and the Labour Relations Act (LRA) 1995, both of which stipulate the legal duty of employers to ensure the maintenance of fair labour practices³ between themselves and their employees, unfair treatment and practices are still prevalent and have been slow to change. King argues that part of the reason for the slow improvements in the field “is because the nature of domestic work makes it difficult for labour legislation implementation to be monitored and enforced and the interrelationships between employers and servants are enacted behind closed doors, away from public view” (2007:171). Another reason which King presents for the slow changes in the field is the fact that employees often do not insist on the implementation of labour legislation, out of fear of losing their jobs (2007:175). Thus, she argues that although “post– apartheid domestic workers now [have] the formal frameworks for legal redress, which were denied to them during the apartheid era [...] the

¹ The definition of “black” used here is the Black consciousness definition of black which defines it as “the broad population of African, Coloured and Indian people”. This definition draws on Steve Biko’s assertion that “[b]eing black is not a matter of pigmentation” but rather “a reflection of a mental attitude” (Howarth 1997: 60).

² Although domestic work started out as a male-dominated occupation in South Africa in the 1930’s (Gaitskell 1983:245), since then it has become a black-female dominated occupation (Cock 1980).

³ Examples of some of these practices include ensuring that “their employees had a written contract, entitlement to paid public bank holidays and annual leave, set hours of work with compulsory rest periods to be incorporated within the working day.”(King 2007:174).

implementation of the tenets of this labour legislation [have] proved difficult to enforce and monitor” (King 2007:174).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the precarious nature of domestic work. According to Quraisha Dawood and Mariam Seedat-Khan (2022), domestic workers were amongst the most vulnerable labour groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. They argue that the precarity of their situation was largely influenced by “[i]nflation and the global economic recession” which left some employers unable to afford domestic workers and others fearing that their live-out domestic workers posed high transmission risks (Dawood and Kahn 2022:8). Furthermore, other scholars have argued that the pandemic left domestic workers in a position where they faced increasingly “high risk[s] of unemployment, demand for overtime work, unremunerated labor, unsafe workplaces, and minimal access to state benefits” (Pandey et al 2021:1288). The subject of domestic work thus remains a relevant area of study, perhaps increasingly so as its landscape shifts and adapts to the changes resulting from the pandemic. Although the vast majority of studies on the subject currently tend to be done from a sociological perspective, it is also relevant to consider the nature of the depiction of domestic work and the various challenges and issues associated with it in popular culture. This is because representations of domestic work in popular culture “both document and influence perceptions and behaviours with regards to race, power, subordination and service”, which in turn have an effect on social interactions amongst people of different racial, class and sex groups (Jansen 2019:267). This study therefore sets out to investigate the nature of these representations and the extent to which they have been complicated or reinforced.

Although conventional power relationships between employers and domestic workers have been an important aspect of colonial and early postcolonial literature, in the South African context, depictions of domestic workers in cultural texts are largely confined to one-dimensional portraits of characters who are limited to a peripheral role. Furthermore, workers are often portrayed as subservient and deferential when interacting with their employers. As a result of this nature of depiction, much of the existing scholarly engagement with the subject has centred on these stock representations. This study however, takes a necessary turn towards engaging with depictions which depart or complicate conventional depictions of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers.

The relative lack of interest in the figure of the domestic worker is echoed in the dearth of literary scholarship on the subject. Despite this scarcity, there have, however, been some scholars who have offered critical readings of texts which contain fictional representations of domestic workers.

Earlier scholarly work on the subject has tended to look at the manner in which these texts depict the exploitation of domestic workers in South Africa, whilst later works have placed more emphasis on analysing the level of complexity with which domestic workers are depicted in South African fiction (Bystrom 2016, Jansen 2019). Margaret Lenta (1989) and Mary West (2009), for example, have highlighted how fictional depictions of domestic workers are able to offer commentary on social issues such as white liberalism, racism and the injustices of apartheid. More recently, Ena Jansen's book-length study *Like Family: Domestic Workers in South African History and Literature* (2019)⁴, (originally published in Afrikaans in 2015), underscores the extent to which recent depictions of domestic workers have expanded. According to her, domestic workers are now able to play a more significant role in the plot as opposed to remaining in the largely insignificant roles into which they were traditionally cast. Jansen also makes reference to a notable increase in the complexity with which domestic workers have been depicted in more recent texts, drawing attention to the emergence of what she describes as a "new generation of domestic worker characters" who defy "a long literary tradition of stereotypes, of marginal 'jolly Hottentot' and meek 'Yes, Boss' figures" (Jansen 2019:265).

The existing body of scholarship on the subject has been useful in providing insight into the different ways in which texts containing fictional depictions of domestic workers are able to comment on the unequal, exploitive nature of the relationship between domestic workers and employers. However, they do not give much attention to the subversive agency which domestic workers are able to exercise in their relationships with their employers. Furthermore, although more recent studies such as Jansen's have begun to discuss the increasing complexity with which domestic workers are depicted, they have not looked at this question across different literary and filmic mediums. Instead they have focused mainly on the genre of the novel. The dominant literary and historical emphasis has also led to the neglect of more popular forms such as self-help literature and television. Furthermore, there has also been a dearth of scholarship on contemporary fictional representations of domestic workers.

My study aims to build on existing scholarship by taking a multi-generic cultural studies approach to the investigation of the representation of the domestic worker figure. Examining different genres such as the chick lit novel, the self-help text and the television series, my selection of works comprises of texts which can be categorised as "popular" genres. These works include Zukiswa

⁴ In its introduction, Jansen argues that the title of the book was inspired by the familial language employers often use in reference to their domestic workers

Wanner's *The Madams* (2006) and *Maid in SA: 30 Ways to Leave Your Madam* (2013)⁵, and the television drama *Housekeepers* (2018) directed by Grant Atkinson and produced by Portia Gumedede. All three of my chosen works engage with domestic work in ways which inflect and complicate traditional engagements with the subject whilst demonstrating the ability of popular forms to engage with "serious" issues. The reason why I have chosen to do a close reading of two Wanner texts is because Wanner's work provides one of the most comprehensive fictional engagements with domestic work in the post-apartheid period. Furthermore, her engagement with domestic work is not only limited to one genre of popular literature but two, as is demonstrated by the fact that *The Madams* is a chick lit novel, whilst *Maid in SA* is a self-help text. Wanner's work therefore makes an important contribution towards the growing body of popular literature engaging with domestic work. Popular texts (and other popular cultural productions) occupy the space in between what is regarded as "traditional" on the one hand and "elite" on the other (Barber 1997:1). They are often characterised by their "openness to experimentation" and their tendency to "ignore canonical conventions" (Ogola 2017:30). Their subject matter also generally tends to engage with socio-political and economic issues which affect the masses, though it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that all popular forms are progressive. Popular forms also tend to rely on "[s]tereotyped characters and plots", but as noted by Karen Barber (1997), this does not prevent them "from dealing with real experience [s]" (3). This dissertation explores the extent to which contemporary popular genres can be understood as beginning the project of shifting traditionally problematic portrayals of marginalised figures such as domestic workers. In addition to adopting a multi-generic cultural studies approach, my study aims to examine the extent to which contemporary authors and television series directors have disrupted trends in the fictional depiction of domestic workers (such as the tendency to depict them as silent, submissive characters).

This introductory chapter of my study begins with an overview of the nature of early depictions of domestic work in South African literature, after which it provides an outline of the changes which have occurred in the South African literary landscape and the effect these changes have had on different forms of engagement with domestic work. Thereafter it discusses the various ways in which different popular genres have treated the subject of domestic work. This is then followed by an overview of the existing critical literature on my selected works for this study. Lastly, it provides an outline of the chapters in the body of this study.

Early depictions of domestic work

⁵ The page numbers referred to for Wanner's texts reflect the page numbers in the Kindle e-reader editions of the texts.

As stated earlier, the body of South African literature engaging with the subject of domestic work has generally tended to depict domestic workers as silent, submissive characters. Examples of early portrayals of this nature include Olive Schreiner's portrayal of domestic workers in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which has been viewed as a "patronizing or derogatory portrayal of the (otherwise invisible) " 'Hottentot' and 'Kaffir' laborers and servants." (Visel 1990:115). Similarly, Schreiner has been criticised for the lack of depth and anonymity with which the black domestic worker in *From Man to Man or Perhaps Only*— (1926), is portrayed (Maithufi 2017). Other early portrayals include Daphne Rooke's depiction of an "intra-racial" rape in which a black domestic worker, Anna, is raped by a black man in *Mittee* (1952). Lucy Graham (2009) argues that although *Mittee* "foregrounds the experience of a brown or Coloured woman" through affording her the role of narrator, overall, "the black women [including the black domestic workers] on the farm in the novel do not receive much attention" (51). Significantly, Graham argues that the portrayal of Anna's rape in the text was strategically included as a substitute for the rape of Letty, a white woman, by a black man. This was done so as to avoid potential censorship since the South African Entertainments (Censorship) Act of 1931 "banned representations of "intermingling " of Europeans and non-Europeans, as well as scenes of "rough handling or ill-treatment of women and children " (Graham 2009:45). According to Graham, Rooke substituted Letty's rape with Anna's so as to exploit "the relatively ungrievable status of intra-racial rape in the South Africa imaginary and of the black woman as rape victim in order to evade censorship" (Graham 2009:49). This suggests that even in early attempts at casting domestic workers in more prominent roles, the motive behind it may not have purely been to expand the complexity of their depictions.

Other examples of stereotypical portrayals of domestic workers include portrayals of "domestic bliss" by white Afrikaans authors in which domestic workers are portrayed as happy and at peace with their circumstances (Jansen 2019:89). Examples of these kinds of portrayals can be seen in Elisabeth Eybers' "Amos and Tabita" (1957) and Audrey Blignault's "Met Ligter Tred" (1962). As noted by Jansen in her book *Like family: Domestic workers in South African literature* (2019), in one of the essays in "Met Ligter Tred", Blignault casually expresses her enjoyment at hearing "the sound of [a] washer-woman whistling while doing the laundry" (2019:89). Blignault's reference to this appears to be done so as to depict the carefree singing of her domestic worker, Rosie, but Jansen argues that Blignault's description of this is superficial as it fails to question the significance of the songs she sings, which, when roughly translated, say "[w]hen you are battered by the storms of life" and "[w]ork because night is approaching" (2019:89). Jansen therefore argues that the reason why portrayals such as the ones provided by Blignault can be regarded as problematic is

because they are too simplistic and do not question or interrogate the authenticity of the assumed happy demeanours of the domestic workers depicted (Jansen 2019:89).

In addition to depicting domestic workers as silent submissive characters, there are also some common tropes associated with their depiction. These tropes often coincide with the common tropes associated with the historical depiction of black women overall, who have been the traditional demographic cast in this role. Jansen argues that part of the reason for this is because there has been a tendency on the part of white authors to represent black people “in terms of their functionality” (Jansen 2019:281). Similarly, in the North American context, Patricia Hill-Collins’ (2002) argument regarding the circulation of “controlling images” also demonstrates the overlapping nature of the tropes associated with the depiction of black women and those of domestic workers. Hill-Collins’ argument focuses on the depiction of African-American women in the United States of America (U.S.A) but her observations are useful in terms of understanding the tropes associated with the depiction of black women in literature more broadly. She argues that there is a set of “controlling images”, which include stereotypical tropes of black women as “mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas”, which are used as a means “to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Hill-Collins 2002:69). The “mammy” trope, in particular, has been widely applied in texts engaging with the subject of domestic work. Hill-Collins describes the mammy trope as one which depicts black women as “the faithful, obedient domestic servant”, one who adopts the role of a surrogate mother by “loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and ‘family’ better than her own” (Hill-Collins 2002:72). Jansen echoes Hill-Collins’ observations as she makes reference to the “like family” trope often used in texts engaging with domestic work in which “family relationships are often used in descriptions of domestic workers” (Jansen 2019:15). Hill-Collins’ reference to the “hot mamma” trope, a sub-category of which is the seductive “Jezebel” figure, is also common to texts engaging with domestic work. This trope places emphasis on the perceived hyper-sexuality and large sexual appetites of black women which was used as justification for their sexual exploitation (Hill-Collins 2002:81). The sexual exploitation of a black domestic worker at the hand of their white master has also been a common trope in literature engaging with domestic work (see Rooke’s *Mittee* (1952) and Mutch’s *Housemaid’s Daughter* (2012)), although less common in South African literature published during the time in which the Immorality Act⁶ was still active

⁶ The Immorality Act was a Bill enforced by the apartheid regime which prohibited sexual intercourse between black and white people. (Martens 2007)

It is, however, important to note that during apartheid there were a few prominent white authors such as Elsa Joubert and Nadine Gordimer who did not take part in the trend of depicting domestic workers in accordance with stereotypical tropes (Jansen 2019). In *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (1980) and *July's People* (1981) respectively, both writers complicate the traditional depiction of domestic workers by presenting domestic workers as multi-faceted individuals with lives and experiences outside of their roles as domestic workers. In addition to this, black authors such as Bessie Head and Sindiwe Magona, most prominently in their works *Maru* (1971) and *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* (1991), disrupt the treatment of the subject of domestic work by shifting away from simplistic depictions of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers, and offering depictions which complicate conventional tropes of silence, deference and humility. Both of these texts vividly depict the fluidity of the boundaries between domestic workers and their employers and highlight the complex nature of the relationships between them. Other examples of black authors who disrupt problematic depictions of female domestic workers include Lauretta Ngcobo and Nokugcina Sigwili (later known as Gcina Mhlophe). In Ngcobo's *Cross of Gold* (1981), a black domestic worker named Sindisiwe narrates her journey "from apolitical domestic worker to militant, anti-apartheid activist" through "a long, lyrical letter" addressed to her sons which surfaces after her death (Boswell 2016:1330). The fact that Sindisiwe's character undergoes changes in her political views is significant because it contributes to her depiction as a complex, multi-faceted individual. Although Ngcobo has been criticised for killing off Sindisiwe (the only woman in the novel) too early into the text (Boswell 2016:1336), it is noteworthy that a domestic worker figure of her complexity is depicted in the text. An equally striking alternative depiction of a domestic worker can be found in Sigwili's "My Dear Madam" (1980), a short story published in *Staffrider* magazine, an anti-apartheid publication which "provided not only a counter discourse to the grand apartheid media narrative, but also a space for those rendered invisible by the system to contribute to media and cultural production in South Africa" (Manase 2005:56). In "My Dear Madam", the black domestic worker in the story is depicted as defiant, 'cheeky' and strong-willed: she "refuses all attempts by her madam to control her" and defies "to be silenced and ignored" (Gqola 1999:162). This is significant because even in a publication as progressive as *Staffrider* magazine, as Pumla Gqola notes, such nuanced portrayals of black women were uncommon.

Despite its relative prominence in literary texts there is still a surprising shortage of scholarship on the figure of the domestic worker in South African literature. It is thus crucial to shift our focus to the role of the domestic worker and the subversive ways in which they exercise their agency. This is especially necessary within the context of the decolonisation debate. Historically, colonisation and

domestic work have been intertwined as larger, systemic structures of authority have influenced who takes on the role of domestic worker versus who takes on the role of employer. In the South African context the racial domination of black people by white people meant that white people could escape “the low wages and poor working conditions” involved in domestic work, whilst “blacks were increasingly coerced into it” (Cock 1989:173). According to Cock, historically, black women in particular were coerced into domestic work due to their racial *and* sexual oppression which excluded them from jobs reserved for white women, namely that of “clerical work and shop assistants”, relegating them to domestic work (1989:251). It is for these reasons that Cock contends that the development of domestic work over centuries “reflects changing patterns of both racial and sexual domination” (1989:173). In recent years, protest movements such as the “Fees Must Fall” and “Rhodes Must Fall” movements have highlighted the importance of the decolonisation of knowledge and infrastructure in higher institutions of learning. The fact that, during the movement, many students identified and formed alliances with domestic workers (Coetzee 2016:207) illustrates the parallels which can be drawn between the struggle to decolonise knowledge and the struggle to free domestic workers from exploitation. It thus becomes necessary to turn our attention to fictional texts which engage with the subject of domestic work in order to give more prominence to this socio-political issue. In this regard, my study’s specific attention to popular culture forms, challenges and expands the approaches taken on the subject in other disciplines by bringing the important questions of language and representation to the fore, something which tends to be underplayed in studies of a historical or sociological nature.

Changes in the South African literary landscape

As the process of decolonising existing bodies of knowledge takes place, so too does the process of shifting away from former, more rigid modes of writing, characteristic to the apartheid era, take place. These changes, in turn, have contributed towards different forms of engagement with domestic work. During apartheid, South African literature, especially literature by white liberals and black authors, was largely political, preoccupied with the depiction of the injustices of apartheid and often used as a weapon to combat the apartheid regime (de Kock 2005, Davis 2013). This is because “[u]nder apartheid and with the understanding of literature as a tool of the struggle, most fiction concerned itself with self-consciously representing, in vivid sensory (if not psychological) detail, the current moment” (Gallagher 1997:384). Furthermore, during apartheid “[l]iterature acquired a particular importance in shaping international understandings of the nature of Apartheid” (Barnett 1999:288). However, since the democratic era, South African literature appears to be less concerned with using literature as a tool to combat apartheid, instead it often “complicates, or ignores apartheid-era racial categories (Frenkel and MacKenzie 2010:2). An

example of this can be seen in one of my chosen texts, *The Madams*, in which Wanner subverts the conventional white employer/black domestic worker configuration by depicting the domestic worker as white and the employer as black. This subversion complicates the apartheid-era racial categories in which domestic work was reserved for black women, thereby highlighting the manner in which post-apartheid literature disrupts traditional binaries. In addition to this, more recent South African literature, namely that which has been described by some scholars as post-transitional (Samuelson 2008, 2012; Frenkel and MacKenzie 2010) is often characterised by “politically incorrect humour, and incisive satire, and the mixing of genres with zest and freedom” (Frenkel and MacKenzie 2010:2). Another of my chosen texts, *Maid in SA*, demonstrates this as it satirises the relationship between domestic workers and their employers so as to deliver broader commentary on life in post-apartheid South Africa. The term post-transitional, however, has come under scrutiny with scholars such as Nedine Moonsamy (2013) arguing that the term may signal “a premature appraisal of a ‘post-transitional’ state”, thereby suggesting that the process of transition is still ongoing and that it may be too soon to adopt the term (8). Similarly, Chris Thurman (2010) questions the credibility of the term ‘post-transitional literature’, in a country which may still be “in a process of transition from apartheid to something else” (91). Others such as Aghogho Akpome (2016) argue that the “idea relies – whether intentionally or not – on a limiting conception of South Africa’s contemporary socio-political history and transition in terms that are inevitably linear and teleological” (39). Furthermore, Ronit Frenkel (2013) argues that it may be more useful to view the term post-transitional as a palimpsestic concept which allows for “a reading of the new in a way in which the layers of the past are still reflected through it” (25). My chosen television drama, *Housekeepers*, demonstrates this as some of the stereotypical ways in which domestic workers were portrayed on television during apartheid can still be seen in the drama. Significantly however, they are complicated and inflected so as to provide a different form of engagement with the subject. In further reference to the post-transitional, Frenkel argues that rather than the term being “merely a temporal marker”, it “summons a broadening of concerns and styles that reaches both backwards and forwards with a wider scope.” (2013:42) Despite their different views on the term, what all these scholars have acknowledged is that changes of varying degrees are taking place in South African literature, and my research aims to investigate the nature and extent of these changes.

Approaching domestic work in popular forms

In addition to investigating the nature and extent of these changes my study also aims to investigate how different popular genres treat the subject of domestic work and in which ways they work to reframe the question in new or complex ways. The chick lit genre, for example, is performing new and different functions as it is reworked in the African context to take on a more political stance,

one which offers “a critique of society” (Spencer 2019:155). The genre also offers clear engagement with women’s agency as it “articulates how women see themselves and their relationships”, [...] “negotiates the dilemmas of a patriarchal society, while also confronting issues of class and race” (Spencer 2019:155). My reading of Wanner’s *The Madams*, aims to demonstrate this through underscoring how the text uses specific generic features to expand upon previous treatments of domestic work. Similarly, my study aims to investigate the reworking of the self-help genre in Wanner’s *Maid in SA* to illustrate how it satirises the relationship between domestic workers and their employers and expands previous engagements with the subject in order to deliver broader social commentary. Lastly, my study will analyse the *Housekeepers* television series, engaging with the subject of domestic work to demonstrate how changes in depiction have not only occurred in literature but also in other popular culture forms. In post-apartheid South Africa television is often used as a tool to engage with discourses of unity and togetherness, as well as with the failures of the democratic promise (Kruger 2010, Smit 2016). My study aims to examine a television series which has engaged in the process of disrupting the stock-image of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers in the South African television industry. Much like its literary counterpart, the traditional representation of relationships between domestic workers and their employers has been one-dimensional and uncomplicated. In recent years, however, there have been some television series which have engaged in much more liberal depictions of this relationship, affording more narrative space to domestic workers. These series include the television adaption of *Madam and Eve*, and soap operas such as *The River* and *The Queen*.

Theorising domestic work

Critical studies on the figure of the domestic worker have been theorised from a range of disciplinary perspectives including the fields of social science and literary studies. While the main theoretical approaches that inform my study are popular culture theory, critical race theory and agency and intimacy theory, I also draw on a range of concepts discussed in sociological studies on domestic work in South Africa. These conceptual and theoretical approaches each relate to specific concerns of my work.

With regard to the sociological concepts which will inform my study, Jacklyn Cock’s sociological study, *Maids and Madams* [1980] (1989), will inform my analysis of the depiction of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers. Additionally, Shireen Ally’s (2010) more recent study on domestic work in the post-apartheid era will be used to inform my reading of my selected works which were all produced in the post-apartheid era. Lastly, I will draw on the concepts discussed in *Like Family*, Jansen’s study on domestic work in South Africa and the

existing fictional depictions thereof in South African literature. Since Jansen's study takes a largely historical approach on domestic work in South Africa, it will further aid my understanding of the various social, political and economic conditions which have influenced the nature of the job and the nature of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers. Significantly, my study will extend upon Jansen's study by examining the depiction of domestic work across various popular forms like television, and not only literature.

Debates in popular culture theory, dating back to Karin Barber's early work on popular culture in Africa, provide the theoretical basis for this study. In the introduction to *Readings in African Popular Culture* (1997) Barber argues that historically the study of African cultures has been dominated by two distinct categories, namely the 'traditional' and the 'elite' ('modern'/'westernised') (1997:1). As a result of this, "[t]he African cultural universe is often represented as being divided into two halves" (Barber 1997:1). This method of categorisation, Barber suggests, fails to acknowledge the importance or even the existence of cultural productions that do not fit neatly into either one of these categories (1997:1). These cultural products, she argues, can be defined as "popular" (art, literature, music) and tend to be about "things that matter to people", addressing "real problems" and offering "serious solutions" (Barber 1997:2). While she discusses a number of different definitions of "the popular", Barber concludes that "it is generally agreed [...] to refer in some way to an existing social category: 'the people'" (1997:3). Barber's work on African popular culture will inform a vital part of my study because each of my chosen works contains elements of the categories of the 'traditional' or 'elite' and engages with some of the themes Barber lists as common in popular culture forms. These themes include the "naming of common suffering" and the "aspiration to a better life" (Barber 1997:5). This is seen in the ways in which my chosen works illustrate the common suffering among domestic workers at the hands of their employers who often exploit and treat them unfairly as well as their aspirations for a life beyond domestic work.

Furthermore, Barber also disputes the false dichotomy between political art and entertainment and instead argues that popular culture can engage with important social and political issues whilst also being entertaining (Barber 1997). Barber's views are echoed by popular culture scholars Joyce Nyairo and James Ogude (2005) who argue that "popular forms have the capacity to forge, clarify and articulate the bond between cultural affairs and political existence" (225). These arguments will be crucial to my study as I engage with popular forms and how they depict the social and political issues relating to domestic work. Extending upon Barber's arguments, Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome's book *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday* (2014) offers a reading of popular culture which seeks to understand "the diverse ways in which social experiences

are foregrounded in different African art forms, especially the experiences of the class of people we might refer to as the ‘common people of the street’” (3). In this regard they move beyond Barber’s search for “a methodology for the study of African popular art forms” (Newell and Okome 2014:1) and present a collection of essays which offer close readings of a wide range of popular forms.

The use of critical race theory will be beneficial to my study as all of my chosen works engage with the historically complex relationship between domestic work and race in South Africa. As a result of this, critical discourses on race and how they influence life in post-apartheid South Africa and the relationship between domestic workers and their employers will be necessary to inform my reading of texts which engage with themes of domesticity and the legacy of apartheid. The critical race theory which I will draw on includes Melissa Steyn and Don Foster’s (2008) work on discourses of white resistance. They argue that in an attempt to mask their resistance towards the social and political transformation of South Africa, white people engage in “white talk” (Steyn and Foster 2008:36). They contend that “white talk” comprises of tropes and themes such as “*casting reconstruction as an unjust process; denouncing elite blacks [...] [and] stressing the dire consequences for the society of transformative measures*” (Italicised in the original, Steyn and Foster 2008:36). In two of my chosen works, namely *The Madams* and *Maid in SA*, there are instances where characters in the text express views which align with Steyn and Foster’s definition of white talk. Using the insights gained from their definition, I will conduct an analysis of how white talk complicates and inflects contemporary engagements with domestic work.

In my discussion on the performative aspects of domestic work, I will draw on agency theory, mainly James Scott’s (1990) theory of hidden and public transcript, to gain greater insight into the markers and inhibitors of agency in subordinate groups. Scott argues that both masters and servants make use of a public and a hidden transcript when interacting with one another (1990:5). Scott’s research will be crucial to my analysis of the different behaviours domestic workers engage in when in the presence of their employers and how these behaviours differ from their behaviour when in the presence of other domestic workers. This will assist my reading on some of the performative aspects of domestic work. In this respect, I will also draw on Judith Butler’s (1988) theory regarding performative acts and gender constitution. This critical lens will be particularly pertinent to the depiction of domestic work in the television drama, *Housekeepers*.

Furthermore, due to the fact that my study aims to explore the nature of the intimate relationships which often develop between domestic workers and their employers, engagements with intimacy in postcolonial contexts will be useful in informing my discussion on the development, maintenance

and effects of these bonds. Ann Stoler's work on intimacy in domestic spaces in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* ([2002] 2010) examines the intimate relationships which often developed between masters and servants in various colonies and argues that the intimacies of domestic spaces form part of the "microphysics of colonial rule" (Stoler 2010:7). In terms of the context of her study, Stoler's work focuses on the Asian, particularly Indonesian, regions. Although sexual intimacy between European men and Asian women (usually concubines who performed both sexual and domestic work) is a major focus of the study, Stoler also examines the emotional intimacy between Europeans (mostly European children) and Asian servants. Her study thus provides a comprehensive discussion of intimacy in the colonies. Although Stoler's work is situated in the colonial context, with a large focus on Asia, it is useful to my study because it highlights the multiplicity of roles which domestic workers are often forced to perform (servant, concubine, surrogate mother). Similarly, my chosen works depict domestic workers who, as a result of the intimate bonds they develop with their employers, shift between the roles of friend, confidant and surrogate mother. Moving beyond Stoler's predominant focus on domestic intimacy between white men and Asian women in colonial contexts, my study examines relationships between domestic workers and employers of the same race and gender who are not operating under any institutionalised systems of oppression. Thus my study will expand Stoler's scope of analysis and in so doing add to the sparse body of work on the complexities of the intimate relationships between domestic workers and employers.

This study will also draw on Jacklyn Cock's sociological study *Maids and Madams* ([1980] 1989) in which she analyses a collection of interviews with different 'maids' and 'madams', highlighting the highly asymmetrical nature of their relationship through discussing issues such as exploitation, low wages and unfair treatment in the workplace. Cock's argument also explores the important role which domestic workers play "in the reproduction of labour power", specifically through the crucial role they play in "physical maintenance (through the preparing of meals and the laundering of clothes" (1989:8). Furthermore, Cock also argues that domestic workers perform an important function in "ideological maintenance" as they play a crucial role in "socializ[ing] [people] into the dominant ideological order" (1989:8). This is because the interaction between domestic workers and their employers often serve as "the only significant interracial contact whites experience" and it is through this "extremely asymmetrical" relationship that attitudes of racial superiority and inferiority are generated and maintained (Cock 1989:8). Cock's engagement with the relationship between domestic workers and employers will be used to inform my discussion of how the fictional depiction of this relationship has evolved over time. A similar but more recent study on the subject conducted by Shireen Ally in her book *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers*

and the Democratic State (2010) will also inform my study. In the study Ally looks at much of the same issues as Cock but does so within the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Ally also discusses the effects of the changes in South African labour legislation since its redrafting in 2004. She argues that despite these changes, which provide domestic workers with a number of important benefits, many of the discriminatory practices which characterised domestic work under apartheid “remain a recalcitrant reality in contemporary South Africa” (Ally 2010:7). Ally’s engagement with the continuous presence of discriminatory practices in domestic work will be used to inform my analysis of my chosen works as each of them reflect the nature of these continuities and in so doing suggest that changes within domestic work have been slow to occur.

Approaching the domestic worker figure in South African literary and cultural texts

The early 1980s saw the emergence of several critical studies of the fictional depiction of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers, thus addressing a significant gap in scholarship at that time. The increase in interest can be attributed to the fact that a number of novels engaging with the subject of domestic work began to emerge during this time, including Elsa Joubert’s *Poppie Nongena* (1980) and Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* (1981). In addition, the original publication of Cock’s *Maids and Madams* in 1980 provoked controversy due to its overt critique of the “liberal mentality” which Cock regarded as inauthentic due to its tendency to “assert[...] the humanity of Africans, only to deny the human needs and feelings of African servants” (1989:2). Furthermore, Cock’s study provoked controversy because it exposed the gruesome extent of the ill-treatment of black domestic workers at the hands of white employers, some of whom were elite members of white society (1989:2). Cock and Joubert’s texts each received criticism from the conservative white community for their overt engagement with the injustices surrounding the field of domestic work. Both Cock and Joubert’s works resulted in an increase in critical scholarship on domestic work as well as an increase in fictional texts engaging with the topic in new ways. The dominant arguments presented by scholars during this time tended to focus on how these texts delivered social commentary on the injustices of the apartheid system (Smith 1984, Schalkwyk 1986). Some examples of early scholarly work on the subject can be seen in the works of David Schalkwyk (1989), and Roland Smith (1984). In his analysis of Joubert’s *Poppie Nongena*, for example, Schalkwyk draws attention to Joubert’s portrayal of the daily exploitation black domestic workers are exposed to thus placing particular emphasis on domestic workers as victims of oppression. Similarly, Roland Smith’s (1984) reading of Gordimer’s *July’s People* gestures towards the vast difference in the quality of life between domestic workers and employers in his discussion of the difficulties July, the domestic worker in the text, and his employers, the Smales, experience when forced to adjust to changes in the power dynamics of their

relationship. The readings offered by Schalkwyk and Smith serve as examples of early scholarly engagement with the subject of domestic work.

After the initial wave of publications engaging with the subject of domestic work in the early 1980s, interest in the subject continued to grow in the following decade as older texts such as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) were revisited to analyse their engagement with the fictional depiction of domestic workers and their relationship with their employers (Lenta 1987). Margaret Lenta, for example, argues that Schreiner's depiction of black people, including those who take on the roles of domestic workers, lack depth and are perceived by white characters in the text as "primitive in their social development and probably also in their intellects" (Lenta 1987:17). In addition to this, the early 1990s saw the publication of texts such as Sindiwe Magona's *Living Loving and Lying Awake at Night* (1991) and J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), each of which offer complex approaches to questions of representation and domestic workers and employer-employee relations. This is seen as Magona's short story collection, *Living Loving and Lying Awake at Night*, affords the domestic worker figure the narrative agency to comment on the challenges and issues they face as domestic workers and to unpack some of the factors which result in them having to become domestic workers. Similarly, Coetzee's *Age of Iron* broadens engagement with domestic work as it depicts the challenges faced by a domestic worker figure, Florence, in the text and explores the complex dynamics of the relationship between her and her employer, Mrs Curren. With the end of apartheid, moving into the early 2000s, scholars gradually began to shift their focus away from the injustices of apartheid and its effect on domestic workers and instead began to pay greater attention to the depiction of the personal bonds which can develop between domestic workers and their employers. Texts such as Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* in 2004 demonstrate this as it depicts the complex personal relationship which develops between a coloured domestic worker named Agaat (who shifts between the roles of daughter and worker) and her ailing employer, Milla (Prinsloo and Visagie 2009, Carvalho and van Vuuren 2009). Prinsloo and Visagie's (2009) reading of *Agaat*, in particular, discusses issues of representation and identity with regards to coloured domestic workers and considers the extent to which the relationship between Agaat and Milla influences ideas surrounding Agaat's identity. Turning to a different aspect of the relationship between domestic workers and employers, Carvalho and van Vuuren examine the impact and efficiency of different modes of communication between domestic workers and their employers as they explore Agaat's verbal and non-verbal expressions when interacting with Milla. In a more recent study of *Agaat*, Eva Hunter (2012) examines the strong presence of maternalism in the novel and racist Afrikaner notions of superiority. She also examines the manner in which the novel portrays the "complexities of power in the relationship between 'white' farm owner and

‘coloured ‘domestic servant’” (Hunter 2012:74). Although Hunter’s reading of *Agaat* begins to engage with some of the ways in which Agaat exercises agency in her relationship with Milla (as Milla’s illness progresses), this is a secondary concern of the article. Thus it is evident that in the discussed readings of *Agaat* none of them primarily investigate subversive acts of agency on the part of black domestic workers. Although some of the readings discussed thus far are fairly recent, the most recent work on fictional engagements with domestic workers in South Africa is by Ena Jansen.

In her book *Like Family*, Jansen not only provides a detailed history of domestic work in the country, dating as far back as 1658 and ending in 2015, but also offers valuable information about the legislation of domestic work in South Africa - and even includes some oral testimonies and personal accounts from domestic workers. In addition, Jansen provides numerous close readings of texts spanning across the apartheid era and well into the democratic era. In her analysis she draws a number of conclusions about the depiction of domestic workers, including the fact that it has undergone an important change in recent years, with domestic workers stepping out of the background and becoming more prominent as subjects of fiction in their own right (Jansen 2019:281).

Other recent studies such as Kerry Bystrom’s chapter “Keeping House” from her book *Democracy at Home in South Africa* (2016) and Gabeba Baderoon’s article “The Ghost in the House: Women, Race and Domesticity in South Africa” (2014) extend the discussion by analysing the fictional depiction of domestic workers across a number of different artistic mediums, including novels, plays and art exhibitions. Furthermore, their studies include discussion on issues such as the artistic depiction of same-sex attraction between ‘maids’ and ‘madams’, the elaborate modification of ‘maids’ uniforms⁷ for artistic purposes and the use of literature as a form of social commentary. Although neither of these are book-length studies, they each offer insight into the growing complexity with which post-apartheid authors and artists are engaging with the subject of domestic work. Both Bystrom and Baderoon’s works are particularly useful to this study because they take a multi-generic approach to their discussions on works engaging with domestic workers and their relationships with their employers. However, although their studies examine multiple genres, neither one of them devotes much attention to South African television and other filmic mediums, nor do they foreground debates in African popular culture.

⁷ This discussion in particular draws attention to Mary Sibande’s art exhibition *Sophie-Ntombikayise*, which showcases sculptures of a domestic worker figure named Sophie, wearing elegantly modified, Victorian-era influenced versions of the traditional domestic worker uniform. For a more detailed discussion on this see Dodd, 2010.

While some scholars have engaged with the depiction of black women in South African soap operas and advertisements, there is very little specific engagement with the portrayal of the domestic worker figure in South African television and film. According to Shelley-Jean Bradfield (2012), Shahidah Cassim and Miguel Monteiro (2001), the post-1994 period has seen an excessive focus on depicting black women as middle-class aspirational figures. However, these depictions are not necessarily in line with the socio-economic realities experienced by black women and thus tend to marginalise an important aspect of the South African experience. As suggested, although these studies are useful in gaining insight into the trends in television representation in the South African context, many aspects of television and filmic representation – the genres of melodrama and the thriller, for example – remain unexplored. The studies that have been done tend to focus on early post-apartheid advertisements and soap operas as case studies, and not more contemporary ones.

Critical literature on selected texts

In terms of the scholarly literature on my selected texts there has been a scarcity of engagement with how these texts portray domestic workers and their relationships with their employers. Zukiswa Wanner's *The Madams* (2006), for example, has only garnered limited critical attention, with scholars such as Ena Jansen (2019), Meg Samuelson (2012), Lynda Gichanda Spencer (2018) and Nonhlanhla Dlamini (2018) drawing attention to the novel's reversal of roles previously determined by race and class. Jansen and Samuelson also briefly comment on the novel's depiction of the relationships between domestic workers and employers. Another of Wanner's texts, *Maid in SA: 30 Ways to Leave Your Madam* (2013), has been the subject of even less scholarly attention, with Jansen only briefly referring to it in *Like Family*. There have been some informal online reviews of the book (*Bookamoso* 2017), but overall, it has not been the subject of critical study.

Housekeepers (2018), the television series which I have chosen to analyse for this study, has received even less critical engagement than any of the chosen texts. A brief description of the series is available on the Mzansi Magic and Multichoice websites, the television networks through which the show is broadcasted. Mzansi Magic describes the show as “an exploration of the class dynamics that exist in [South African] society” (Mzansi Magic 2018). Mzansi Magic also states that their intention behind the show was to “go into the unfamiliar territory [of domestic work] which is not foreign to [South African] audiences” (Mzansi Magic 2018). There is also a brief review of the show on *Media24*'s website in which the media company vaguely compares it to the popular American television series *Devious Maids* (2013) which depicts the lives and experiences of ‘maids’ in Beverly Hills (Ferreira 2018).

This overview has illustrated the shift in scholarly focus from the exploitation of domestic workers during apartheid to an increased interest in multifaceted portrayals of domestic workers in post-apartheid South Africa. My study aims to investigate the extent to which the depiction of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers has changed and evolved in contemporary texts and television series by taking a multi-generic, cultural studies approach.

Chapter overviews

Chapter one of this study offers a close reading of Zukiswa Wanner's *The Madams* (2006) through the lens of "chick lit". It considers how specific generic features of chick-lit influence the depiction of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers. It argues that whilst some features of the genre, such as its emphasis on female friendships and the exploration of sexuality, allow for the evolution and expansion of previous engagement with domestic work, others, such as its focus on consumption and use of the confessional writing style, serve as limiting and exclusionary to the domestic worker character.

Chapter two offers a reading of Zukiswa Wanner's self-help text *Maid in SA: 30 Ways to Leave Your Madam* (2013). I argue that Wanner subverts archetypal features of the self-help genre to expand upon previous depictions of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers. In particular, I suggest that Wanner satirises the relationship between domestic workers and their employers so as to critique post-apartheid society. I also argue that through this Wanner expands upon the self-help genre by using it as a vehicle of social commentary.

Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the television drama *Housekeepers* (2018) to assess its treatment of the subject of domestic work. I suggest that the series draws on elements of both the soap opera and the crime drama. The central argument I present in this chapter is that in *Housekeepers* domestic work is depicted as performative. This is seen as the performative aspects of domestic work are explored through the depiction of a young law student who takes on the role of a domestic worker so as to engage in the work of a detective. A further aspect of this chapter's argument is that through its secondary plot, which engages with the lives and challenges of a group of domestic workers in the suburb in which the drama is set, *Housekeepers* provides a holistic depiction of domestic workers and their lives outside of their occupational roles.

In the concluding chapter, the arguments developed in the body of the dissertation will be drawn to a close. The assertions made throughout the study will then be further substantiated with evidence from various texts while also pointing to further avenues of research.

CHAPTER 2

“BLACK PEOPLE ARE NOT ALWAYS THE SERVANT CLASS”: ZUKISWA WANNER’S *THE MADAMS*

This chapter takes up the inquiry into popular culture forms and their engagement with domestic work through an investigation of the genre of chick lit. The focus of the discussion is Zukiswa Wanner’s *The Madams* (2006)⁸ a text which draws on many of the thematic and stylistic features of the chick lit genre, particularly the preoccupation with contemporary female experiences. Reading *The Madams* against the backdrop of historical depictions of domestic work in South African literature, I consider the extent to which the text can be seen as reframing entrenched or stereotypical depictions. In this way, I offer a wider argument about the ways in which the genre of ‘chick lit’ could be seen as opening new possibilities for the fictional representation of domestic work and to what extent older patterns of representation are disrupted, complicated or simply reinforced. As such the study offers an intervention in ongoing debates in South African scholarship on the representation of the domestic worker figure in South African fiction. I will begin by providing a brief overview of *The Madams* and outlining the reasons why it lends itself to a reading as a chick lit text. Thereafter I will situate my reading of *The Madams* in relation to scholarship on chick lit in the African context and existing criticism of the novel. I will then offer a close reading of *The Madams* in relation to the stylistic and thematic preoccupations of the chick lit genre, paying particular attention to the text’s incorporation of the confessional mode of narration, emphasis on consumerist culture and female friendships, and its engagement with sexuality. These stylistic and thematic preoccupations will be discussed in terms of how they exclude the domestic worker figures in the text as well as in terms of the manner in which they extend upon previous representations of them.

Zukiswa Wanner’s *The Madams* is centred on the lives of three South African women and their domestic workers. By including employers and domestic workers of different backgrounds and ethnicities, the author is able to comment on the reconfigured post-apartheid race and power relations in the context of domestic work in South Africa and to underscore the afterlife of apartheid’s racial categories and divisions. The three madams in the text form part of the affluent middle-class, with two of the three madams forming part of the black middle-class in South Africa. As such, the novel engages with Pumla Gqola’s idea of the New South African Woman, which she describes as “a working, urban, upwardly mobile woman [who] has a career, [...] is ambitious and

⁸ All references to pages of the text are from the Kindle e-reader edition of Wanner, Z. 2006. *The Madams*. Nairobi: Paivapo.

driven” (Gqola 2016:123). This concept is important in relation to new configurations of the madam/domestic worker relationship in post-apartheid South Africa, which has seen an increase in the number of black-middle class women who employ black domestic workers. The literary depiction reflecting this madam/domestic worker configuration, in *The Madams*, reframes and expands earlier depictions of this relationship which generally centre on the white employer/ black domestic worker configuration. Furthermore *The Madams* is a satire on contemporary post-apartheid relationships between ‘maids’ and madams’, the satirical mode thus departs from historically more earnest treatments of the subject in South African literature. The treatment of domestic work in *The Madams* can therefore be likened to other more light-hearted treatments of the subject such as those found in Stephen Francis and Rico Schacherl’s comic strip, *Madam & Eve*, which depicts the relationship between white Madam, Gwen Anderson, and her domestic worker, Eve Sisulu. *Madam & Eve* uses this relationship as a vehicle through which to engage with “subjects, such as personal sentiment, group sentiment [...] national sentiment, hardship [and] changing social roles” in post-apartheid South Africa (Du Plooy 2001:23). *The Madams*, when read as chick lit, performs similar functions.

Reading *The Madams* as a chick lit text

The Madams lends itself to a reading as chick lit, a genre considered one of the foremost post-feminist genres, because the text’s thematic and stylistic preoccupations align with the genre’s key features. According to Pamila Gupta and Ronit Frenkel (2019), a key thematic feature of chick lit is its preoccupation “with issues of modern womanhood in a global world.” (Gupta and Frenkel 2019:124). *The Madams* adopts this focus as its plot centres on the lives of contemporary women and the challenges they face as they navigate the complexities of the modern world. Another key characteristic of the genre is its tendency to “herald the importance of friendship” and “acknowledge female solidarity” (Webb Johnson 2006:151). This is evidenced in *The Madams* as its plot also highlights the strength of women’s friendships and the pivotal role they play in helping women cope with the challenges they face. A further attribute of the chick lit genre is the focus on consumerism (Ferriss and Young 2006). In *The Madams*, multiple references to shopping, “maxing out” one’s credit card and the bliss of engaging in retail therapy provide additional support for a reading of the text as an example of chick lit, as does its concern with issues of romantic love and female sexuality. These are distinguishing features of the genre, confirming its propensity to “provide important new visions of women’s voices, communities, and experiences as sexual beings” (Mabry 2006:205). The use of the diary format and the choice of the first-person narrator is another characteristic of the genre which “typically uses first [person narrative technique], with numerous [chick lit] texts self-classifying themselves as semifictional diaries” (Harzewski 2006:5).

Although *The Madams* displays many of the characteristics of what Lynda Spencer describes as “mainstream chick-lit”, that is “Western forms” of the genre, the text can also be regarded as forming part of an “uprising genre” (2019:158). Spencer borrows this phrase from Stephanie Newell, who gets this from Carol Boyes (Spencer 2019:159), to refer to Ugandan and South African formulations of the genre which perform different functions in comparison to their Western mainstream counterparts. As Spencer argues, these functions include greater engagement with socio-political and socio-economic issues as experienced in contemporary society. Thus complicating simple ideas of chick lit as inherently escapist. In its engagement with questions of race, class and gender, *The Madams* exemplifies Spencer’s claims and in so doing negates the idea that chick lit “[avoids the] serious treatment of cultural, political and social concerns” (Ferriss and Young 2006:8). Furthermore, by presenting consumerism as a means through which the New South African Woman often expresses her freedom in post-apartheid South Africa, *The Madams* challenges the critique that the genre is apolitical and places too much emphasis on the post-feminist ideals of excess, carefree spending and light-hearted pleasure (Genz and Brabon 2018:8). Instead the text suggests that it is through these very ideals that women are able to exercise their political and economic freedoms. Spencer’s reading of *The Madams* supports her argument surrounding chick lit’s ability to engage with serious subjects as it discusses the text’s engagement with conspicuous consumption and new feminine identities such as that of the “New South African Woman” (Spencer 2018).

Critical scholarship on *The Madams*

Spencer’s reading of *The Madams* has been one of the few examples of critical engagement with the text as there has been an overall paucity of scholarship surrounding it. Amongst the existing scholarship on *The Madams*, much attention has been devoted to the manner in which the text engages with the ways in which feminine identities are formed and expressed in the post-apartheid era. In particular, emphasis has been placed on depictions of the ‘madams’ and what these reveal about black feminine identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Scholars such as Nonhlanhla Dlamini for example, have analysed the text’s characterisation of men and women in the domestic space in relation to “‘traditionally’ held notions of masculinity and femininity construction in the home”, arguing that it results in the oppression of both men and women (Dlamini 2018:11398). Dlamini’s analysis of *The Madams* also examines its characterisation of the madams in the text in relation to “black women empowerment discourse” and “female sexuality” and what this reveals in terms of broader debates surrounding feminine identity (2018:11398). The text has also been analysed in terms of its engagement with race, intimacy and domesticity in the context of post-apartheid South Africa (Samuelson 2008, Vandermerwe 2018). Meg Samuelson for instance argues that *The*

Madams provides a comprehensive exploration of the relationships “between women and women, and women and men” in “the newly configured” domestic space, which she argues, is sometimes “far from being a comfort zone” (2008:134). Meg Vandermerwe provides a different reading of the text, one which highlights *The Madams*’ engagement with racial otherness and how it suggests that “empathy and compassion” can exist in the face of it, in ways which “transcend commonly-held racial and social assumptions or prejudices” (2018:101). In her reading of *The Madams*’ engagement with “otherness”, Vandermerwe, similarly to Dlamini, examines the characterisation of the madams in the text, noting that although they are of different races, they all form part of the same class because “[t]hey are all “The Madams”; women with sufficient economic means to employ other women to clean and perform child-care tasks for them.” (Vandermerwe 2018:100). The scope of these readings of *The Madams* however, has been limited by the fact that they all predominantly use the characterisation of the madams in the text as a vehicle through which to discuss issues of race, domesticity and feminine identity.

By contrast, Ena Jansen’s reading of *The Madams* is situated within a wider concern with contemporary depictions of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers against historical trends in South African writing. Her conclusion that the text “disrupts and unsettles typical representations of the madam-maid situation” (Jansen 2019:246) forms an important departure point for my analysis. I hope to build on this argument by drawing new attention to the significance of popular culture forms and the potential they offer for alternative forms of representations.

As suggested, this study aims to examine the extent to which *The Madams*, when read as an example of chick lit, can be said to reframe and complicate traditional depictions of domestic workers and their relationship with their employers. Next to the concern with the significance of popular culture form, my reading of the text also aims to draw attention to the continuities and changes which have occurred in the treatment of the subject over time, from the apartheid context to the present. Thus my analysis steers away from the predominant critical focus on the figure of the ‘madam’, as seen in Samuelson (2008) and Vandermerwe’s (2018) readings of the *Madams*, and instead draws attention to the depiction of the domestic workers and their relationship with their employers. I argue that *The Madams* greatly expands upon previous engagements with the subject. This is done in several ways: through its depiction of same race domestic worker and employer configurations; in the manner in which it affords the figure of the domestic worker greater prominence in the narrative in comparison to previous representations; and through its interrogation of the familial language employers often use in reference to their domestic workers. Although my

study acknowledges the various ways in which *The Madams* expands upon previous depictions of the subject, my discussion will be limited to those which relate most strongly to my reading of *The Madams* as an example of chick lit.

Analysis and close reading of *The Madams* in relation to the generic conventions of chick lit

The Madams opens with the unusual literary device of the prologue⁹ which introduces some of main preoccupations of the text which are expanded upon in the body of it. The first line of the prologue opens with the words “I love my life”, a bold declaration on the part of the first-person narrator Thandi—a madam figure, whose views are foregrounded throughout the text. Thandi appears to feel the need to justify her desire to hire a domestic worker, and the justification she provides for this is largely based on the difficulties she faces with balancing her responsibilities as a wife, mother and career woman, responsibilities which leave her feeling “sick and tired of being sick and tired” (9). Thandi’s challenges as presented in *The Madams*, echo the thematic preoccupations of chick lit (more specifically “mommy lit” an unofficial sub-genre of the larger body of chick lit texts), which tend to “[circle] around the issues of work, identity, and motherhood” (Hewett 2006:121). In *The Madams*, Thandi’s difficulty in balancing these various roles is presented as a catalyst for her decision to hire a domestic worker, something which Thandi admits “[she] thought [she] would never do” (16). As the prologue proceeds Thandi unpacks some of her feelings about the hiring of a domestic worker and in so doing reveals some of her anxieties regarding the subject. Adopting the genre’s characteristic confessional style, through the use of the first-person narrative technique (Harzewski 2006), Thandi reveals that she has always “maintained that having a maid is really all about playing ‘madam’” and that “[a] woman should be able to take care of herself and her own without bringing a stranger into the family” (16). Crucially however, Thandi admits that she has been unable to do this “without stressing [her]self out” (16), “hence the maid” (39). As the prologue proceeds, however, Thandi further confesses that hiring a domestic worker “makes [her] feel like she is exploiting another individual [and][...] gnaws at her social conscience” (39), thereby highlighting the multiplicity of conflicting emotions regarding the act of hiring a domestic worker.

Towards the end of the prologue, Thandi states that in order to help quell her feelings of guilt, she will ensure that she hires a white, rather than a black domestic worker. Her reasoning is that “[s]hould [she] bring [her] office personality home, [she] will feel less guilty lashing out at a white person, than a black person” (65). This introduces a racial aspect to the hiring of a domestic worker, a pivotal aspect of the plot as the story unfolds. Thandi’s detailed description of her conflicting

⁹ The preface or introduction to a text; esp. a speech (usually in verse) forming the introduction to a play; a preamble, a preliminary discourse (The Oxford English dictionary).

emotions and the various factors she takes into consideration during this decision-making process, reveal the act of hiring a domestic worker as complex and multifaceted, thereby ascribing it unprecedented weight. The use of the chick lit genre's confessional style allows access to both Thandi's thought process and her anxieties regarding the possible exploitation of another person. Through exposing Thandi's inner thoughts on the hiring of a domestic worker, Wanner invites the reader to contemplate some of the existing discourses on contemporary womanhood, domestic work and race. These discourses include the idea that paid domestic work produces, constitutes and reflects "structures of gendered, raced and classed inequality" due to the fact that it "is almost always reserved for poor women, women of colour and immigrant women" (Ally 2010:5). The use of the first-person narrative technique and diary format typical to the genre's confessional style also allows female characters in chick lit texts the opportunity to express "their most intimate, personal and emotionally significant secrets" (Montoro 2012:129). In *The Madams* the nature of these "secrets" largely centre on the employer's racial prejudices, especially those in relation to domestic work. As noted earlier, the reader is made privy to some of Thandi's own views on the subject but as the text progresses we are also exposed to the views of her friends Nosizwe and Lauren. This three-part focus of the madam's view (despite the lean towards Thandi's perspective) allows for the exploration of three distinct employer/employee relations and their varied racial configurations, thus contributing to the complexity with which *The Madams* engages with domestic work.

The sections in which Nosizwe's views on domestic work are the focus allow for an exploration of the black domestic worker/black employer permutation of the relationship. According to Nosizwe the act of hiring a domestic worker is an opportunity to assist and uplift a fellow black woman. This is seen towards the beginning of the text when she hires, Pertunia, "a very distant relative—a relation by clan name only" (172), to assist her with some house work and looking after her stepsons. Nosizwe takes the liberty of enrolling Pertunia into "a sewing class which she pays for" (165), an act which both Nosizwe's mother and Lauren condemn, with Nosizwe's mother warning her to be careful because "darkies always bite the hand that feeds them" (172). Nosizwe's secret reply to this statement is that "so long as those darkies' stomachs [are] full, [I'm] happy" (172). Through this, Nosizwe is depicted as a character concerned with the social upliftment of other black women.

Contrastingly, Lauren's views, as conveyed by Thandi, are presented as much less socially conscious, as Thandi frequently refers to what she regards as Lauren's exploitation and ill treatment of her domestic worker Ma'Rosie. This ill-treatment is seen in what Thandi regards as Lauren's

unrealistically high expectations of Ma’Rosie, which include insisting that she “wake up at four-thirty to iron everyone’s clothes before they go to work or school because [Lauren] always insists that clothes should be ‘freshly pressed’” (259). According to Thandi, Lauren’s treatment of Ma’Rosie exposes her well disguised yet “inherent racism” (244). Lauren’s treatment of her domestic worker provides a window through which insight can be gained into her racial prejudices. Furthermore, later in the text, after a climactic argument between the three friends sparked by Lauren’s offence at not being informed that Thandi would be hiring a white domestic worker, the letters exchanged between the three friends in an effort to reconcile, further reveal Lauren’s prejudices. The inclusion of letters, emails and text messages, alongside the diary format employed in *The Madams* is not uncommon in the genre of chick lit. As Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young suggest, these stylistic choices all contribute towards “craft[ing] the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to readers” (2006:4). In *The Madams*, even though Thandi, Lauren and Nosizwe exchange letters with each other, readers are still privy to their contents since Thandi includes them in her narration of the text. Lauren’s letter to Thandi draws attention to some of the discourses surrounding domestic work in South Africa and the lingering racial prejudices they reveal:

I suppose, as a South African, because this is all that I have ever known, it has become ingrained in me that black people (please don’t cringe, I am going for as much candour as you gave) are the servant classes. It may probably be different with you and Siz because your experience abroad permitted you to see maids/au pairs/nannies of all races. It has not been that way with me and I daresay, if you had grown up here in South Africa and stayed here all your life, you would find it difficult, be you black or white, to adjust to a white person as a domestic worker. (1232) (Italics in original)

Lauren’s response highlights the strong correlation between race and domestic work in South Africa. This is because in South Africa, historically, “whites enjoyed far better education than blacks and had a first claim to jobs at the upper end of the economic pyramid”, resulting in blacks occupying jobs such as that of a domestic worker, at its lower end (Giliomee 2009:197). This resulted in the link between blackness and domestic work becoming so strong that in South Africa “the word maid not only denotes ‘servant’ but is also a demeaning way of saying “black woman”. (Baderoon 2014:175). Similarly, “[t]he word *girl* is a correspondingly offensive term that merges servant and black woman” (Baderoon 2014:175). Lauren’s admission that she still regards “black people” as the “servant class” is significant as it highlights the salience of race in post-apartheid South Africa. According to Jeremy Seekings, despite the official end of apartheid, post-apartheid South African society continues to be “profoundly [shaped] by the experience of apartheid, remaining distinctive in terms of the social, political or economic roles played by ‘race’” (2008:2). He also asserts that “South Africans continue to see themselves in the racial categories of the apartheid era” (Seekings 2008:1). Similarly, Sally Matthews (2015) argues that “while the post-

apartheid era has seen some erosion of racial divisions and racial inequality, racial cleavages in South Africa continue to be stark” (113). *The Madams* makes a similar point through its exploration of the ways in which the dominant identity ascribed to black people during apartheid was that of the unskilled or semi-skilled domestic worker.

Lauren’s position is usefully explored using Melissa Steyn and Don Foster’s (2008) notion of “white talk”. They argue that since the end of apartheid “[i]t is more difficult [for white people] to express open opposition to transformation, or to dismiss notions such as non-racism and democracy and still hold the moral high ground when in the presence of the ‘other’” (Steyn and Foster 2008:46). It is for this reason that “resistant white discourses, referred to as *White Talk*” (Italics in the original) have instead been adopted (Steyn and Foster 2008:25). This white talk manifests through the expression of specific ideological opinions, namely “non-racialism and democratic principles, concern for poverty, and good blacks” (Steyn and Foster 2008:29). Applying these ideas to the exploration of race in *The Madams*, it is clear that Lauren engages in expressing views of “non-racialism” when in the presence of Thandi and Nosizwe. For example, when Thandi recounts Lauren’s response when questioned about why she enrolled her daughter in a Sesotho class. Nosizwe mockingly suggests that it is her “attempt at White Cultural Empowerment” arguing that “if the whites know what the natives are saying then they can stay ahead of the BEE boat” (222). Instead of laughing, Lauren dismisses Nosizwe’s suggestion as she says “it’s always about black and white with you two isn’t it” (222). This view is echoed later in the text when Nosizwe interrogates Lauren for the real reason for her anger at not being informed that Thandi would be hiring a domestic worker:

‘Is the [...] problem the fact that you wanted to help Rosie’s sister, the fact that Thandi has a maid and didn’t tell you about it, or is it that she has a WHITE MAID and this offends your sense of decorum and your idea of the order of things?’ (Uppercase in original, 888)

To this question, Lauren retorts “[y]ou always have to bring race into it. I do not care whatever race someone’s maid is” (888). Lauren’s claims regarding not caring about race can be related to Charles Gallagher’s argument that proclaiming “colorblindness allows many whites to define themselves as politically progressive and racially tolerant as they proclaim their adherence to a belief system that does not see or judge individuals by the ‘color of their skin’” (Gallagher 2003:22). As Steyn and Foster (2008) note, white talk is often employed as a means of disguising any “lingering racism, or affinity with the past order” (28). In *The Madams*, Lauren’s white talk is interrogated and unmasked through both satire and the use of the confessional mode. Additionally, through Lauren’s white talk,

The Madams demonstrates how fragile race reconciliation white talk is, disintegrating when placed under pressure.

Although the use of the confessional narrative style in *The Madams* allows for the interrogation of racial discourses surrounding domestic work in South Africa, it also serves as exclusionary since the views provided in the text are all either provided by, or filtered through the eyes of, the employer. In this regard, the domestic workers in the text are not provided with any substantial narrative agency. An example of this is seen in the relationship between Thandi and her white domestic worker, Marita. Marita often conveys “stories” to Thandi about events which take place in the homes of the other madams (information she gains access to through the other domestic workers), and in so doing can be regarded as a secondary narrative figure. Her narrative agency however is greatly limited as her views are filtered through Thandi. The reader is thus afforded no primary account of events from the perspective of the domestic workers themselves. An example of this can be seen in Thandi’s description of Marita’s account of how an affair began between Nosizwe’s husband Vuyo and her domestic worker Pertunia. The excerpt below demonstrates the detail with which Thandi describes Marita’s account:

One day, about two months ago, Vuyo went home around lunch because he had forgotten something.’ Marita leaned in towards me, looking around to make sure nobody was in earshot. ‘He found Pertunia wrapped in a towel in their bedroom . . . putting on Siz’s fancy make-up. She got one hell of a skrik, but what could she do?’ Marita was really getting into her stride now – and I, of course, was a captive audience. (1044)

The extract illustrates the level of detail with which Thandi describes Marita’s account of events. This is seen in how Thandi makes use of direct speech instead of reported speech, and carefully describes Marita’s specific gestures such as how she “leaned in towards [her] and [looked] around to make sure nobody was in earshot”. Despite this however, it is still Thandi who remains Marita’s “captive audience” and not the reader of *The Madams*. Thus despite what can be viewed as Wanner’s efforts to circumvent the problem of the ‘madam-narrator’ and afford the domestic worker figures in the text some narrative agency, it is still the madam’s perspective which remains the dominant one in the text. Therefore, despite Wanner’s attempts to bring the lives and experiences of the three domestic workers’ in the text to the fore, they still remain somewhat marginal due to the choice of narrative technique employed in the text. A potential explanation for this problematic narrative choice could be that it allows for the adoption of the satirical mode in which the madams damn themselves rather than being satirised by their employees.

In addition to some of the stylistic choices in the text which tend to marginalise the domestic worker characters, there are also thematic concerns which have a similar effect. One such thematic

concern is *The Madams*' focus on consumerism. This focus is characteristic of chick lit as "[n]umerous chick-lit novels focus on the simultaneous pleasures and dangers of consumerism" (Ferris and Young 2006:11). As Ferris and Young explain, "[c]hick lit's concern with shopping, fashion, and consumerism leads to an arguably obsessive focus on skin-deep beauty" (2006:11). In keeping with the conventions of the genre, there is a strong focus on consumerism in *The Madams*. This is illustrated by the fact that like "[m]ost of the protagonists in South African chick lit [the madams] have incomes that allow them to spend a great deal of time on middle-class feminine rituals such as shopping at exclusive boutiques" (Spencer 2018:8). A character who is seen to participate in consumerist culture most explicitly is Nosizwe (Siz). From very early on in the novel Siz's extravagant spending and insatiable appetite for designer clothes is made apparent. This is seen in Thandi's description of Siz as "[t]he clothes horse" (67). Thandi also states that "Siz is a shopaholic and her wardrobe hangs like the who's who of Milan Fashion Week" (154). Although much emphasis is placed on Siz's excessive shopping, she is not the only madam who engages in consumerist activities. Thandi also occasionally engages in reckless spending (albeit less extravagant than Siz's) and makes more than one reference to "the power of the plastic" (489). Significantly, the only characters who are seen to participate in this consumerist culture are the madams themselves, resulting in the exclusion of the domestic workers from this crucial aspect of the genre. A potential reason why the domestic workers in the text are unable to participate in consumerist culture is because they do not have the financial means to engage in the conspicuous spending so closely associated with early post-feminist ideals. This relates to Simidele Dosekun's argument that "post-feminism is potentially and variously available to globally 'scattered' feminine subjects who have the material, discursive, and imaginative capital to access and to buy into it" (Dosekun 2015:966). According to Dosekun, class serves as an important qualifying factor in terms of the extent to which women in the global south can engage in post-feminist acts closely linked to careless spending and excess. The fictional representation of the domestic workers in *The Madams* can therefore be said to align with some of the lived realities surrounding post-feminism and the women who are able to exercise its ideals. Wanner's focus on hyper-consumption allows for an exploration of the domestic worker/employer relationship in post-apartheid South Africa as one which, although less unequal than its apartheid counterpart, is still affected by class differences and economic disparity. Furthermore, Wanner's depiction of the conspicuous consumption of the madams in the text can also be read as part of her satirical treatment of them.

Although the relationship between domestic workers and their employers in the text are depicted in unequal terms with regard to class and spending power, there are instances where the relationship is depicted as one of friendship. This is evident in the depiction of Thandi and Marita's relationship, which after Thandi's altercation with her two best friends, develops into one of (almost) friendship:

While I waited for my friends to realise the error of their ways, Marita and I became quite close, since I had no one else around to gossip with. I had got over being ‘madam’ and I was now just a simple MaHintsa and she, to Hintsa, was Auntie Marita. (1016)

The narrative focus on friendship aligns closely with one of the key characteristics of the chick lit genre, namely its tendency to “herald the importance of friendships [and] the clarity they bring [...] [and to] acknowledge female solidarity and the idea of socially constructed families (versus biological ones)” (Ferris and Young 2006:151). In *The Madams*, friendship is granted importance from the start when Thandi states, in the opening lines of the prologue, that she loves her “supportive though sometimes misguided, girlfriends, Nosizwe and Lauren” (9). It is also seen throughout the text as the ‘madams’ seek guidance and support from one another. After Thandi’s argument with her friends, she yearns for the closeness and support afforded to her by her female friendships and finds it in her domestic worker, Marita. Significantly however, Thandi’s description of the friendship reveals its nature as ‘second best’, as she states that she and Marita “became quite close” but then qualifies it by saying that this happened “since [she] had no one else around to gossip with” (1016). Similarly, later in the text, when Marita takes a day off Thandi states that “[she] would miss Marita’s on her day off” but then also goes on to qualify the statement by saying “because I no longer had friends” (1017). This begs the question as to whether a friendship between the two of them would have developed organically under other circumstances. That being said, the quasi friendship which develops between Marita and Thandi is one which signals a marked shift from previous depictions of the relationship between domestic workers and employers in which the domestic workers are often depicted as shifting between the roles of family member and worker. In this instance however, Marita shifts between the roles of employee and friend.

The Madams also allows the reader insight into the friendships which develop amongst domestic workers themselves, thereby drawing attention to some of the personal aspects of their lives. This is significant as the majority of texts engaging with the subject of domestic work published during apartheid tended to depict domestic workers as “anonymous servant figures” with no lives outside of their roles as domestic workers (Jansen 2019:265). In *The Madams*, the importance of female friendships is extended to the domestic workers in the text and in so doing more attention is given to their identities beyond the domestic worker role. Although a friendship develops between all three domestic workers, the text places particular emphasis on the friendship between Marita and MaRosie, which is depicted as one of unconditional support and closeness. This is seen as they often gossip with each other over the wall, go for tea and ‘Chicken Licken’ dates, and confide in each other. The natural flow of their friendship perplexes Thandi and she even admits to being curious as

to how “a fifty-year old overworked and underpaid black maid and a thirty-five-year old overpaid and underworked maid had become gossip buddies over the wall” (7979). Despite their differences however, the two develop a close friendship, with Marita going as far as referring to MaRosie as her “best friend” (2296). In this regard *The Madams* extends the representation of domestic workers to include an aspect of their lives outside of their jobs and in terms of the forging of female friendships. It is, however, important to note that these friendships are afforded much less attention in the text, with the dominant focus still being the friendships between the madams. Thus although *The Madams* extends the interpretation, the friendships amongst the domestic workers still remain a secondary concern of the text.

The Madams further expands upon the stock image of domestic workers in South African fiction in relation to Marita’s sexuality. Sexuality and the exploration thereof is an archetypal feature of the chick lit genre which allows women to examine their “place in the world in general and in sexual relationships in particular” (Ferris and Young 2006:200). The genre is also known to “give contemporary women voice and allow them to express desires that may lie outside of the ‘happily-ever-after’ marriage to Prince Charming” (Ferris and Young 2006:192). In *The Madams*, Wanner presents Marita’s relationship with her black, same-sex partner, Maria, as one which departs from the narrative of the “happily-ever-after marriage to Prince Charming” and instead allows for the exploration of queer romantic relationships. Although not a major preoccupation of the text, Marita and Maria’s relationship is presented as close and passionate. This is evident in Thandi’s description of their public displays of affection at a party which Thandi hosts at her home:

I don’t know whether all the sex talk had made Marita and Maria all hot and bothered or whether the alcohol had freed up any remaining inhibitions, but the lovebirds were by now very busy with the public displays of affection. The tongue-locking that went on between the two of them would have made Madonna and Britney blush... (2403)

The detail with which this encounter is described demonstrates the shifts in the representation of queer relationships which have occurred in South African literature. According to Grant Andrews (2019) “[b]efore the end of apartheid, queer lives were almost entirely unrepresented in public literary works in South Africa” (1). One of the reasons offered for this is that queerness ventured too far away from apartheid’s “official narrative” of separate development and “the preservation of the white, heterosexual, reproductive family” (Thoreson 2008:680). Thus, all forms of communication, including literature, which challenged this narrative “were often violently silenced” (Andrews 2019:1). Contrastingly, as Jane Poyner explains, post-apartheid literature is characterised by a proliferation of precisely such “themes and topics typically previously ‘out of bounds;’” (2008:106). In this way, *The Madams* demonstrates a shift away from the silencing of apartheid and

a turn towards the engagement with previously taboo subjects, thus rewriting some of the conventional engagements with the figure of the domestic worker in South African fiction.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how *The Madams*, when read as a chick lit text, opens up new possibilities of the fictional representation of domestic service and the complexities associated with it. In particular it has demonstrated the extent to which *The Madams*' adoption of the first person narrative and confessional mode have allowed for the satirisation of the madam figure, especially in relation to their racial attitudes and anxieties surrounding the hiring of a domestic worker. It has also discussed the extent to which this stylistic convention of the genre serves as exclusionary to the domestic worker figures in the text as the only narrative perspective the reader is exposed to is that of the madam. Furthermore, it has illustrated the extent to which *The Madams*' focus on consumerist culture also serves as exclusionary to the domestic worker figures in the text as they are not afforded the opportunity to participate in it due to financial constraints; thereby reflecting some of the lived realities surrounding post-feminism and the women who are able to exercise its ideals. This chapter has also demonstrated how *The Madams*' emphasis on female friendships and sexuality has allowed for the opening up of new possibilities regarding the representation of domestic workers. Specifically it has demonstrated how *The Madams*' focus on female friendships allows for a shift in the depiction of the domestic worker figure from that of a family member to that of a friend, as well as how it allows the reader insight into the friendships which develop amongst domestic workers themselves, thereby resulting in a more holistic depiction of them.

Furthermore it has shown how *The Madams*' engagement with sexuality, particularly that of a queer domestic worker figure, has expanded previous representations of domestic workers in South African literature. Through this, this chapter has illustrated the chick lit genre's capability to engage with serious social issues rather than just being escapist, as some critics have argued. All this said, in as much as this chapter has demonstrated the new spaces which have been opened up with regard to the representation of domestic workers, it has also illustrated the extent to which certain elements of previous representations have been reinforced. This is seen in how *The Madams* still foregrounds the views and experiences of the madams rather than the domestic workers in the text, as was common in previous engagements with the subject. In this regard *The Madams* reinforces the chick lit genre's propensity to foreground the lives of middle-class women. Furthermore, by extending upon and reproducing certain elements of previous engagements with domestic work, *The Madams* can be read as a palimpsestic post-transitional text; one which re-conceptualises certain ideas but also reflects the traces of former ones.

CHAPTER 3

QUITTING IS FOR WINNERS: ZUKISWA WANNER'S *MAID IN SA: 30 WAYS TO LEAVE YOUR MADAM*

Much like *The Madams* reframes, complicates and reinforces entrenched depictions of domestic work whilst demonstrating the possibilities the chick lit genre opens up for these depictions, so too does *Maid in SA: 30 Ways to Leave Your Madam* (2013)¹⁰, I argue, inflect and expand the nature of these depictions through the incorporation and subversion of specific features of the self-help genre. This chapter examines *Maid in SA*, a self-help text which provides domestic workers and employers with advice on how to navigate the challenges and pitfalls of their working relationship. It also provides them with warnings regarding what may result in the termination of their relationship and tips on how to maintain a good working relationship. *Maid in SA* extends upon previous engagements with domestic work by satirising the relationship between domestic workers and their employers so as to deliver broader social commentary. Furthermore, *Maid in SA* reframes previous depictions of domestic work as it underscores the occupational aspect of it rather than reproducing common tropes such as the “like family” trope, which tend to frame the work domestic workers do as favours or acts of love rather than as official services rendered.

This chapter begins by providing a brief overview of the self-help genre's history in the African context. Thereafter I argue that *Maid in SA* differs from the texts examined in Newell's (2008) study of self-help literature in urban West Africa, due to its difference in publishing context, channels of literary distribution, audience and main themes. I will then argue that *Maid in SA* lends itself to a reading as a self-help text due to its overt focus on offering advice and assistance, as well as due to the fact that its structure adheres to the typical structure of self-help texts. Thereafter I will conduct a close reading of *Maid in SA* against archetypal features of the self-help genre so as to demonstrate the extent to which Wanner reworks the genre. In particular, I argue that *Maid in SA* reworks the self-help form by using it as a vehicle through which to satirise the relationship between domestic workers and their employers so as to deliver broader commentary on post-apartheid South Africa. I also argue that *Maid in SA* incorporates the use of the satirical mode to comment on the plight of migrant domestic workers and employer attitudes towards them, thereby expanding upon previous engagements with domestic work. In addition to this, I argue that *Maid in SA* subverts the conventional narrative structure of self-help texts by incorporating the use of polyvocality in its narrative structure. Lastly I argue that *Maid in SA* reframes the self-help genre's

¹⁰ All references to pages of the text are from the Kindle e-reader edition of Wanner, Z. 2013. *Maid in SA: 30 Ways to Leave Your Madam*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.

positive thinking paradigm through the nature of the advice it offers and that this reframing results in a more holistic depiction of domestic workers and their lives outside of their jobs.

Self-help origins

The presence of the self-help genre in Africa is not a new phenomenon. According to Newell (2008), evidence of advice literature can be found in West Africa dating as far back as the 1880s, with the rise of marriage guidance literature “when African-owned newspapers made space available to the earliest prose writers who, apparently, without hesitation, responded with literature that debated gender and marital relationships” (2008:18). Furthermore, Newell notes the presence of marriage guidance literature in Ghana from 1880 onwards, and observes how marriages to ‘modern’ women and ‘traditional’ women were often contrasted. (2008:18). Nigerian pamphlet literature which first appeared in Onitsha in 1947 (Obiechina 1973:np) and later came to be known as “Onitsha Market Literature” (OML), engaged (and continues to engage) with themes of marriage and relationships (Obiechina 1973; Newell 2005 and 2008). Evidence of self-help literature in South Africa can be seen in the 1930s through the advice columns present in the South African *Bantu World*, “[t]he first newspaper with an African readership to discuss issues pertaining to love” (Reuster-Jahn 2014:69). In the *Bantu World*, writers and readers were able to debate issues surrounding love via advice columns and letters (Thomas 2009). As Sandwith (2020) explains, the *Bantu World* offered women “helpful advice on domestic matters” and “acted in very profound ways to legitimate women’s lives, aspirations, and achievements” (147).

Further evidence of self-help literature in South Africa can be seen in the 1950s to the 1980s with “the famous *Drum* magazine [which] shaped public discourse on love in large parts of Anglophone Africa” (Reuster-Jahn 2014:70). The magazine’s most popular column was “‘Dear Dolly’, an advice column that dealt mainly with questions about sex and courtship by young men and women in English-speaking Africa” (Mutongi 2000:1). In addition, the magazine also had “advice columns by a so-called ‘Dr Drum’ offering health advice” (Mutongi 2000:1). Just as advice columns gained popularity in South Africa, so too did “advice columns on sex and relationships [become] popular [in Tanzania] towards the end of the socialist (Ujamaa)¹¹ era in the 1980s, when a number of private magazines in Swahili, aiming at urban readers, were registered” (Reuster-Jahn 2014:70). Thus, it is clear that the self-help genre has had a presence in Africa from very early on.

¹¹ This term was coined by President Julius A. Nyerere and means ‘African socialism’ (Reuster-Jahn 2014:89).

Despite this evidence, “[r]esearch on the subject tends to emphasise self-help’s origins in the US” and “there is relatively little scholarship that has explored the history of self-help in other societies” (Nerhing et al. 2016:20). By emphasising self-help’s American origins, dominant critical scholarship seems to suggest that examples of self-help literature from other parts of the world are derivative rather than unique, locally-produced cultural objects. Although some scholars such as Daniel Nerhing et al. have acknowledged the “heterogeneous and hybrid [...] character” of self-help literature and have gone as far as to refer to it “as a multidirectional transnational network” (2016:33), the USA is still regarded as the centre of this network. Furthermore, although it is true that “[d]ue to the international dominance of US self-help, American self-help entrepreneurs do [tend to] define templates and set the standards that authors elsewhere use as points of departure” (Nerhing et.al 2016:45), it is important not to confuse the USA’s contemporary dominance of the genre, with the so-called ‘origins’ of the genre as a whole. Due to the fact that much of the existing scholarship on contemporary self-help literature focuses on the West, most of the in-depth studies on the generic features of self-help texts tend to take the Western self-help text as a model. Scholars such as Patricia Neville (2012) have commented on why this is problematic:

Perhaps one of the most glaring omissions from the self-help book canon has been the absence of globalization, either as a theorizing construct or operational framework against which we could chart, plot and measure the breadth and width of contemporary self-help book culture. (372)

Similarly, Micki McGee (2005) argues that current research on self-help and therapeutic cultures is characterised by “a focus on the makeover cultures of Western and largely global northern cultures” (686). Both Neville’s and McGee’s arguments underscore the extent to which existing self-help scholarship tends to ignore contexts outside the USA and generally approaches self-help texts emanating from the USA as the standard from which everything else is seen as a derivative. My study challenges this narrative by demonstrating the extent to which popular culture forms in the South African context engage with the subject of domestic work in ways which consider context specific histories as well as local behaviours and attitudes, rather than simply relying on Western templates of generic forms. By doing this my study aims to demonstrate the various perspectives different generic lenses are able to offer on the depiction of domestic work.

Maid in SA in relation to urban West African self-help literature

Maid in SA is a noteworthy subject of study as it differs from the texts examined in Newell’s work on urban West African self-help literature. This difference is primarily due to its distinctive publishing context, channels of literary distribution, audience and thematic concerns. This is seen in how Wanner’s text – published by the mainstream South African publishing house Jacana Media –

cannot, like its West African counterparts, be easily and affordably accessed. According to Newell, the dominating form of self-help literature in urban West Africa is the self-help pamphlet which she describes as “ephemeral texts with extremely short shelf lives [...] priced within the reach of ordinary urban readers” (2008:16). This is not the case with *Maid in SA* as the book retails for over R200 and, unlike most self-help pamphlets which are easily obtained at “bus depots and ‘lorry parks’” (Newell 2008:16), is largely only available at reputable book stores. That being said, were the book to go out of print, it could still be accessed electronically albeit at a higher cost than the average self-help pamphlet. Its pricing thereby suggesting that domestic workers, the text’s implied audience (its intended audience being the average South African “madam”) in the first half of the text, would not be able to afford it. This is because domestic workers are often paid very meagre wages which are often only enough to cover necessities and does not leave them with disposable income to purchase the book. This suggests that the objective of the text may be more complex than simply offering advice. Another area in which *Maid in SA* differs from West African self-help literature is through its thematic concerns which unlike urban West African self-help literature, does not predominantly focus on themes of love and marriage, but instead engages with the experiences of domestic work.

Reading *Maid in SA* as a self-help text

Nevertheless, *Maid in SA* lends itself to a reading as a self-help text due the fact that superficially the text presents its main objective as that of offering “help” to domestic workers seeking to leave their employers. It is only upon closer examination of the text that one discovers that its claim to offer help serves as an important component of the text’s satirical agenda. *Maid in SA* can be read as a text which makes use of indirect satire because rather than engaging in direct attacks on its subject of ridicule, it uses various stock characters, whose opinions and actions are presented as “ridiculous or obnoxious” by the narrator, to deliver its attack (Abrams and Harpham 2012:354). By claiming to offer these stock characters help, *Maid in SA* achieves its indirect satirical objectives. Offering help to its readers is a key characteristic of the genre which “[f]irst, and most importantly, promises ‘help’ in societies where social support, resources, services and opportunities are deficient” (Rimke 2020:44). This help typically comes in the form of “advice and guidance on a very broad range of topics, such as intimate relationships, sexuality, marriage, divorce [and] friendship” (Nerhing et al 2016:6). In *Maid in SA*, the typical subject matter of self-help literature is expanded upon through its engagement with domestic work, an unlikely thematic preoccupation of the genre. That being said, in many ways “[t]he intimate nature and setting of the work [and] the contradictions of intimacy and distance” (Ally 2010:116) in the domestic space often results in the formation of intimate relationships and friendships, so in some ways the subject of domestic work

encompasses aspects of the genre's traditional subject matter. Nonetheless, it is still a noteworthy expansion of the genre's conventional subject matter and demonstrates the tendency of post-apartheid writers to push boundaries in terms of their thematic and stylistic choices (Davis 2013).

Although the self-help genre offers advice on a broad range of topics, the nature of this advice is not "tailored to the personality of the reader, diagnosis or personal circumstances" but instead is administered using a 'one-size fits all' approach (Bergsma 2008:350). *Maid in SA* adopts a similar approach when providing advice to readers as it is not tailored to any one individual but rather constructed around a number of hypothetical scenarios domestic workers and their employers might find themselves in. In addition to these hypothetical scenarios, the text uses caricatures of different types of domestic workers and employers at the beginning of most sections in the book which firmly places it within the larger body of South African humourist work. In *Maid in SA* the reader is presented with these scenarios and images and is then tasked with adopting and applying the advice most relevant to them. This is characteristic of the genre in that it is "the client [who] bears a lot of responsibility in choosing a suitable self-help book and after this choice has been made, in sorting out the options that are presented by the self-help author." (Bergsma 2008:356). In like fashion *Maid in SA* places the responsibility on the reader to examine themselves so as to identify which "maid" or "madam's" behaviour most matches theirs and then tasks them with applying the advice most relevant to their situation.

The structure of *Maid in SA* also aligns with the typical structure of self-help texts in which the author "sets up a problem [and then] directs [...] readers to 'insights and tools' that will 'vastly improve' their ability to manage any situation they might face" (Nerhing et al 2016:17). The fact that Wanner makes use of the self-help form, a "problem-solving" genre (Jones 2019:143), to engage with the subject of domestic work in post-apartheid South Africa negates the notion that the dismantling of apartheid meant the eradication of all problems in this sector. In *Maid in SA*, the 'problem' presented is that of an unsatisfactory relationship between domestic workers and employers. Divided into two parts, the first offers advice to domestic workers on how to remedy the situation, whilst the second part offers advice to their employers. The fact that the text offers advice to both domestic worker and employer allows for a more holistic form of engagement with domestic work, one which explores the challenges and issues at both ends of the spectrum rather than at just one. Next to the aforementioned features, Wanner also subverts certain key features of the genre through the text's incorporation of satire as a vehicle through which to engage in social critique, its incorporation of polyvocality in its narrative structure, and through its reframing of the self-help genre's positive thinking paradigm.

***Maid in SA's* subversion of the self-help genre**

From its start *Maid in SA* firmly positions itself in the context of South African humourist work through the author's note, which opens with: "I would like to give a nod to South African humourists of my generation who I may or may not have borrowed from as I wrote this work through the stories they have told me or something they have written" (39). Wanner's acknowledgement that she drew on the works and concepts of the "South African humourists of [her] generation" serves as an invitation to the reader to consider *Maid in SA* in this context. In addition to the author's note, the satirical titles, epigraphs¹² and caricatures at the start of each of the two sections in which the book is divided also contribute towards solidifying the text's positioning as a humourist work. In particular, *Maid in SA's* use of caricatures of the different stock figures of domestic workers and employers underscores the satirical underpinning of the text. The incorporation of the satirical mode to deliver broader commentary on and critique post-apartheid South Africa is the most significant way in which Wanner subverts the conventions of the self-help genre.

The use of the self-help genre to engage in social critique is uncommon due to the genre's psychocentric nature, which tends to underscore individual, rather than societal flaws, resulting in a critique of the individual rather than their environment (Rimke 2020). Rimke defines "psychocentrism" as "the dominant or hegemonic assumption that all human problems reside within, or are an effect of, the individual mind and/or body rather than a product and expression of social, political, historical and economic problems" (2020:38). Any failure of the individual to attain success, be it material or otherwise, is thus presented as a result of "their own bad choices, high-risk lifestyles, and/or lack of desire to improve" (Rimke 2020:40). Furthermore, Rimke argues that the reason why self-help industries (including literature) place emphasis on the flaws of individuals rather than society is to "distract from wider structural issues of social injustice and social inequality" prevalent in neoliberal¹³ societies (2020:47). Although this is a common tendency of self-help industries more broadly, scholars such as Newell (2008) and Rebecca Jones (2019) have drawn attention to the ways in which self-help in African contexts is often deeply embedded in the social and often critiques the structural and systemic violence of neoliberalism. According to Newell, rather than being completely removed from social, economic and political conditions, self-

¹² The epigraph of Part 1 reads as "I am human too, madam. R.E.S.P.E.C.T" whilst the epigraph of Part 2 reads as "No good help these days".

¹³ According to Steger and Roy (2010) neoliberalism can be defined as "a rather broad and general concept referring to an economic model or paradigm [...] [b]uilt upon the classical liberal ideal of the self-regulating market" (n.p.). The model places emphasis on free markets and free trade and regards self-regulating markets as more effective than "state intervention in producing sustained economic growth" (n. p.).

help texts in urban West Africa often serve as “responses to current conditions in the cities, and encourage readers to imagine alternative futures and new pleasures for themselves” (2008:16).

Similarly, Jones argues that the advice offered in African self-help texts is not removed from their lived social and political conditions but instead “is tailored to local circumstances” (2019:141). *Maid in SA*’s incorporation of the satirical mode to critique post-apartheid South Africa thus aligns more closely to the concerns of African self-help texts than those of Western self-help texts, which have a tendency to underscore individual flaws, so as to divert attention away from “the societal deficits that generate individual problems” (Rimke 2020:38). Significantly, Wanner uses the field of domestic work as a lens through which to do this. In particular, she satirises the relationship between domestic workers and their employers to deliver commentary on the “nouveau riche”¹⁴ and black middle-class and to comment on lingering racial prejudices in post-apartheid South Africa.

According to Patrick Ebewo (1997), “[s]atire typically aims to make people laugh but the laughter masks its central function, which is to deride, expose, ridicule and denounce abuse, folly and vice within society” (31). Satire has been used throughout South African history to perform different functions.¹⁵ According to Corinne Sandwith (2019), black writers such as Rolfes Robert Reginald (R.R.R.) Dhlomo used satire as a mode of resistance towards 1930s segregationist South African society and Western pretensions to civilisational superiority (103). Similarly, Robin Crigler (2021) argues that satire was sometimes used by black South Africans as a means to ridicule the apartheid state, but suggests that “[c]ensorship, legal repression, and increasingly overt government violence placed steep constraints on what black South Africans could safely ridicule, in print or otherwise” (433). Furthermore, with reference to the use of humour after 1994, Crigler argues that “[t]he comedy of this era, heavily promoted by the corporate sector, celebrated South Africa’s eccentricities with a new vigor [but that] [c]rucially—and problematically—it did so without acknowledging that for many, the New South Africa’s promise of a better life for all has not materialized” (2021:430). In *Maid in SA*, Wanner extends earlier employments of the satirical amongst black satirists focused on critiquing and exposing apartheid and racial thinking by also turning the satirical gaze on the “nouveau riche” and black middle class, through her depiction of their relationships with their domestic workers.

¹⁴ According to the narrator in *Maid in SA* the “nouveau riche is anyone who made their money after 1994” and when they are black this definition is further stretched to include anybody who made their money during the “early Mbeki and late Zuma years” (54).

¹⁵ Robin Crigler’s (2021) thesis on the social and cultural history of humour in South Africa sheds some light on the nature of some of these functions which include its use as a means of solidifying white identity in the face of “rising international criticism of segregation and apartheid, which culminated in boycotts and exclusion from international organizations” (3).

In *Maid in SA* Wanner satirises the “nouveau riche” by depicting them as employers who forego paying their employees a living wage in a timely fashion, so as to maintain an image of affluence and a luxurious lifestyle. In this way, Wanner draws attention to the conspicuous consumption of the “nouveau riche” and underscores the vast discrepancies in the standard of living between them and the working class. This is seen in the text when the narrator describes the “nouveau riche” madams’ tendency to pay their domestic workers late and in kind rather than on time and in cash. This, despite the fact that “[t]hey have no problem swiping their credit card at a Sandton boutique so they can buy a watch for R200 000. Or throwing an all-white party that costs millions” (74). In a similar example, the “nouveau riche” madam is described as “[wearing] designer clothes and shoes” (82) which, in the event that her domestic worker ever “express[es] admiration for any one of them, she [passes] it on to [them] after she has worn it once to a function” (89). The narrator’s description of the “nouveau riche” madam and their treatment of their domestic workers is significant because it evokes questions about how the working class is affected by the conspicuous consumption of the “nouveau riche”. The description of the “nouveau riche” madam can be likened to the characterisation of the “madams” in Wanner’s *The Madams*, who are also characterised as active participants in consumerist culture. In this regard both texts adopt the trope of the New South African Woman, who, as explored in the previous chapter of this study, is depicted as the “urban, upwardly mobile [...] epitome of sophistication and glamour” (Gqola 2016:123). Although both texts engage with the conspicuous consumption of employers, *Maid in SA* directly draws attention to the negative implications thereof when done at the expense of paying domestic workers a liveable wage. The broader implications of conspicuous consumption have garnered much debate in the years following democracy. Mehita Iqani and Bridget Kenny (2015), for instance, argue that consumption serves as a useful vehicle through which to engage with discourses of freedom “because it operates as a nexus of narratives about aspiration, questions of expenditure and identities, and debates about equality and inequality” (98).

Similarly, Deborah Posel (2010) suggests that that the relationship between freedom and consumption is complex in the post-apartheid context because consumption has historically been inextricably linked to race in South Africa. This is because black consumption was very strictly regulated and curtailed by “economic exploitation and political domination” (Posel 2010:163). In this regard Posel argues that, given the historically close relationship between consumption and race, it is not unsurprising that “performances of racial identity” and freedom would be “closely connected to practices of acquisition” (2010:173). That being said, conspicuous consumption also “call[s] up anxieties and moral orders” (Iqani and Kenny 2015:96) as some may feel that

spectacular displays of wealth and consumption may be insensitive in a country plagued by poverty and high unemployment rates. In *Maid in SA* the satirical tone which the narrator adopts when describing the outlandish displays of wealth which the “nouveau riche” engage in appears to suggest a condemnation of such acts of consumption when they are done at the expense of the working class.

Furthermore, later in the text when the unnamed narrator describes the conspicuous consumption of the black middle-class, she uses an incident relating to the hosting of elaborate parties and purchases of expensive alcohol to engage with questions about the insensitivity of the wealthy to the challenges faced by the working class. In the “you will leave” section of the “middle-class black madam”, the narrator states that the domestic worker might leave because she can no longer tolerate their employer’s insensitivity as “[t]hey throw parties almost every week where the amount of alcohol they buy and drink in one weekend is more expensive than what they pay [her] in a month” and indulge in R4000 bottles of whisky whilst they only pay her “R2500 per month” (433). The fact that Wanner juxtaposes the conspicuous consumption of the “nouveau riche” and black middle-class with the exploitation of domestic workers suggests that Wanner may be using this as a vehicle through which to condemn such acts of consumption. Furthermore, the text’s exploration of consumption repositions and complicates previous engagements with domestic work because although the issue of low wages has been considered in previous engagements, there has rarely been explicit engagement with the nature and effect of employer consumption on domestic workers’ remuneration.

Racial prejudices in post-apartheid South Africa

Another way in which Wanner uses the self-help genre as a tool through which to engage in social commentary is through satirising the relationship between domestic workers and employers so as to highlight discourses of lingering racial prejudices in post-apartheid South Africa. This is most evident in the narrator’s description of the relationship between the older “poor white madam” and her domestic worker. Through this relationship Wanner engages with discourses of “white talk” in post-apartheid South Africa. As stated in the previous chapter, “white talk” is made up of specific tropes such as claiming to be racially colour blind, framing social and political transformation as catastrophic and villainising the black-middle class (Steyn and Foster 2008:36). Wanner explores discourses of white talk in *The Madams* by interrogating the authenticity of one of the character’s claims to colour blindness but addresses different aspects of white talk in *Maid in SA* through its exploration of negative attitudes towards social and political transformation and towards the black-middle class. *Maid in SA* engages with these tropes in the narrator’s description of the kind of

conversations the “poor white madam” (one of the stock figures in the text) and her family engage in, as well as through the nature of the questions she asks her domestic worker. For example, there is an instance in the text where the “poor white madam” scolds her son-in law for his inability to provide for her daughter. When faced with this criticism, “he pull[s] out the best defence he can” (522) as he blames affirmative action for his shortcomings:

But you know they cut my hours at the factory. I think they are trying to find a way to let us white boys go. Now they are saying ‘we need minimum matric’ because they want to employ the darkies. It’s this bloody BEE. BEE *se gat man*. (522)

Significantly, rather than considering that his hours may have been cut as a result of his lack of adequate qualifications, the “poor white madam’s” son-in-law immediately attributes it to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)¹⁶. This relates to Steyn and Foster’s observations that viewing affirmative action programs such as BEE as “antithetical to white interests” or as a form of “reverse racism” is a typical trope of New South African Speak (NSAS), a subcategory of white talk, which is often used as a form of resistance to changes in hierarchies of domination (41). In this instance it is used as an excuse to mask personal inadequacies and as the text progresses, as a potential springboard for the “poor white madam” to question her domestic worker’s views on the subject:

So Trinity, and then you know it’s coming. “What do you think of this BEE thing? Do you think your fellow blacks without qualifications should be given jobs because of BEE? Heh? Isn’t that reverse racism?” (529)

In this conversation the reference to “reverse racism” is overt and coupled with a subtle critique of black progress, or as Foster and Steyn argue, “African advancement”, which “is often constructed as the consequence of tokenism, or even corruption” (41), rather than merit. What is also revealed is that the “poor white madam” and her family harbour feelings of resentment towards their black, middle-class neighbours. In her description of the “poor white madam”, the narrator states that the “poor white madam” is bitter about her husband’s inability to have taken advantage of apartheid but that “what makes her and her husband more bitter is when they have a cheeky black neighbour who drives a BMW” (479). The narrator then goes on to say how this generates contempt and exclamations of “tenderpreneur¹⁷” every time they pass by. This relates to Foster and Steyn’s observation that in NSAS “[t]he emerging class of successful and moneyed black people is often the target of indignation, even resentment.” (41). *Maid in SA* engages with this aspect of NSAS through

¹⁶ Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) is a program of economic redress which “encourage[s] the employment of black people at all levels of business, and [...] encourage[s] black entrepreneurs and black business ownership. (Cahan and van Staden 2009:44)

¹⁷ A person who uses his or her political connections to secure government contracts and tenders for personal advantage (Oxford English dictionary).

its depiction of the “poor white madam” and her family’s views on BEE and the black elite, demonstrating how Wanner uses the self-help genre as a tool of social commentary, particularly as a vehicle through which to engage with racial discourses in post-apartheid South Africa.

Migrant domestic workers in South Africa

The lingering racial prejudices in post-apartheid South Africa is not the only aspect of social commentary *Maid in SA* engages in - it also adopts the satirical mode to comment on the plight of migrant domestic workers in South Africa and existing attitudes towards them. This is a notable expansion on previous engagements with domestic work, which have rarely explored this aspect. In *Maid in SA*, Wanner engages with both the intranational and transnational migration of domestic workers in South Africa and existing employer attitudes towards them. This is seen through the five main categories into which Wanner divides domestic workers; “the city helper, the rural helper, the Zimbabwean, the Mosotho and the Malawian helper” (706). These categories include both local and transnational domestic workers and relate to some of the real-life trends in domestic work. The intranational migration of black women from rural villages to the urban areas in search of employment as domestic workers is a well-known phenomenon in South Africa, dating as far back as the 1930s which saw “[t]he rapid entry of African women into waged labour markets” such as domestic work (Ally 2009:29). Similarly, the transnational migration of people from neighbouring southern African countries such as Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Malawi into South Africa for employment purposes is a common practice, dating as far back as 1860 when colonialists used “migrant labour from across the entire region for multiple purposes” (Trimikliniotis et al 2008:1325). Despite transnational migration not being a new phenomenon, factors such as wars, disasters and major economic decline in these neighbouring regions has resulted in an increase in migrants in South Africa (Trimikliniotis et al 2008:1324). These migrants often have very few options for employment, especially if they do not possess a South African Identity card or a work permit and are thus forced to engage in “informal work including domestic work, hairdressing, sex work or trading” (Vanyoro 2021:9).

In the case of domestic work, workers from these regions are often hired with their employers in full knowledge of their illegal status but often preferring them due to their exploitability (Griffin 2009:22). In Laura Griffin’s (2009) study on Basotho migrant domestic workers in South Africa, Griffin argues that due to their illegal status, migrant domestic workers often endure unfair treatment and low wages from their employers, fearing that should they report them, their own illegal status may be revealed resulting in their “detention or even deportation” (23). As a result of their willingness to endure these conditions they “have earned a reputation with employers, as

cheap, submissive, exploitable labour” (Griffin 2009:22). The plight of the Basotho domestic workers Griffin refers to can be applied to the plight of Zimbabwean and Malawian domestic workers, who, experiencing the same fears, endure the same unfair conditions and are thus often preferred by employers. In *Maid in SA*, Wanner satirises employer attitudes towards migrant domestic workers through the narrator’s descriptions of employer views surrounding them. In the narrator’s description of the Mosotho domestic worker for example, she states that “Johannesburg middle-class women swear by them” because of how hardworking, respectful and loyal they are (892). The narrator also goes on to state how impeccably they cook, clean and mind infants (905). Although this description does not explicitly engage with some of the underlying reasons why employers tend to prefer migrant domestic workers, the satirical tone which the narrator adopts in the description provokes the reader to ponder on the motives behind this employer preference.

Furthermore, parallels can be drawn between the narrator’s description of the manner in which Basotho domestic workers enter South Africa, and the real-life informal networks through which migrant women find employment as domestic workers. According to Precious Baison (2021) the challenges migrant women face “in obtaining valid work visas” result in them being unable to “seek employment through formal channels such as recruitment agencies” (68). This, in turn, forces them to make use of “informal channels such as social networks” (Baison 2021:68). These social networks are usually made up of friends or relatives who are already in South Africa, “who inform them of job openings” while they are still in their home countries (Baison 2021:77). Employers of the domestic workers already in South Africa typically get recommendations from them and then pass on the relevant information to their friends or relatives seeking to hire a migrant domestic worker (Baison 2021:77). In *Maid in SA*, the narrator references some of these informal networks through the advice she offers employers on how to hire a migrant domestic worker:

While it is true that the former Basutoland is fully bordered by South Africa, you do not have to find out which is the closest border to your home to go and recruit this beloved of helpers. No. All you need to do is ask one of your friends who always brags about her fantastic Mosotho helper. She is bound to have a cousin who is looking for a job. She tells you that she is her sister [...]. Twenty four hours after you confirm your request to her sister, your Mosotho helper will arrive. (905)

The satirical tone which the narrator adopts in their description of the process of hiring a migrant domestic worker highlights the efficiency of the established network but also frames the process in a way which suggests that these migrant domestic workers have been commodified. The process which the narrator describes can be likened to online shopping where one selects your desired items, pays and then waits for your package to arrive. The difference however, is that in this

instance, it is a person. Wanner appears to satirise this process so as to highlight this process of commodification and push readers to reflect on the personhood of migrant domestic workers.

There are also other instances in the text where Wanner calls upon the reader to consider the personhood of migrant domestic workers. One such instance is when, through the narrator's description of the Zimbabwean domestic worker, attention is drawn to the varying circumstances under which migrant women take on jobs as domestic workers. One such circumstance referred to in the text is when highly skilled migrant women are unable to secure employment in their professions and are forced to work as domestic workers in order to survive.

The narrator's description of the Zimbabwean helper below, speaks to this:

She cooks. She cleans. She helps with the children's homework. She used to be a teacher. She says. Sometimes she has papers permitting her to work. At other times, she has a visa but is still trying to sort her papers out. (853)

The fact that the narrator specifically states that sometimes these domestic workers have permits and sometimes they do not, relates to the real-life experiences of both documented and undocumented migrant women, who are often unable to secure work in the formal sector and are forced to become domestic workers. According to Ria Smit and Pragna Rugunanan (2014), even documented migrant women sometimes struggle to find formal employment due to the fact that they can only be employed in the formal sector if their "employer is [able] to demonstrate to the Department of Labour that no South African with the requisite skills for that position can be found." (7). A further issue these documented migrant women sometimes face, especially when they are skilled, is that they struggle to have their qualifications verified by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (Smit and Rugunanan 2014:7). In *Maid in SA*, these issues are alluded to as the narrator states that the Zimbabwean domestic worker used to be a teacher and that in some cases she does have a work permit. This demonstrates the extent to which *Maid in SA* expands upon previous engagements with domestic work through its adoption of the satirical mode to explore the plight of migrant domestic workers and existing attitudes towards them. Through this, Wanner subverts the self-help genre's tendency to avoid engaging with systemic injustices and instead uses it as a tool of social commentary.

Polyvocality

Maid in SA further subverts the features of the genre by incorporating the use of polyvocality in its narrative structure. This is an atypical approach in self-help literature, which usually only consists

of one narrator (typically the author themselves) and one “narratee”, who is generally “framed in the author’s image, as receptively and willingly adopting the author’s advice, as suffering from the pains of similar life experiences that authors have cured in themselves” (Woodstock 2006:323). *Maid in SA* departs from this in that it includes a number of different “narratees”¹⁸. Divided into two parts, the text shifts from the figure of the domestic worker as narratee in part one to their employer as addressee in part two. Wanner further complicates the relationship between narrator and narratee by continuously changing the narratee depending on who they work for, in the case of the domestic workers, and who works for them, in the case of the employers. The categorisation is then further complicated by the fact that Wanner divides the narratees according to race, nationality, class, age, marital status and whether or not they have children. These different sub-sections are then dedicated to each of these narratees. This is indicated to the reader through the use of distinctive headings such as “the middle-class African madam” (281), “the conservative Indian madam” (143), “the city helper” (714), or “the Zimbabwean helper” (847), which as the discussion unfolds are then qualified with subheadings such as “if your middle-class African madam is married” (344) or “if she is younger” (714). In the text each of these designations are presented as factors which influence the treatment received by domestic workers and the service received by employers. As a result, each relationship is depicted as somewhat different from the other. This allows for engagement with a variety of domestic worker and employer relationships in the post-apartheid context as opposed to the reproduction of conventional portrayals of a white employer and a black domestic worker as is common in South African literature during apartheid (Jansen 2019:191).

As noted by Jansen, the prevalence of these kinds of homogenous literary depictions may have been a result of the fact that many works by both white and black authors engaging with domestic work would have “inevitably reflect[ed] social reality in South Africa in some way or another” (2019:18). During apartheid black people were predominantly in subordinate positions such as domestic workers (Cock 1989:8). Many of the texts engaging with domestic work during apartheid therefore characterised black and white people in ways which aligned with the social reality of life in South Africa at the time. The fact that Wanner depicts a number of different domestic worker/employer relationships is significant as it allows for a shift away from the homogenous nature in which these relationships have typically been portrayed. It is, however, important to note that whilst Wanner’s depiction of different domestic worker/employer configurations is not homogenous in one sense, it is somewhat caricatural through her use of specific stock figures of domestic workers and

¹⁸ According to M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham (2012), a “narratee” is “the explicit or implied person or audience to whom the narrator addresses the narrative” (234).

employers rather than more carefully crafted, rounded characters. Nonetheless, depictions which shift away from the conventional white madam/black domestic worker configuration demonstrate a recognition of the fact that “[t]raditional hierarchies are fast changing in South Africa” (Jansen 2019:265).

Reframing of positive thinking paradigm

In addition to subverting the self-help genre’s tendency to avoid engaging with societal flaws, *Maid in SA* also reframes the genre’s positive thinking paradigm and in so doing expands upon previous engagements with domestic work. This is seen in how the advice offered by the narrator regarding the relationship between domestic workers and their employers often involves the employer dismissing their domestic worker or the domestic worker resigning. This is an expansion on previous engagements with domestic work which have rarely engaged with the prospect of a domestic worker resigning. Advice of this nature diverts from the typical nature of the advice offered by self-help texts which tend to place great emphasis on “the importance of positive thinking” often deeming it the ultimate solution to all problems (Woodstock 2006:322). This emphasis on positive thinking is based on the assumption that “readers alone can change their reality by changing the nature of their thoughts” (Woodstock 2006:322). *Maid in SA* reframes this positive thinking paradigm by discouraging common tropes of the genre such as “resilience” and suffering or “no pain no gain” (Rimke 2020:44) and instead, encouraging both domestic workers and employers to end the relationship should it no longer be beneficial. This is most clearly demonstrated through the “you will leave” and the “you will let her go” sections at the end of each chapter. These sections outline different scenarios which will result in domestic workers resigning or employers dismissing them. The example below outlines the three major reasons why a domestic worker might leave a “poor white madam”:

Because someone you know has found you a better job. Because you are tired of all the excuses when it comes to getting your wages [...]. Because the husband/sons/son in law give you unwanted attention (556).

This is notable as literary depictions of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers have rarely engaged with the prospect of a domestic worker resigning. Instead depictions have generally centred on the intimate, pseudo-familial nature of the relationship, often spanning across generations (Jansen 2019; Cock 1989:87). The nature of these depictions relate to sociological observations made by Cock (1989) on the nature of domestic work during apartheid. Cock’s study found that many of the women interviewed in her sample group were “caught up in a cycle of poverty, with a lack of education and employment opportunities which continue[d] from

generation to generation” (1989:80). During the early years of apartheid this often resulted in the children of domestic workers also becoming domestic workers, often taking over from their mothers once they were too old to continue. Thus in the face of discriminatory and restrictive apartheid legislation, the concept of resigning was not an option for the average domestic worker. *Maid in SA* moves away from portrayals of domestic work which emphasise the longevity of the relationship and instead, through presenting resignation as an option for domestic workers, depicts the relationship in more occupational rather than familial terms, dependant on mutual satisfaction, an aspect of the depiction which has not been previously engaged with.

Through reframing the genre’s positive thinking paradigm, *Maid in SA* also expands on previous depictions of domestic workers by depicting them as complex, multifaceted individuals with identities beyond their profession as a domestic worker. This is seen in the text when the narrator lists the potential reasons why domestic workers may resign. These reasons, which are not all negative, underscore the experiences of domestic workers outside of their jobs. These reasons include leaving “[b]ecause someone has found [them] a better job” (549) or because they are “getting married to [their] boyfriend” (336). Wanner also makes reference to the fact that sometimes domestic workers will leave to cater to their family responsibilities:

You will leave her because [...] [y]our mother dies and you have to go home to take care of the family home, and your child needs someone too (242). [...] You [want to be] closer to your daughter and watch her so she does not chase boys (254).

These reasons provide a holistic depiction of domestic workers and their lives outside of their jobs. This is significant because even though earlier depictions of domestic workers such as Sindiwe Magona’s *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* (1991) acknowledge the role of domestic workers outside their occupations through various descriptions of their living and working conditions, written from their perspective, such engagements were rare. *Maid in SA* thus contributes towards expanding this body of texts. Overall, this chapter has demonstrated a number of ways in which *Maid in SA* expands upon previous treatments of the subject.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which Wanner has reworked the self-help form through the incorporation of the satirical mode, to expand upon previous discussions of domestic work. In particular it has discussed the ways in which Wanner subverts the self-help genre’s tendency to ignore systemic injustices, in favour of highlighting the flaws of the individual, by using the genre as a form of social critique. These areas of social critique include commenting on lingering racial

prejudices in post-apartheid South Africa as well as commenting on the plight of migrant domestic workers and employer attitudes towards them. *Maid in SA*'s commentary on these issues highlights the fact that, similarly to the chick lit genre discussed in the previous chapter, the self-help genre is capable of engaging with serious subject matter rather than only escapist themes. It also demonstrates the manner in which *Maid in SA* aligns with the tendency of African self-help texts to engage with social, economic and political issues. Furthermore, this chapter has argued that *Maid in SA* departs from the self-help genre's typical narrative structure, which usually consists of only one narrator and one narratee, by incorporating the use of polyvocality in its narrative structure. This change in narrative structure allows for broader engagement with different employer/domestic worker configurations whilst also underscoring the text's satirical underpinning through its use of stock figures rather than round characters. In addition to this, it has argued that Wanner reframes the self-help genre's positive thinking paradigm through advising domestic workers and employers to end their relationship should it no longer be beneficial. This reframing results in an expansion of previous engagements with domestic work.

CHAPTER 4

THE KEEPERS OF THE HOUSE: GRANT ATKINSON AND PORTIA GUMEDE'S *HOUSEKEEPERS*

The previous two chapters explored popular culture representations of domestic workers in relation to the genres of chick lit and self-help, and considered the possibilities they might open up for the re-writing of the domestic worker figure. This chapter expands on this investigation by focusing on the genre of the television drama; in particular the contemporary television drama, *Housekeepers* (2018) directed by Grant Atkinson and produced by Portia Gumedé. The drama was first aired on Mzansi Magic, a channel on Dish Television (DSTV¹⁹). It was later made available on the South African video on demand service Showmax (launched in 2015 with a specific focus on local content). This chapter focuses on season one of the series but overall there are two seasons made up of thirteen episodes each, each roughly twenty minutes in length. The dominant language spoken in the series is isiZulu with English subtitles but there are some instances where English and isiXhosa are spoken. The drama's primary plot follows the main character, Linda Ndlovu, a law graduate played by Thando Thabethe, in her quest to prove the innocence of her mother, June Ndlovu. June Ndlovu, a former employee of Peter and Boniswa Zwide, is wrongfully accused of murdering Veronica Zwide, Peter Zwide's first wife whom she took care of. Linda Ndlovu goes undercover²⁰ in the home of the Zwides as a domestic worker in an attempt to gather incriminating evidence against them so as to exonerate her mother. The drama also has a secondary plot which depicts a "community" of domestic workers who work in the same area as Linda. Through the secondary plot viewers are able to witness the bonds which develop among the domestic workers and the challenges they face in their jobs.

This chapter argues that *Housekeepers* expands upon previous depictions of domestic workers on television as it focuses on the invisibility of domestic workers, the strength of the bonds developed amongst the community of domestic workers in the drama and the nature of their ambitions. The secondary plot of the drama, in particular, demonstrates the extent to which *Housekeepers* builds upon existing representations and provides a holistic depiction of domestic workers. Furthermore, the chapter argues that in *Housekeepers* domestic work is depicted as performative, that is; consisting of a specific set of behaviours which must be executed in order for the performance to be successful. The fact that *Housekeepers* depicts domestic work as performative is significant as it

¹⁹ DSTV falls under the category of "pay TV" in South Africa, which "refers to paid television services provided to a consumer for a fee" (Udoakpan and Tengeh 2020:2). "Dstv was the first pay-TV product launched outside of the United States of America (USA) and the African region." (Udoakpan and Tengeh 2020:2)

²⁰ Going undercover involves doing "secret work within a community or organization, especially for the purposes of police investigation or espionage e.g. 'an undercover police operation'". (Oxford dictionary)

serves as a way in which the drama addresses some of the subjective dimensions of domestic work; a crucial aspect of its social critique. The inclusion of a television drama in this study is significant as it allows for an analysis of the representation of domestic workers and their employers through a visual medium. This allows for engagement with factors such as cinematography, *mise en scène*, lighting and camera angles, and how they contribute to the nature of these depictions. It also allows for an exploration of the impact of voice-over narration on visual depictions of domestic work. The chapter begins by providing a brief historical background of television in South Africa, mapping its arrival and detailing the evolution of common broadcasting themes, ranging from division to unity and nation building. Understanding the nature of these themes will be important as it will serve as a benchmark against which to evaluate the themes expressed in *Housekeepers*. It then explains the chapter's contribution to the body of scholarship on the subject, after which it provides a brief description of the generic features of the drama. Thereafter it discusses the multi-faceted, nuanced ways the drama expands upon previous depictions of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers, as well as the specific ways in which the drama portrays domestic service as performative.

Television in South Africa

Television in South Africa was introduced in 1976 (Teer-Tomaselli 2005:558). Its late arrival was as a result of concerns about its ideological influence, specifically its potential to convey messages opposing the policy of apartheid (Tomaselli and Tomaselli 1989 and Krabill 2003). Ironically, once television was introduced it served as a means of further division and clearly denoted the privilege experienced by white people. This is because upon arrival, the “South African Broadcasting Corporation began airing television on a single channel, SABC Television One (TV1), evenly split between Afrikaans and English for five hours each evening” (Krabill 2003:69). Black people did not appear on these channels, the reasoning being that they would have their ‘own’ channel at a later date” (Tomaselli and Tomaselli: 1989:134). This initial absence of black people on screen was then followed by “a stage when [...] blacks could be shown provided they fulfilled their accepted roles in the division of labour, for example as domestic servants, labourers or mineworkers and the occasional affluent individual” (Tomaselli and Tomaselli: 1989:134). This overt absence and carefully casted presence serves as an example of the manner in which the “[w]hite minority government tightly managed visual media, dictating every image that crossed the television screen” (Ives 2007:160). This illustrates how early television in South Africa reinforced the marginalisation and one-dimensional treatment of domestic workers.

Later, in 1982, “the SABC initiated separate channels for Blacks” (Ives 2007:161) in an effort to appease black people, who were growing increasingly resistant to apartheid ideology (Krabill 2003:86). The channels were initially introduced as one but “split a year later into TV2 and TV3” (Krabill 2003:94). As was the case with TV1, which had a structured absence of black people, TV2 and TV3 had an absence of white people, with sport programmes being the only exception (Krabill 2003:158). According to Alexia Smit (2016), “while initially defined by the exclusion of black viewers, with the introduction of second and third channels for South Africa’s black population, South African broadcasting was defined by separated audiences” (3).

The idea of separate audiences persisted into democratic South Africa in 1994, despite a number of significant structural changes (Kruger 2010). Once democracy was attained, an overt emphasis was placed on broadcasting content which fostered ideas of unity and aspiration. In the early years of post-apartheid television soap operas such as *Generations* (1994-2014) and *Isidingo* (1998-2020) were used to provide “models for changing racial attitudes and, among black South Africans in particular, for cultivating aspirational narratives” (Jacobs 2019:63). Both *Generations*’ and *Isidingo*’s story lines were especially targeted toward what Sean Jacobs (2019) describes as “the aspirational viewer, one who was open to the promises of capitalism and the market economy and thus would thrive under the new conditions of political and, presumably, economic freedom” (7). The years that followed saw a shift from discourses of nation-building to a greater emphasis on the “conspicuous consumption of the new elite” (Kruger 2010:75). The changes in the nature of broadcasting in the post-apartheid period, both in early and more recent years, resulted in a clear emphasis on narratives of aspiration and consumption, with black people largely being cast in these roles. Contrastingly, this resulted in “a significant underrepresentation of blacks in low-skilled occupations” such as domestic work (Cassim and Monteiro 2001:106). As such, there has been a relative absence of prominent domestic worker figures in South African television. In *Isidingo* for example, the domestic worker figure Mavis is often referenced by other characters in the soap opera but as viewers we are never afforded the opportunity to see her. Thus while the figure of the domestic worker was backgrounded during apartheid as a result of the apartheid regime’s tendency to place black characters in peripheral roles, in the post-apartheid era, the figure of the domestic worker was backgrounded so as to allow for an overt emphasis on aspirational narratives and the black middle-class.

This tendency to place the figure of the domestic worker in the background of the narrative, however, is starting to change as shifts in their representation have begun to occur. Television shows such as *The Queen*, *The River* and *Housekeepers*, which feature domestic workers with more

prominent roles in the plot, suggest that the marginality of the domestic worker figure is slowly being addressed. There has, however, been no critical scholarship to date on this question. My study therefore serves as the first critical study to engage with the representation of domestic workers in the genre of the television drama.

Generic categorisation:

In terms of genre, the *Housekeeper* series has elements of both the soap opera and the crime drama. It is roughly the same length as the average day or night time soap opera, which ranges between 30 and 60 minutes (O'Donnel 2007:107). It also aligns with the characteristics of the standard soap opera in that it is a continuous serial which does not come to a resolution at the end of each episode, instead the "[a]udience has to stay tuned to follow the narrative" indefinitely until a resolution occurs (O'Donnel 2007:107). Furthermore, *Housekeepers* engages with interpersonal and domestic themes, both common to soap operas (O'Donnel 2007:107).

As suggested, *Housekeepers* also shares characteristics with the crime drama, or more specifically the detective show which is a sub-genre of the crime drama (O'Donnel 2007). Similarly to its literary counterpart, crime dramas tend to begin with "[a] dilemma (a murder, a missing person, a theft, a rape,...)" or some other heinous crime "that is resolved (by detectives, the police, FBI agents, or forensic scientists)" (O'Donnel 2007:120). *Housekeepers* also begins in this fashion as a murder occurs in the first episode, but it differs from the typical crime drama in that it does not seek to solve the crime by determining who committed it. Instead, the lead character, Linda Ndlovu, who takes on the role of an amateur detective, seeks to prove the innocence of her mother. The fact that the identity of the murderer is already known goes against the typical appeal of the crime drama which enables the audience to follow "the case step by step, anticipat[ing] the outcome" (O'Donnel 2007:104). In the case of *Housekeepers*, since the identity of the murder is already known by the audience and a few of the characters, a large aspect of the appeal can be found in observing a young aspirant law graduate adopt the disguise of a conventionally invisible domestic worker character who exploits this invisibility to exonerate a wrongfully convicted person.

Domestic work as performative:

In *Housekeepers* the portrayal of domestic workers on television is expanded beyond their conventional depiction as characters who only exist in terms of their occupational roles. In *Housekeepers*, domestic workers are depicted as people with lives outside of their jobs as domestic workers. This is seen in how the drama portrays the aspirations of domestic workers to further their studies and attain employment beyond domestic work(as is seen through the character of Katleho).

his is also seen in how aspects of the domestic workers' personal lives, such as their romantic relationships, are depicted in the drama (as is seen through the romantic relationship which develops between an older domestic worker, Maria and the gardener, Max). The drama's focus on these areas is significant as it demonstrates a departure from previous depictions which rarely included these aspects as part of the representation of domestic workers. Furthermore, by presenting domestic work as performative, *Housekeepers* calls the subjective dimensions of domestic work into question and in so doing allows for a more in-depth critique of it.

The performative nature of domestic work is underscored in the series through Linda, who takes on the role of a domestic worker as part of her disguise when she goes undercover. Whilst pretending to be a domestic worker, Linda adopts a submissive, differential demeanour, one more in line with the typical behaviour many people have been socialised into expecting from a domestic worker figure. She also wears a domestic worker uniform as part of her performance. Judith Butler's theorisation of performative acts and gender constitution can be usefully drawn on to discuss the performance of servitude which Linda engages in. According to Butler (1988), gender is not "a predetermined or foreclosed structure" which one is born into, but rather something the body becomes "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time" (523). In her discussion Butler draws on Simon de Beauvoir's claim "that 'woman' is a historical idea and not a natural fact" thereby underscoring "the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity" (1988:522). This cultural interpretation can take the form of "language, gesture and all manner of symbolic social sign [including clothing]" (Butler 1988:519). As a result of this, Butler argues that the concept of gender "is real only to the extent that it is performed" (1988:527). When one relates Butler's theory to Linda's performance of servitude while undercover in the Zwide's home, it can be argued that it is only through a series of repeated acts and the wearing of certain clothes (i.e, the domestic worker uniform as will be further discussed), that this performance is effective. This expands upon the complexity with which domestic workers have been depicted as it suggests that domestic work involves the deliberate, self-conscious adoption of a mask. This is an important departure from the "like family" and surrogacy tropes which position domestic workers as part of an intimate family structure. In *Housekeepers*, the authenticity of perceived familial bonds between domestic workers and their employers are challenged as emphasis is placed on the performance in which domestic workers engage.

Demeanour of deference:

A crucial aspect of Linda's performance of servitude is the demeanour she adopts when in the presence of her employer, Boniswa Zwide. It is one of humility, submission and deference. These

qualities are expressed in the drama through specific gestures, particularly the bowing of one's head and the avoidance of eye contact. Viewers are first introduced to this demeanour in episode two of the show when Linda goes for a job interview at the Zwide home. The scene begins in a medium shot with Linda attentively looking around the room she's in, as if to survey it for any threats. The shot then moves from a medium to a close up shot as Linda hears ears footsteps approaching and immediately bows her head in submission (Figure 1), as though to signal that the actual performance has now begun. The use of a close up shot in this regard draws attention to her submissive demeanour. The shot then changes from a medium close up to a medium long shot to reveal Boniswa and her son in the frame (Figure 2). This scene is noteworthy for the introduction of music in the scene, which has had no non-diegetic music up until this point. The music evokes an eerie mood as Linda's head remains bowed whilst Boniswa circles around her. The music then moves into a clear, consistent bang of a drum as Boniswa looks Linda directly in the eye and asks her whether she has any experience working as a domestic worker. Linda responds and says that her mother was a domestic worker and taught her everything she knows (Figure 3). Although Linda's head remains bowed throughout the conversation with Boniswa, there is a moment where there is a break in Linda's performance when she is briefly startled by Boniswa asking her whether she knows how to use a washing machine. She makes eye contact with her for a split second and then composes herself and once more lowers her head (Figure 4). This brief break in performance indicates the disjuncture between self and performance.

The conversation continues with Boniswa giving Linda a stern warning not to speak to her husband, to which Linda stutteringly responds "Yes madam". Linda's behaviour in this scene can be related to Scott's (1990) theorisation of the hidden and public transcripts of subordinate groups. He argues that within the public transcript there are certain modes of expression, one of these being performances of deference (Scott 1990:24). He further argues that acts of deference such as "a bow of greeting or the use of a superior's honorific in addressing [them][...] are intended in some sense to convey the outward impression of conformity with standards sustained by superiors" (Scott 1990:24). Although Linda is merely performing the role of a domestic worker she is deeply aware of it and, arguably, has been socialised into understanding the manner in which a domestic worker should conduct themselves when around their employers. This underscores the manner in which *Housekeepers* portrays domestic work as performative. This forms an important aspect of the drama's more nuanced and critical engagement with the subject of domestic work in comparison to earlier forms of representation.

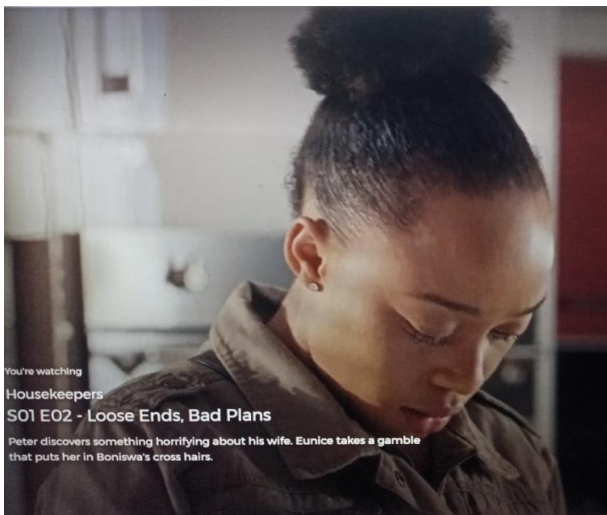


Figure 1: Season 1, episode 2



Figure 2: Season 1, episode 2

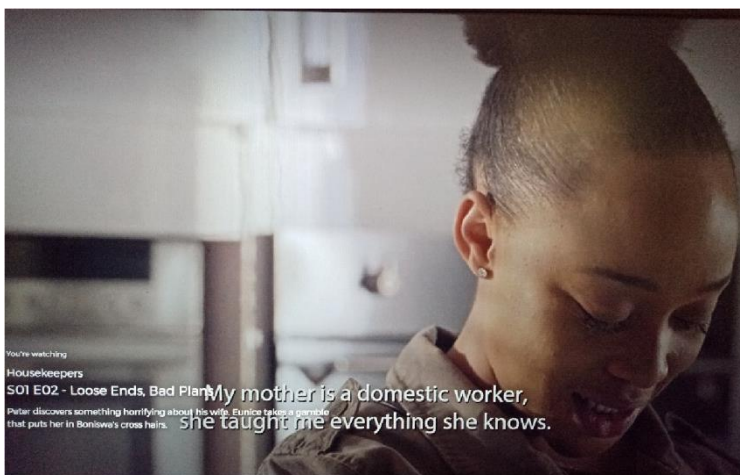


Figure 3: Season 1, episode 2

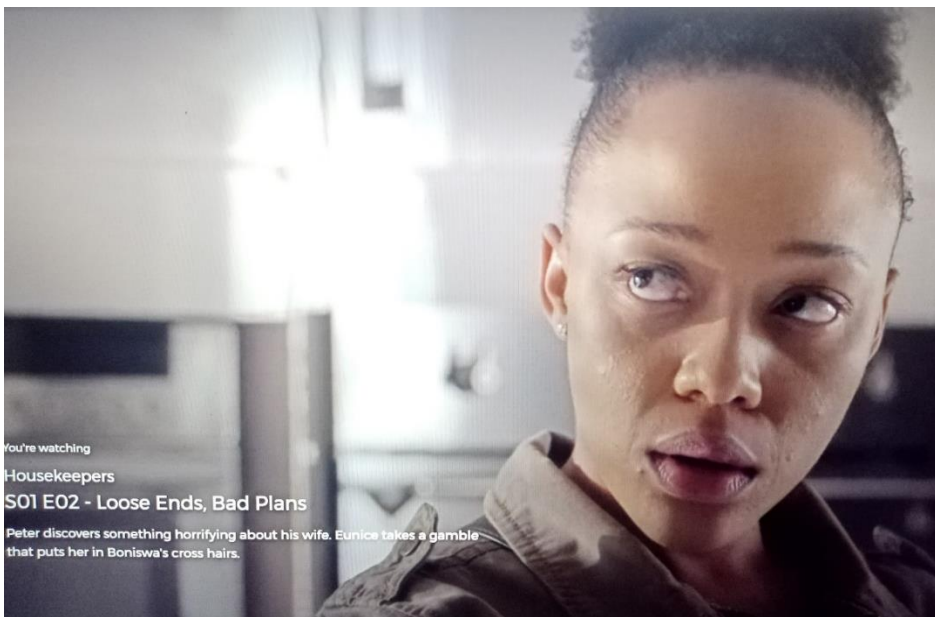


Figure 4: Season 1, episode 2

The Uniform:

Another crucial aspect of Linda's performance of servitude in *Housekeepers* is her uniform. The domestic worker uniform serves as a signifier of servitude in *Housekeepers* as almost all of the domestic workers wear one (Figure 5). In South African society the domestic worker uniform is a highly recognisable form of clothing associated with domestic work as it is commonplace for domestic workers to wear one. The uniform therefore serves as a symbol used to entrench social hierarchies in South Africa. In her analysis of the soap opera form, Dorothy Hobson (2003) focuses largely on British soap operas with brief mention of American and Australian soap operas. Hobson argues that "[t]he construction of a character through dress and appearance is an important aspect of the fictional representation in television soap operas" (2003:68). She also argues that because "lower class positions cannot be indicated by accent, they are portrayed through costume, [for example] the wearing of flamboyant and unfashionable clothes and a certain hairstyle being used to indicate a character of a lower status who does not have any dress sense" (Hobson 2003:69). Stereotypically, the domestic worker uniform tends to symbolise the "working class or maid, whilst 'florid dress' typically symbolises 'the bourgeois madam'" (Dodd 2010:470). The domestic worker uniform has therefore been a recognisable symbol of the "entrenched and highly politicised dichotomy that has tended to govern popular depictions of the maid and madam" (Dodd 2010:470). The domestic worker uniform is such a recognisable symbol of servitude that when artist Mary Sibande held an exhibition depicting domestic workers in elegantly modified, Victorian-era

influenced versions of the traditional domestic worker uniform, it caught the attention of many because “it radically disrupt[ed]” their “associative categories” (Dodd 2010:468).

In *Housekeepers*, the domestic worker uniform is an important aspect of characterisation in the show. An example of this is seen the moment Linda receives her uniform, which is depicted as a momentous event. This is achieved through the voice over narration, the music and the camera angles. The use of voice over narration in particular, expands upon previous television portrayals of domestic work which have rarely incorporated it as a means through which to shape viewers’ interpretations of scenes in which domestic workers feature. Significantly, even though Linda is undercover, it is her first-person narration in the role of a domestic worker that is being foregrounded. At the end of Linda’s interview with Boniswa, Boniswa informs her that she can start work the next day and hands her the uniform (Figure 6). The moment the uniform is handed over to Linda, the consistent drumming which has been present throughout most of the interview scene changes to fast-paced piano music accompanied by an extreme close up shot of the uniform, which then changes into a close up shot of Linda’s face. (Figure 7)

Whilst this takes place, Linda, the voice-over narrator, says “the moment I accepted that uniform, is the moment I crossed the line. The moment that I let go of the law that I once believed served us all and became a law unto myself”. Linda can be described as a homodiegetic narrator because she is “a present character in the story [she] tells” and therefore is a part of “the diegetic universe of [the] narrative” (Genette 1980:245). In *Housekeepers*, Linda does not narrate the story throughout but instead only says a few sentences at certain pivotal movements in the drama. This is typically how voice-over narrators function in films or television shows as viewers “may only hear a few sentences” from them, as opposed to hearing them narrate “a story from start to finish” (Kozloff 1989:3). Linda’s narrative voice in the drama tends to be used as a tool to vocalise her inner thoughts on matters to the audience that she usually does not vocalise to the other characters in the drama. Her voice therefore works in combination with other elements of *mise en scène*²¹ to deliver a particular message or evoke a certain emotion. According to Sarah Kozloff (1989), “[v]oice-over narration is just one of many elements, including musical scoring, sound effects, editing, lighting, and so on, through which the cinematic text is narrated” (44). In the scene where Linda receives the uniform for the first time, it is the combination of the change in music, the close-up shots and her voice-over narration, which highlights the symbolic importance of the uniform in Linda’s performance of servitude. Similarly, it is the combination of Linda’s deferential demeanour

²¹“Mise en scène is a French term that refers to a series of elements of film construction that can be seen within the frame of the individual shot...” (Benyahia et al 2006:17).

expressed through specific gestures as well as the uniform she wears which combine to portray domestic work as performative. In this regard, Linda's behaviour can be related to Scott's (1990) notion of public transcripts, which he describes as "the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" (2). He argues that when engaged in their public transcript "[s]ubordinates appear deferential, they bow and scrape, they seem amiable, they appear to know their place and to stay in it, thereby indicating that they also know and recognise the place of their superiors." (Scott 1990:33). Linda's behaviour when in the presence of Boniswa serves as an example of this.



Figure 5: Season 1, episode 11



Figure 6: Season 1, episode 2

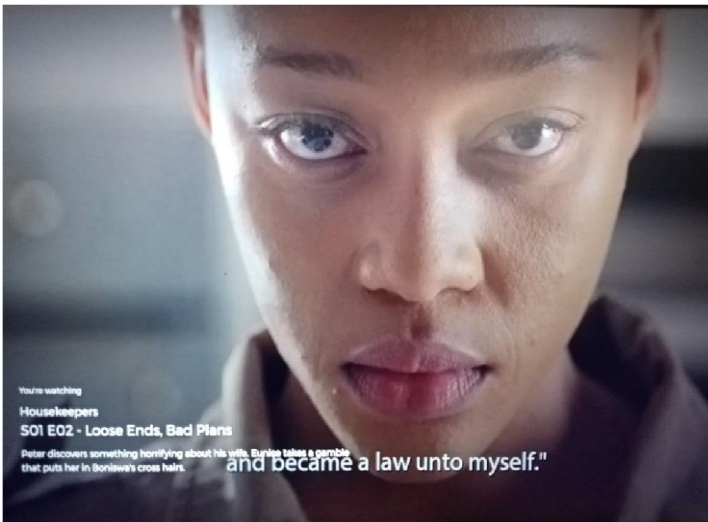


Figure 7: Season 1, episode 2

Another scene which highlights the significance of the domestic worker's uniform occurs when Linda puts the uniform on for the first time, at the start of episode three. This scene is significant not only because it reiterates the symbolic significance of the uniform but also because it is shown in conjunction with a montage of shots depicting the challenges faced by domestic workers in their jobs. These challenges include having to come into contact with and dispose of their employers' intimate items such as used condoms whilst cleaning. They also include having to care for the children of their employers whilst being unable to provide the same level of care to their own children. Linda's voice over narration in this scene is also of particular importance as it candidly comments on the negative aspects of domestic work.

The scene opens with a medium long shot of a half-naked man and two half-naked women lying on a couch. The camera then pans to reveal a perplexed woman in medium shot wearing dish washing gloves, an apron and a matching bow. The viewer recognises this woman as Katleho, one of the domestic workers who work in the same neighbourhood as Linda. As soon as this character comes into the frame, the music, which has been a single, subtle violin note, changes into piano music. The camera then pans out to a wide-angle shot to reveal a very messy room with empty alcohol bottles and other rubbish, as well as another man who is also half-naked lying on the couch. (Figure 8). Katleho begins cleaning the room as the camera moves into a close-up of a nearly empty champagne glass with a used condom in it on a table. The camera then moves into a medium close up of Katleho holding the glass and lifting the used condom out of it (Figure 9). Her facial expression is one of disgust as she slowly throws it in the dustbin next to her. This is followed by the voice-over narration: "I never knew what it was like to be a domestic worker". The scene continues with a montage of shots depicting other negative aspects of the job mentioned earlier such

as having to clean toilets and spend time away from your family in service of others (Figure 10). The emphasis on the negative and humiliating aspects of domestic work is accentuated by the voice over: “I never knew what it was like to be a domestic worker. To neglect your family and spend your days taking care of another family, that didn’t even notice or appreciate that you were there.” The scene shifts to a view of Linda slowly putting on different parts of the domestic worker uniform as she says “I never thought that I would become one of them” (Figure 11). The fact that Linda says this whilst putting on the uniform further reiterates the idea that the uniform serves as a key component of solidifying her new identity as a domestic worker. The entire scene also appears to suggest that by putting on the uniform, Linda must accept the negative aspects that accompany the job. Overall, the scene is significant as it provides an unusually explicit perspective on domestic work through its candid showcasing of toilet cleaning and the disposal of a used condom. This departs from previous portrayals which have rarely placed explicit focus on these unpleasant aspects of the job. The scene is also significant because it highlights the importance of the domestic worker uniform as an essential component of the performance domestic workers engage in, thereby underscoring the performative nature of domestic work.

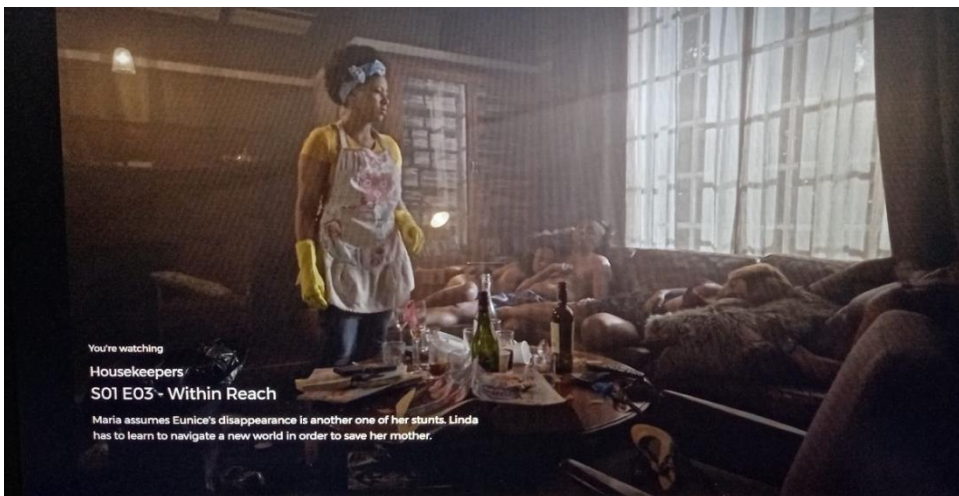


Figure 8: Season 1, episode 3



Figure 9: Season 1, episode 3



Figure 10: Season 1, episode 3

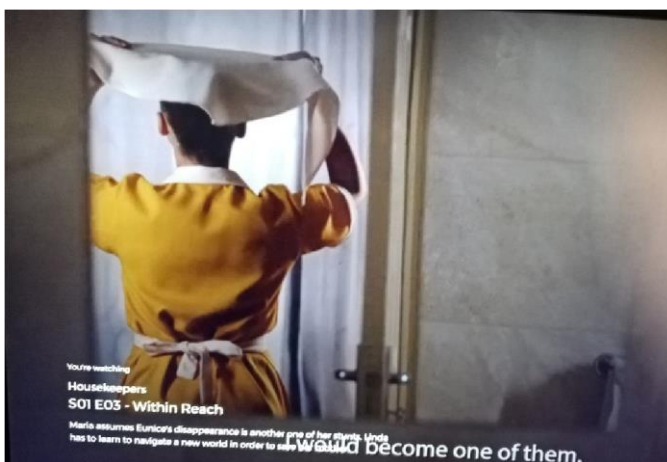


Figure 11: Season 1, episode 3

In addition to the domestic worker uniform serving as a crucial component of the domestic worker performance, the adaptation or reconfiguration thereof serves as a signifier of the expansion of the conventional depiction of the domestic worker figure. In *Housekeepers* all of the domestic workers wear a conventional domestic worker uniform except Katleho, who wears a modified version of it. Her “uniform” consists of jeans and a T-shirt with a matching apron and kitten heels. She also wears makeup and earrings with a big bow in her hair (Figure 12). Katleho’s portrayal in *Housekeepers* stands out for its engagement with self-styling and fashion as a means of expressing one’s identity. This is a common trope adopted in chick lit texts which often portray their protagonists as fashion-forward individuals who use fashion as a “vehicle for creating a [specific] self” (Van Slooten 2006:227). In *Housekeepers*, the modification of Katleho’s uniform appears to be done so as to differentiate her from the other domestic workers, thereby serving as a vehicle through which to express the difference in her identity. Through Katleho’s portrayal, *Housekeeper’s* speaks back to the middle-class lens of the chick lit genre by extending one of its key characteristics to a domestic worker figure.

Furthermore, the difference in Katleho’s uniform depicts her as a character who differs from the other domestic workers in the series as she is presented as an aspirational figure who desires a life beyond domestic work. In addition to expressing this desire through deviating from the conventional domestic worker uniform, in the final episode of the season Katleho explicitly states her plans to further her studies so as to improve her financial situation. The fact that *Housekeepers* includes a domestic worker figure determined to leave her job in search of better employment relates to the stories of planned departures seen in Zukiswa Wanner’s *Maid in SA*. In *Maid in SA*, Wanner presents a number of different scenarios which could result in domestic workers leaving their jobs, one of which includes domestic workers improving their qualifications and then leaving to pursue better employment opportunities. In this regard, both *Maid in SA* and *Housekeepers* expand upon previous portrayals of domestic work by closely engaging with the aspirations of domestic workers to further their education and obtain better jobs. Furthermore, through Katleho’s portrayal, *Housekeepers* extends upon the aspirational narrative common to early post-apartheid television (Jacobs 2019). The purpose of this narrative was to reflect ideals of political and economic freedom and the characters used to represent these ideals were usually black middle class professionals (Ives 2007, Jacobs 2019). Domestic workers were rarely afforded the opportunity to be depicted as aspirational figures. In *Housekeepers*, Katleho is portrayed as a different kind of aspirational figure, one less removed from the social realities of the possibilities of upward mobility for the average working class individual. In this regard *Housekeepers* extends the aspirational role to a domestic worker and in so doing expands upon previous engagements with domestic work.

The scene in which Katleho states her aspirations is also significant as it is set in the communal garden. The garden is an important setting in *Housekeepers* as it is where the domestic workers and the gardener Max congregate during their breaks (Figure 13). The shots in which the communal garden is shown are generally long or medium long shots which places emphasis on the idea of community rather than individuality. It is here that Scott's notion of the hidden transcript comes into view as domestic workers use this space to discuss things they would not typically discuss in front of their employers. Scott describes the hidden transcript as the "offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (1990:5). He further argues that the hidden transcript can usually be seen "offstage, where subordinates may gather outside the intimidating gaze of power" (Scott 1990:18). In *Housekeepers*, the garden serves as a site where the hidden transcript is revealed and the domestic workers are able to express themselves more freely. It is also in the garden where the domestic workers (and Max) are able to form different kinds of bonds, including romantic ones.



Figure 12: Season 1, episode 6



Figure 13: Season 1, episode 2

Romantic relationships:

The expansion of the portrayal of the domestic worker figure is further demonstrated in *Housekeepers* through its exploration of the romantic relationships domestic workers engage in. This theme is also explored in Zukiswa Wanner's *The Madams* as it depicts the relationship which develops between Marita, one of the domestic workers in the text and Maria, her partner. The exploration of the romantic relationships domestic workers engage in is an important aspect of the expansion of their portrayal as former literary and television portrayals have rarely engaged with such personal aspects of their lives. Furthermore, portrayals which focus on the process through which domestic workers fall in love and maintain healthy relationships demonstrate a departure from portrayals of domestic workers as seductresses who lure their "masters" into their bed (Hill-Collins 2002:81). In *Housekeepers*, a romantic bond develops between Max and Maria, an older domestic worker in the drama. Most of their interactions take place in the garden but their first official date takes place in Maria's home. The scene in which this occurs opens with a very long shot of the township in order to establish that the setting has changed from the Zwide home in the previous scene. The next shot is a medium long shot in which Maria and Max are seen sitting in a small dimly lit room, not wearing their uniforms (Figure 14). The lack of uniform signals that the interaction between them will be social. The furniture in the room seems oversized for the area, it is a markedly different setting from the Zwide home which is spacious and elegantly furnished. The scene continues as they open up to each other about their lives and about the events that have led them to this stage in their lives. They also open up to one another about their previous relationships and lost lovers. Their conversations also refer to events which took place in their lives before

working for the Zwides. It is an interaction completely separate from their jobs. This is significant as the personal life of a domestic worker, separate from their employer or their job, has rarely been engaged with in popular representations of domestic workers. Instead, domestic workers have generally been depicted in terms of their functionality, or in relation to their employer in some form (Jansen 2019). *Housekeepers* however, boldly foregrounds multiple domestic workers from the onset through its title which indicates that the housekeepers, that is, the domestic workers, will be a major preoccupation of the drama. That being said, it is necessary to note that there is some engagement with the personal lives of domestic workers in the local television drama *The River*, but overall the focus is more pronounced in *Housekeepers*. *Housekeepers* expands upon previous representations by portraying domestic workers as people with lives of their own outside of their employer and employment, and in so doing provides one of the most holistic portrayals of domestic workers to date, thereby demonstrating a significant shift in the nature of their representation.



Figure 14: Season 1, episode 9

The season ends with the Zwides' deaths. Linda murders them with the help of Maria, who has recently learnt that Linda is June's daughter. Linda murders them after she escapes the room in which they had been holding her hostage once they discovered her true identity. Even though Linda is unable to exonerate her mother before her death in prison, she does eventually manage to convince the lead detective in the case of her mother's innocence and the Zwides' guilt. Despite this, Linda murders the Zwides before they are formally charged with anything. The manner in which the season ends further places the domestic worker figure at the fore as it is the employers who die at the hand of their domestic worker and her accomplice, who is also a domestic worker. Although Linda's plans do not result in the entirely desired outcome, as a result of her domestic worker alias she is able to gain revenge on the Zwides and in this regard, her quest proves successful. Linda's portrayal extends upon previous representations as it suggests that the manner in which domestic workers are often disregarded, underestimated and treated as invisible can actually be used as an advantage in gaining crucial information on their employers, information which in

some cases can be used to incriminate them. In reference to this “invisibility”, Esther Peeren (2014), in her analysis of the depiction of domestic workers in British period dramas, argues that rather than viewing domestic workers as invisible, a more useful analogy would be to view them as genies. She argues that the “ideal servant” can be likened to “a genie [which] does not decide by itself when to become visible, but is made to appear, usually by rubbing a bottle [...] compelled to grant its master’s wishes without question” (Peeren 2014:81). This, she contends, is similar to the position of the “ideal servant” who must not “show up unless required to perform a service; they must blend into the background, maintaining a semi-presence that reassures rather than haunts, while materialising fully only at the behest of their master or mistress.” (Peeren 2014:80). Peeren’s analogy suggests that the power is ultimately in the hands of the employer but in *Housekeepers*, Linda assumes some of this power as she uses her “genie-like” status to gain crucial evidence. In this regard, *Housekeepers* extends upon previous representations of domestic workers by reframing them as able to use a disempowering aspect of their job to empower themselves.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the television drama *Housekeepers* treatment of domestic work and the extent to which it expands upon previous depictions of domestic workers. It has argued that the drama expands upon conventional depictions of domestic workers, which have tended to centre on their functionality, by providing a depiction which explores their challenges, aspirations and romantic bonds. Furthermore, this chapter has argued that by providing a depiction of domestic workers which takes these aspects into consideration, *Housekeepers* has provided a holistic engagement with the domestic worker figure, one which highlights the subjective dimensions thereof. In addition to this, it has drawn on Scott’s notion of hidden and public transcripts to argue that the figure of the domestic worker is depicted as performative in *Housekeepers*, thereby suggesting that domestic work requires the adoption of a mask of deference when in the presence of employers. Through the presentation of this argument it has demonstrated how the visual medium of the television drama, with its use of cinematography and voice-over narration, has allowed for a representation of domestic workers which foregrounds their subjective experiences. In particular, it has highlighted the manner in which the use of specific camera shots, especially close-up shots, emphasise the performative aspects of domestic work and in so doing enhance viewer identification and empathy. Lastly, although *Housekeepers* has expanded upon previous engagements with domestic work, the fact that the main character of the drama is a law student pretending to be a domestic worker rather than an actual domestic worker, is somewhat problematic as it undermines the impact of this expansion.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“[W]hile popular art forms often appear on the surface to be conservative and unsophisticated – often featuring gender-stereotypical or stock figures for instance – consumers of these cultural forms go beyond stereotyping to use the storylines and insights they offer to interpret and make sense of social situations” (Spencer, Ligaga and Musila 2018:4)

Jansen’s largely historical study on domestic work in South Africa, *Like Family*, includes a section on the literary representation of domestic workers. These literary representations, Jansen argues, deal with “the issue of borders, whether [...] formally constructed by laws, or whether they relate to informal patterns of behaviour and conventions” (2019:271). She further argues that any story dealing with the issue of borders “may be told in such a way that it perpetuates stereotypes, or in a manner that results in a questioning of an entangled set-up” (Jansen 2019:271). Although I agree with Jansen’s assertion, I’d like to extend it by arguing that *any* story, not just one engaging with the issue of borders, may be told in such a way that it perpetuates stereotypes or questions them. In this study I have endeavoured to investigate the extent to which the representation of domestic workers and their relationship with their employers have been reframed in post-apartheid popular works of different genres. My investigation of post-apartheid representations of the domestic worker figure has identified several key representational shifts, the first being a shift to more holistic depictions of domestic workers and their lives outside of their occupations. In my reading of *The Madams* I found that the chick lit genre’s emphasis on female friendships allows for engagement with the friendship networks domestic workers develop amongst themselves. It also allows for a shift in previous portrayals of domestic workers, which often depicted them in terms of the “like family” trope; that is, as pseudo family members, to a portrayal which explores their roles as potential friends to their employers. Furthermore, I found that the chick lit genre’s engagement with female sexuality and the exploration thereof allowed for the portrayal of a queer domestic worker figure in a same-sex relationship. This is a significant shift in representation as the individual sexuality of the domestic worker figure has rarely been explored, instead most representations have depicted them as seductresses or victims of sexual exploitation. My reading of the self-help text *Maid in SA* has also revealed shifts in the representation of domestic workers. In particular it has found that through adopting the use of the satirical mode to engage in social critique, *Maid in SA* has expanded previous portrayals of domestic workers in South African literature by drawing attention to the plight of migrant domestic workers in South Africa and employer attitudes surrounding them. In addition to this, my reading of the television drama *Housekeepers* has, through the use of specific camera angles, music and other elements of cinematography, expanded previous portrayals of domestic workers by engaging with their

struggles, ambitions and romantic bonds. This allows for a more holistic depiction of them beyond their roles as domestic workers.

The palimpsestic

During the process of evaluating my findings I have found Ronit Frenkel's (2013) palimpsestic view of the term post-transitional useful in my analyses. As discussed in my introduction, Frenkel argues that a palimpsestic view of post-transitional writing allows for "a reading of the new in a way in which the layers of the past are still reflected through it" (2013:25). In the process of determining the extent of the change in representation I have and shown that despite the new ways in which the subject of domestic work is being treated in post-apartheid literature, "layers of the past are still reflected through it" (Frenkel 2013:25). An example of this can be seen in the "like family" trope, common to domestic work texts. Although domestic workers are sometimes still depicted in familial terms, there has been a shift towards depictions which acknowledge the potential of friendship between domestic workers and their employers.

In addition, as my study has shown, the strong relationship between domestic work and race, so prevalent during apartheid, has not vanished, but rather has become a lens through which to examine the presence of lingering racial prejudices in post-apartheid society. An example of this is seen in *The Madams* through its scrutiny of employer anxieties and racial attitudes regarding domestic work. It is also seen in the ways in which my chosen works complicate former domestic worker/employer dynamics by placing emphasis on intersections of race, class, sexuality and nationality. Furthermore, in contrast to the tendency of some apartheid-era writers to highlight the exploitation and unfair treatment of domestic workers so as to underscore the atrocities of the apartheid regime (Lenta 1989 and West 2009), post-apartheid writers such as Wanner appear to use the exploitation of domestic workers as a vehicle through which to comment on the failures of the democratic promise. Thus, while it is possible to identify some changes in the depiction of domestic workers and their relationships with their employers, these changes cannot be regarded as radical, complete overhauls of previous engagements. Instead, I argue that contemporary post-apartheid engagements with the subject are more usefully understood as complex reworkings of former depictions.

The continued marginalisation of the domestic worker figure

Although my chosen works have opened up new spaces with regard to the treatment of domestic work, there are still aspects in which the domestic worker figure remains marginalised. One of these ways includes the fact that the figure of the domestic worker is rarely afforded the role of

protagonist or the opportunity to be the main focus of a text. For example, in *The Madams*, the domestic workers in the text are supporting characters and it is a “madam” who takes on the role of protagonist, thereby perpetuating the chick lit genre’s tendency to privilege middle-class voices and experiences. Furthermore, in *Maid in SA* the text is divided in two sections, with the first section dedicated to advising domestic workers and the second to advising their employers. As a result of this, the focus of the text is still not exclusively placed on advising domestic workers. Additionally, in *Housekeepers*, although the domestic worker figure Linda is the protagonist, she is not an actual domestic worker but rather a law graduate going incognito, thus essentially the protagonist is still not a domestic worker in its ‘truest’ sense. These examples illustrate a lack of engagement with the ordinary, everyday experiences in all facets of domestic workers’ lives, thereby demonstrating a need for texts which make room for this.

There is also room for greater scholarly engagement with the different ways in which popular forms adapt to local context and perform new functions. My study has contributed towards extending debates on this as it underscores the ways in which the genres of chick lit, self-help and the television drama are taken forward and adapted to the African context. My reading of *Maid in SA* has demonstrated shifts in the typical subject matter of self-help literature as the subject of domestic work has been added to the genre’s predominant focus on love, marriage and sexual relationships. It has also shown how the self-help and chick lit genre take on social and political issues through the incorporation of the satirical mode, an uncommon approach to the genres. It has also illustrated how the struggles and ambitions of domestic workers are afforded more space in the storylines of television dramas, thereby extending upon previous representation of domestic workers on television.

Limitations and areas of further study

Although my study takes forward debates on domestic work and popular forms more broadly, this study is not without its limits. The first limitation being that there are other texts foregrounding the domestic worker figure, from other parts of the African continent, which I have not included in this dissertation. These texts include Makanaka Mavengere-Munsaka’s *Perfect Imperfections* (2019), which explores domestic worker/employer relationships in the Zimbabwean context. Examining this text and others like it would have allowed for a transnational engagement with the subject which could provide interesting insights into the subject. I also could have examined more recent comics from Stephen Francis and Rico Schacherl’s *Madam & Eve* comic strip so as to evaluate the extent to which more recent events in the post-apartheid period have affected the nature of its content. In addition to this, I have left out texts which foreground domestic work but would not be

considered popular. An example of this is Damon Galgut's recent Booker Prize-winning novel *The Promise* (2021), which uses domestic work as a vehicle through which to examine the successes and failures of the democratic promise. These are all texts which approach domestic work in complex, dynamic ways and are worthy subjects of critical enquiry. Another source of enquiry which this study has gestured towards but not engaged with in much detail, is the sexual exploitation and violation of domestic workers by male employers. This too, is a worthy subject of critical enquiry. I am also of the view that there is room for greater critical enquiry into the relationship between domestic work and broader questions of agency, as well as the various permutations of this relationship in popular forms. This is because greater engagement with this will contribute towards the growing body of scholarship arguing that the debate is not whether African popular culture engages with the political but rather "to what ends and by whom, these political questions are mobilized" (Musila 2022:10).

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