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“Politics of the Female Body” in the Selected Poems of Malika Ndlovu

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Abstract

South African woman poet Malika Ndlovu, locates the female body in the different realms like society, culture and history in the post-colonial context and traces the politics that are woven, constructed and construed around her body. Ndlovu, registers her protest and resistance against the female body being reduced to a site of colonisation and exploitation by the patriarchal societies. She employs the female body parts as symbols, metaphors and images to reflect the oppression and subjugation that she is subjected to physically, psychologically, emotionally, culturally and historically. The politics that she constructs around the female body focus upon how the female body is transformed into a site of colonisation, into a site to reconstruct the politics of history, into a body to restructure politics of amnesia and finally as a body that transforms into a site to revive female bonding. This paper traces the politics of the female body that are present in four of her poems, ‘Spinal Secrets,’ ‘Next Door,’ ‘Lydia In the Wind’ and ‘Women Weaving’ by drawing theoretical frame works of Franz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Katrak, K. H., Joanna Thornborrow and other post-colonial theorists to scaffold the ideas of the researcher.

Keywords: body politics, body as a site of colonisation, amnesia, female bonding, historical memory, post colonialism.

Introduction

Malika Ndlovu is a poet and playwright from Post Apartheid South Africa who believes in the healing and medicinal nature inherent in writing poetry. She believes that once a poet reaches the crescendo and climax within the complex writing system, the naked truth spills out from the deep psyche and starts spinning an emotional and awe-

inspiring narrative. Her vociferous voice calls out for the empowerment of women's status in every realm like domesticity, education, employment, culture, politics, economy and, of course, women's autonomy and freedom. Ndlovu asserts that "The starting point is yes, I'm a writer, and then the context is, a writer from where, I'm a writer from Africa, so I'm a black woman, I'm an African woman specifically" (Boswell 2003: 589).

Through her works, she celebrates womanhood, elevates women's status and appreciates the beauty of the female body and sings of the women's strengths. Running parallel to these ideas, she decries male domination enforced upon women and protests the suppression and oppression of women caught within the complex web of patriarchal templates. She resists the colonisation of women's bodies by her male partner. She delves deep into the gender inequities prevalent in patriarchal post-colonial society and protests the bias and violence that women are subjected to. Her poems reflect her vision, views, ideas and insights for a better society free from gender disparity.

Malika Ndlovu's collections of poems are *Born in Africa But* (1999), *Womb to World: A Labour of Love* (2001), *Truth is Both Spirit and Flesh* (2008), and the poetic memoir *Invisible Earthquake: A Woman's Journey through Stillbirth* (2009).

This paper attempts to discuss the poems of Malika Ndlovu in the backdrop of politics woven around the female body regarding political, economic, cultural and physical aspects of South African women. The argument of this paper relates well and runs parallel with the idea of Ronit Frenkel: "Issues surrounding victimhood, voice, agency, subjectivity, power, gaze, silences, knowledge and nation have often been recast in African feminist theory and need further exploration in South Africa today" (02). Though the above-mentioned aspects have deeply affected the lives of South African women, patriarchy has been the ubiquitous 'profoundly non-racial institution' (Sachs 1993:13) that has its way across various communities. Ndlovu employs powerful images, metaphors and symbols about the female body to represent the searing signatures etched on her physical body and within the deep layers of her psyche

as the marks of violence, colonisation and oppression unleashed upon her by the untamed male authority.

The politics she constructs around the female body reveal and interpret how the female body is transformed into a site of patriarchal colonisation. She exposes how the female body turns into a site where the politics of history are revisited and reconstructed. Ndlovu uncovers the woman's body as a site where politics of amnesia vis-a-vis memory are retraced within the post-colonial context. She locates the female body that is transformed into a site to revive and renew female bonding among the women poets in the post-colonial and post-Apartheid contexts. Ndlovu locates the female body within different social and cultural institutions to trace and retrace the various power dynamics, power politics, power equations and power relations that define, alter and shape the status of a woman in the apathetic patriarchal framework. Through her poetic works, Ndlovu reflects on the statements made by Spencer and Wood: "Feminist theories provide insights into different aspects of power dynamics in social institutions implementing "patriarchal colonialism" (477).

Through her poems, Ndlovu questions the neglected aspect of a woman's autonomous agency and protests the near absence of her representation in intellectual areas. She questions the patriarchal authority that manifests itself through framing unfair, non-inclusive, biased and subjective laws and norms against women within social, cultural, political and legal institutions, thereby reinforcing the view of Broadbent. "Radical feminist analyses reveal that the debris of "patriarchal colonialism" includes the continuing subordination of women through culturally condoned, widespread, and institutionalised male violence that survives in various forms to contemporary times" (2011).

Ndlovu locates the female body within the backdrop of a post-colonial patriarchal society. She focuses on how women have been reduced to sites or territories of exploitation, subjugation, oppression and colonisation through normalisation, internalisation and indoctrination by the various social institutions. She claims that it is crucial and necessary for women to decolonise their minds to liberate themselves from social and cultural shackles. Frantz Fanon, in his

seminal text on decolonization, *The Wretched of the Earth*, suggested that decolonisation was the “putting into practice” (37) of the sentence “the last shall be first and the first last” (37). It is a remarkable move that the marginalised bodies are turning around and giving back, resisting, protesting and contesting the power relations and power dynamics. Going by the theory of Fanon, Ndlovu seems to be suggesting women to interrogate, introspect, and question the politics of power that rest within the pockets of social, political, cultural and other institutions in the postcolonial patriarchal society.

In the poem, ‘Born in Africa, But,’ the awakening of her female consciousness, the turnaround of power relations and the experience of life through the perspective of an awakened woman to her situations are made evident. She says the universal spirit and essence that pervades every female has been stimulated and aroused within her.

“Born in Africa but
 living before and beyond
 living before and beyond
 a universe awakens in me” (28-31).

Ndlovu articulates that women are more powerful than they are actually held to be by social and cultural institutions. She envisions a perfect, brilliant and astounding image of the women who lie outside the peripheries of the patriarchal society’s limited imagination and beliefs. Through her poems, she gives a concrete shape to her vision, dreams and ideas. She gives a clarion call to all those women who are entrapped and enmeshed within the societal structures; to break themselves free, rally for themselves, realise their dreams and demonstrate their powerful potential. For her, poetry is a comfort and a vibrant vehicle that veers her vision into visible action.

Her poems articulate her ideas, hopes and visions. She seems to echo Audre Lorde’s ideas in her text, ‘Poetry is not a Luxury’ “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (36).

The Female Body as an Archive of Secrets and Stories

In her most celebrated poem, ‘Spinal Secrets’, Ndlovu strategically structures every word that appears like a single vertebra of the spinal

cord. The way each word has been positioned to replicate the structure of the spinal cord is highly symbolic. She considers the spinal cord as the archive of a woman's memories and dreams. The poet delineates each vertebra as a single chapter of her life experiences. For her, the spinal cord is the repository of every woman's remarkable reminiscences and dazzling dreams. The poet has symbolised the woman's spine as the signpost that carries the secret scars of scarred memories and dreams that were dashed to the dust and endless episodes of violence that the woman has passed through her life. The essence of this poem seems to reflect the critical opinion of Goldstein: "It is because the female body has for so long been identified as an erotic object, canonised in the nudes of high art and the sex symbols of popular culture, that efforts to locate and describe alternative images became a paramount goal of the feminist movement and [therefore] of the culture at large" (Goldstein, vii-viii).

In patriarchal societies, the politics surrounding the female body have situated the woman's body within the narrow borders of eroticism and objectification. The popular, cultural and traditional tropes have located her within the narrow confines of gender stereotyping. It is essential to relocate the female body by breaking the conventional imagery and recreating an alternate image of the female body as an individual with intellectual capacity and creative prowess. Very interestingly, Ndlovu reimagines the female physical body as an emblem of empowerment and a resource of resilience, as a symbol of undaunted courage and as an archive of spirited stories and as a sign of collective consciousness of all the women.

"For
Each
Life
A
Single
Story
Line" (1-7).

She says that between each vertebra, there lie buried painful secrets and traumatic tales that the women have experienced since time immemorial. Only through coaxing and cajoling do the secrets spill out and the tales retold. Otherwise, the secrets are dissolved into

fragmented memories that settle into the spinal cord's twisted and braided bone chamber.

“Between
Each
Vertebra
Coded
Secrets
Revealed
Only
Through
Questioning
Listening
Through
Time
Locked
In
The
Braided
Bone

Chamber” (8-25).

The awakening and consciousness towards her universal spirit had inspired her to return to her storyline, recall her life experiences and rediscover and reclaim her status. She says that all her stories have been wrapped in flesh, tissue and blood as they are true and come alive through every experience being retold and revisited. Within every cell are buried the hidden scars, the signatures of violence unleashed on her by her male companion. Every vertebra speaks of her stories of how her dreams and desires have been dashed, dissolved and disillusioned.

Ndlovu is retelling the stories surrounding the female body to restore the fallen human dignity, piece together the fragments of the body and infuse breath and life into the starving soul. She narrates the stories of violence, colonisation and oppression perpetrated through her vulnerable body only to unravel the politics woven around her body.

“buried
in
cells
wrapped
in

tissue
attached
to
bone
my
body
is
my
witness" (61-74).

Every atom of her bone is a witness to her dreams, desires and hopes that she doesn't want to forget and forego. At this juncture, it is essential to bring in the ideas of Kirby as she states: "What we take to be anatomy is just another moment in culture's refiguring of itself. In other words, anatomy is an illusion of sorts, albeit a very powerful one, and one that [Jane] Gallop imbues with a certain political efficacy" (75-76).

Ndlovu employs female anatomical structure as a powerful symbol only to crush all the illusions woven around the female body that predominantly prefigure within male gaze as an object of sex, pleasure and beauty devoid of any potential political, cultural and social agency.

In this poem, 'Spinal Secrets' Ndlovu reconfigures and redefines a woman's spine as a symbol of staggering strength, fearless fortitude, immense power and profound potential. It represents a symbolic archive of secrets about the woman's body, anatomy, autonomy, her life, regrets, promises, memories, desires and dreams. Through the spine, Ndlovu tries to deconstruct power relations, transform the power dynamics and seeks decolonisation of the body by male domination. The poet can transform the expression of power in society by transfiguring and refiguring the body's relationship to power.

As Thornborrow says: "[We need to] consider certain kinds of dissuasive action, including silence, as interactional resources available to speaker across many different setting, rather than see particular for utterances as being inherently more or less powerfully than others. Which of the resources a speaker chooses to use and the interactional outcomes that choice will depend on any numbers of

factors at play in the context at hand. This will always be an of the moment affairs. This idea of women using the resources available”

Interestingly, reflecting the theory of Thornborrow on how women use the resources available to relive their memories and narrate their stories, Ndlovu has chosen a woman’s spine as a repository of her secrets and stories. She considers a woman’s body part as a resource available to her to store her secrets, speak of her silence, and register resistance and protests. This context can be traced to the text on *Politics of the Female Body, Post Colonial Women Writers of the Third World*, where Ketu. K. Katrack says: “A politics of the female body includes the construction and controls of female sexuality, its acceptable and censored expressions, and its location socio culturally, even materially in post colonial regions. Third world women writers represent the complex ways in which women’s bodies are colonised” (8).

The Female Body as a Site of Colonisation

In agreement with the view of Ketu K Katrack, the poem, ‘Next Door’, represents and expresses how women’s bodies are colonised in socio cultural domains. Ndlovu seems to agree with Meena’s critical statement on African Feminism: “African feminism is seen as a type of historical contestation of the oppressive social and cultural conditions that surround women’s lives in Africa” (1992).

The poem opens its doors to the theme of violence, and that violence is essentially a part of a woman’s everyday life. The title suggests how violence permeates within the domains of domesticity and operates within the closed confines of the neighboring next door. This poem addresses the issue of male aggressive domination and rape within marriage and how the female body becomes the territory to unleash his unbridled male power. The poem’s structure is unique, divided into three stanzas; each line comprises two words. The first line begins with ‘He’, followed by the next line starting with ‘She’. He initiates action; She remains passive.

“He enters
 She falls
 He circles
 She murmurs
 He invades
 She whimpers” (1-6).

This status of the man being active and aggressive and the woman forced into being subservient and passive continues through the poem's tempo, reinforcing the relationship between the predator and the prey. The moves indicate the hungry beast entering, circling the woman to determine and define his territorial domination and colonisation. The woman falls, murmurs and whimpers and finally succumbs to the invasion of the coloniser. The woman's resistance to physical colonisation through her 'murmurs' and 'whimpers' throws light on the restricted and subdued expression through limited language usage. The woman is colonised by the man so deeply that her articulation of pain and trauma is reduced to whimpers. This episode of violence draws parallels with the maneuvers between the hunted and the hunter. The vulnerable prey 'falls' and wriggles after being caught within the fold of the predator, whines and whimpers helplessly as the predator takes over the game. The choice of the word, 'invasion' by the poet, is indicative of how the female body is conquered and then transformed into a site of colonisation and subjugation by the man.

Foucault challenges the idea that "power is wielded by people or groups by way of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive. 'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure" (Foucault 1998: 63).

This notion of Foucault of how power is everywhere and comes from everywhere can be applied to study the power dynamics, power relations and the constant yearning of the male to explore, exploit and establish colonisation over the female body. Patriarchal power and domination operate at multiple levels within society and home. To sustain his control and agency over the female, he resorts to aggressive acts that spill and seep into the domestic domains and strip her dignity, rights and her autonomous agency. Women's resistance and protest against male domination and violation of their rights, widespread in all practices and forms within the home and outside, can be seen as a political act.

"He threatens
She Resists
He Abuses
He Violates
She Obeys" (9-13).

The above lines focus on how the man gains over her body and violates her through abuse, threats and violence – physically and emotionally, by not conceding to her pleas and resistance. The woman confronts him initially but finally surrenders and succumbs to his male aggression and power. This act is a show of power and control that can be equated with power dynamics like ‘capture,’ ‘conflict,’ ‘invasion,’ ‘surrender,’ ‘conquest’ and ‘colonisation.’ Here, the man speaks the language of power through threats and abuses, whereas the woman speaks the language of resistance and protest through her silence, murmurs and whimpers. The expression of her protest and resistance against the colonisation of her body and spirit is restrained, subdued and passive. The entire act is devoid of any human emotions and expressions, thereby reducing the female body to a site of colonisation and as a symbol of a sexual object. He looks at her body only as an object of his sexual gratification and pleasure without any human qualities. In this context, the view of Katrak adds meaning: “In resisting patriarchal domination, women make strategic use of their bodies, often their only available avenue for resistance. For instance, they resist patriarchal domination via-speech, silence, starvation, illness and so on” (8)

“He exits
 She unfolds
 He tries
 She Forgives
 He tries
 She Forgives
 She Dies
 He Lives” (20-27).

The above lines draw our attention to how social and cultural institutions have normalised this rigmarole of sexual abuse, violation of human rights and rape. Throughout the act of colonisation, she recoils and withdraws herself emotionally and remains stoic and frigid. This line is poignant as it speaks of how the woman has been crushed and how she passes through this horrendous violence inflicted upon her day after day. The ritualistic colonisation pattern continues to haunt her as she loses her spirit and body to him every day. As he lives through this institutionalisation of violence, she dies in spirit and emotions, as her body is reduced to an instrument of sexual object and abuse. The woman loses her language, human

dignity, identity, spirit and emotions under the aggressive, apathetic patriarchal domination and colonisation. To preserve her dignity and identity, the woman has chosen silence as a medium and language of resistance and protest. Katrak says that "female resistances are undertaken with self-consciousness and remarkable creativity that decides to take risks and confront domination selectively and strategically in the interest of self-preservation" (3)

The Female body is a Site for Reconstructing Memory and History

The poem, 'Lydia in the Wind,' is a poetic tribute to Ou Tamaletjie Williams, who died on 16 June 1910. Lydia Williams was a former slave girl in Cape Town, South Africa, who was emancipated after slavery was officially abolished. Ndlovu weaves an intense narrative to celebrate the life of Lydia, her experiences as a slave girl, and the whip marks she carried on her body as signatures of the colonial enterprise. Ndlovu laments over how such an inspiring person, who has counselled several victims of slavery who were psychologically, economically, emotionally and physically yoked with the burden of slavery and its aftermath, has been relegated to the footnotes of history. Lydia pioneered in trauma counselling; she reached out to many emancipated slaves to bring them to her bosom for solace and hope. She was the embodiment of freedom and a universal spirit. Unfortunately, she is forgotten between the two monumental upheavals; Colonialism and Apartheid. Ndlovu has taken up the mission of revisiting the past, remembering the forgotten by returning to the cultural, social and political historical narratives of South Africa. Through her poem, she is celebrating the life of the unsung heroine, Lydia Williams. Ndlovu is reviving the spirit of freedom by interrogating the colonial past. The words of Leela Gandhi hold significance in this context. "Post colonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia to the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project dedicated to the academic task of revisiting, remembering, and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past" (4).

Through the following lines from the poem, 'Lydia in the Wind,' Ndlovu personifies Lydia as the wind, an element of force and energy. By embracing the wind, by being the wind and by becoming

the wind, Lydia embodies the spirit of freedom; but the wind is agitated as her wails fall on deaf ears. She may rest in peace only when her narrative, punctuated with pain and trauma, is remembered and honoured in contemporary times.

“This wind is a wounded witness
she will not be still
not until we are listening
Are we listening” (1-4).

The identity of Lydia as an emancipated slave, as a healer of psychological wounds perpetrated by slavery, is now forgotten. Her identity is stuck between the two unwieldy historical pasts; Colonialism and Apartheid. Her cry for identity is resonated through the howls of the wind as she moves restlessly between the two plots and gets sucked into the empty spaces within the country’s historical records. Would she ever be recognised and given her due identity? In this context, Stubbs observes “the work of artists and writers and pastors and theologians through their increasing attention being given to slave stories, is helping to access this part of our past” (Cape Times, December 1999).

Ndlovu laments over how the songs of tragedy and truth are buried within the faded and jaded pages of history. She then raises a pertinent question – ‘What if we don’t want to remember our past today, does that recreate an account that’s free from captivity?’

“This wind is a haunted woman
she is wild with rememberings
singing the truth and the tragedy
of our buried heritage
our slavery
If we do not know – are we free” (11-16).

Lydia was held captive when she was alive; after her passing away, she is still being held captive between the broken chains of historical events.

“She is held captive once again
this time by a broken chain of events
our degrees of amnesia” (30-34).

Michael Weeder, in his book *Slaves at the Cape: A Guidebook for Beginner Researchers*, says

"I see Lydia as representing a community of ex-slaves who contributed to the life of the church and society as a whole. More broadly, she stands for people who struggled their whole lives against injustice" (30).

Ndlovu asserts that history should retrace the stories of forgotten heroes. She says the country should recollect and return the narratives to their due places of honour. Recording and documenting the forgotten records of the cultural and political history of the country breathe life and spirit into the buried memories. Only then did the stories spread their luminous light across the recovery paths and bring in the light of consciousness. In this context, it's essential to refer to Frenkel's view on forgotten history and the importance of reviving it "...a history of women who have been excluded from official accounts by both their male counterparts and western constructions" (4).

In this process of breaking free from amnesia and embedding oneself into the collective memory of the country's history, the road to recovery is initiated. The organic integration of one's single identity merges with the other, thereby leading to the collective consciousness.

"And in the questioning
comes the who am I
out of the listening
comes through you am I
through you am I" (38-42).

In the poem 'Lydia,' the poet symbolises the buried and forgotten body of a slave woman to the forgotten history of the country. Ndlovu employs the symbolic images of the wind to the universal spirit of freedom and liberty. She personifies the wind as the haunted, wild woman wailing loudly about the truth of the traumatised past. The buried body of Lydia (history) symbolically should be exhumed to reclaim, recover and relive the memories. Here, the body of Lydia becomes the site to reconstruct the forgotten memory; her body becomes a link between the two worlds and two histories, Colonialism and Apartheid. Lydia's body becomes the site for constructing the 'memory' of the horrific images of the horrendous past of South Africa, seared by the deep wounds of slavery and oppression. The symbolic significance of the body of

Lydia gets elevated here as it represents the traumatised body and spirit of South Africa, oppressed under colonialism, slavery and Apartheid.

One can trace the path of rediscovery only when one revisits and unmask the historical content. One should allow the free flow of knowledge of the past and remove the blocks on the path of historical knowledge funds.

This poem maps the inspiration to regain the identity and merge with the conscious collective historical memory of the country. Ndlovu says: “going within! is a conscious step/ toward a deeper/ listening! a decision to disconnect! by turning inward! returning the beam! to its source” (Conning Ndlovu, 2000: 13).

The Female body as a Site of Female Bonding

The following poem for the study is ‘Women Weaving’. Ndlovu transforms the entire community of women writers of South Africa into one single unit and one single body as a site to exchange and express creative acumen, innovative insights, writing skills and extend moral support to one another. In fact, the acronym ‘WEAVE’ stands for ‘Women’s Education and Artistic Voice Expression’. As a body, ‘WEAVE’ encourages the women to weave their thoughts, ideas, visions and views on women’s education, empowerment, expression, and liberation into concrete shapes that manifest into extraordinary bodies of literary works. Ndlovu feels humbled, healed and inspired in the company of these women when the words work their way into weaving an incredible bond among them. Female bonding blooms as their experiences are willingly shared and courageously discussed. The WEAVE is transformed into a consecrated site of female bonding and companionship where their vulnerabilities are revealed, wounds are healed, spirits are revived, and experiences are exchanged.

Ndlovu claims, “Poetry for me began as an intimate and immediate journal of expression. Here was one place where I could whisper, sing, shout, mourn and mutter to myself in reflection, in states of pain or conflict and even moments of awe at the visions, the worlds this path of expression led me to. I could retreat and mentally roam free of the boundaries of what was expected of someone my

age, my gender, my nationality at any point in time "(Conning Ndlovu, 2000).

Kirby says that the "challenge is to realise the ways in which we are inextricably immersed within the strange weave of essentialism's identity, and to acknowledge that this bind is one that is not merely prohibitive, but also enabling" (72). True to the words of Kirby, The creative body weaves an individual identity of each woman writer that merges with the collective identity of the community of women writers. The poem, 'Women Weaving,' discusses how the shared spaces and agency binds them emotionally and enables them to produce an extraordinary body of artistic creation.

"The blood of our experience exchanged
In the company of these women
Anonymous spaces turn sacred site
Willingly
Courageously" (7-11).

As 'Weave' embodies a space, the other glaring and cruel empty and unexplored spaces like human relationships, intellectual and creative aspects, lost childhood, troubled teenage, abandoned and orphaned lives are now infused with renewed relationships, genuine laughter, revived spirit as they take their masks off to reveal their real selves, real identity, real agency by recognising their free – flowing roles within the tribe of 'SHE'.

"I laugh
I play like my pre-teen self
I can lay my masks on the ground
For us all to dance around
Synchronising
Recognising our flowing roles
In this tribe of She" (18-25).

These women writers explore and identify with their national, historical and cultural lineages through their artistic expressions. The gender dynamics are revisited and redefined through their voices as they invest their emotions in artistic expressions. They engage their space and time in creating artistic enterprises through which they can relocate their autonomous agency.

In this context, it is imperative to bring in the quotation of Ambrose Bierce:

“To men a man is but a mind. Who cares what face he carries or what form he wears? But woman’s body is the woman.”(p.15). The organisation, ‘Weave’, embodies the body, mind, spirit and artistic creativity of women writers of South Africa. This symbolic embodiment transforms into a social agent of a woman’s autonomous body and universal soul. The process of identity forming and self-actualisation concretizes into realisation of the collective experiences of the women poets. By realising their social and cultural agency through their creative prowess and literary enterprise, women writers can situate themselves within the complex social, cultural and intellectual tropes. Desiree Lewis reflects this idea: “the eclecticism of the writing demonstrates how the creative impulse can shift conventional barriers and create new ways of seeing, new ways of writing and, for readers, new ways of thinking about their world” (Mail & Guardian, December 2000).

The Female body as a Site to Reclaim the True Identity

The next poem, ‘Instruments,’ engages with the themes of the female body, its immense power, and its indestructible spirit. In this poem, Ndlovu shifts the woman’s body to the elevated realms of aesthetic aura and spiritual discipline. She situates the female body within the universal space and refers to it as the embodiment of light and hope. The female body operates as an instrument to awaken and rekindle the universal consciousness buried under the cold embers of patriarchal perception and opinion. She transforms the female body into a site to reclaim the true calling of who they are and what they are capable of. The female body is a tremendously powerful site that ignites, inspires and awakens the perception of self-actualisation and self-realisation. Across the ages, the patriarchal gaze has looked down upon the female body as an instrument of sexual indulgence. But, Ndlovu subverts this misconception by deconstructing the debasing and dull image of the female held within the rigid patriarchal framework. She then reconstructs the dignified and incandescent image of the female by transporting her to the higher realms of society. Ndlovu creates a collective body of womanhood, infuses female consciousness into it and then re-reads the integrated female bodies as a single unit. When she is referring to ‘We’, she is referring to the unified, single unit of the female body; thereby embodying and representing the undivided voice and the shared spirit. The idea of female bonding and sisterhood is registered in patriarchal spaces’ dark and shadowy corridors. The lurking fears

and reservations within these dim alleys are allayed by flashing effervescent light, incredible knowledge and togetherness through the beautiful female bonding and sisterhood. In her poem 'Instruments,' she sings about the beauty of female bonding:

"We are light beings
Some slumbering
Some awakening
To the truth of who we are" (1-4)

Abel discusses the value of female friendship: "I seek to represent the world as women imagine it could be, and as many women have created it. Feminist theory must take into account the forces maintaining the survival of women, as well as those that maintain the subordination of women. A theory of female friendship is meant to give form, expression, and reality to the ways in which women have been for our Selves and each other." (434)

Ndlovu calls the women brilliant and steadfast stars who shine their bright light on every possible aspect of life. In a way, the poet seems to be reiterating that every space in society is influenced and inspired by her imminent, immense and indestructible charisma. She calls the women the imposing and shining messengers of love and peace. Their status is unparalleled and supreme as they are endowed with a unique capacity to create and recreate. Here, the poet reinforces dual ideas, one of motherhood and the other as an artist, capable of creating beautiful pieces of literary, academic, artistic and critical work. Katrak supports her idea of how power relations and distribution are manifested in a traditionally patriarchal society. "It suggests that economic, political, and cultural norms can constitute an ideological framework that controls women's bodies and identity. There we find, among men and women, a power distribution gap that leads to women discrimination". [9]

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and unconsciously constitute an ideological framework that controls women's bodies." (Katrak 42)

In this traditional cultural and political setup, women are discriminated against in all possibilities of action and orientation. Their wings are clipped tightly by the societal norms, designed to suit men's conveniences. Women struggle with external forces to unfold themselves and uncover their profound potential through writing. Writing is a process of catharsis that helps them to heal; here, the words of Alice Walker add value: "I think writing really helps you heal yourself. I think if you write long enough, you will be a healthy person."

Ndlovu, speaks of the different capacities and possibilities that women can accomplish. She says that women can be exemplary healers; and can restore the broken bodies and spirits of the women who are crushed under the rigid patriarchal paradigms. Her poem, 'Instruments,' reflects this idea:

"Indestructible stars
We are light beings
Portals of love
Makers of peace
Creators of beauty" (5-9).

These women can be restored to health and happiness and be healed in body and spirit by infusing confidence and self-reliance, and help them to rediscover and reinvent themselves in the newly found sisterhood. Ndlovu says that women can trace their steps towards rediscovery and reinvention by embarking upon a journey into their 'self', to uncover their inherent prowess and acumen only to re-emerge as liberated women.

"We are healers
We are believers inherently
Rediscovering our way
Homeward
Inward" (22-26).

Ndlovu reasserts that a woman is born free and entitled to enjoy her status of freedom and autonomy in all walks of life. To be free is her natural state of being, and love is the emotion she shares and enjoys as if it is her second nature. She reclaims that women are born to bring light into other lives and that they honour each passing

moment as a precious gift of life. The idea of enjoying life and freedom is intrinsic to her personality. It comes naturally to her persona as she is personified and embodied as unbridled nature in all its expanse and bounty. Such natural zeal and spirit, which is supposed to permeate fully within all layers of life, is shackled and kept subservient under male oppression, colonisation and domination. It is time for the woman to retrace, rediscover and recharge with full gusto by breaking the boundaries, treading the unexplored areas and spreading the wide span of wings to take off and enjoy the gift of life.

"We are born to bring light
To honour the blessing of each moment
The gift of every life" (30-32).

It is important to bring in the quote of Toni Morrison from *Beloved* :

"She's a friend of my mind. She gathers me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them right back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind" (249).

Toni Morrison has celebrated the beauty and significance of female bonding, sisterhood and motherhood in her works. Referring to Morrison's quote adds meaning to the context here, as Ndlovu also emphasises the concept of friendship and sisterhood that inspires and kindles a bond that welds the women together to forge their possibilities, potentialities and capabilities and surge into uncharted avenues.

Conclusion

The poems of Malika Ndlovu discussed here have reflected the different dimensions, perceptions and politics surrounding the female body. In the poem, 'Spinal Secrets', the female body has been transformed into a site of archiving secrets and stories of a woman that she carries within her spinal cord forever. The poem 'Next Door,' presents the stark side of the female experience, as her body becomes a site of colonisation within the domestic doors. In the poem, 'Lydia in the Wind,' the dead and forgotten body of a slave woman is transformed into a site of reconstructing memory and history. The poem, 'Women Weaving,' portrays the collective body of women

writers of South Africa, which becomes a site of female bonding. The poem 'Instruments' converts the female body into a site to reclaim the true calling of women's status and identity.

In the poems, 'Next Door,' 'Spinal Secrets,' 'Lydia in the Wind,' 'Women Weaving' and 'Instruments,' Ndlovu has reimaged the female body by deconstructing the traditional images that man has created about a woman. Since time immemorial, patriarchal society has constructed the image of women only through one lens, the lens of desire and pleasure. A Woman has been embodied as the object of sex and as a tool of sexual gratification. But, Ndlovu has transfigured the body of a female into a vehicle of inherent intellect, intrinsic creativity, fantastic imagination, profound insights and inspiring ingenuity. The socially constructed binaries within the structures of patriarchy to define man and woman: strong/weak, masculine/feminine, dominant/oppressed, creative/ unimaginative are overturned by Ndlovu, thereby reversing the sexual politics associated with the female body.

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