

Analysing the use of Humour in the South African English Literary Works to Understand its Role in Building Resilience and Challenging Societal Stigmas

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The study critically analysed how humans inherently use humour as a coping mechanism, and more importantly, as a tool to rebel against societal injustices as articulated in some South African literary works. Through careful analysis of two South African literary novels: “Ways of Dying” (1995) by Zakes Mda and, “Mother to Mother” (1998) by Sindiwe Magona, it was discovered that humour can be used to ease pain, suffering, while also used as a weapon against oppression. The study also incorporated relevant academic literature that to explore how humour is a catalyst for change and creating a sense of community, ease emotional pain, and challenge the stereotypical stigmatised tendencies that characterises unequal communities. This qualitative, conceptual study is based on Freud’s Relief Theory to explore the disparities of people from various socio-economic backgrounds; to investigate the value of humour in playing an essential role in building resilience, and equipping the powerless with strength to deal with the harsh realities of poverty and suffering.

Keywords: *Humour, Resilience, Coping Mechanism, South Africa, Relief Theory*

Introduction

The famous saying about laughter being the best medicine seems to be true. For laughter to evoke its ‘healing’ abilities, there must be a stimulating agent called humour. According to numerous scholars such as Kyomugisha (2025); Potter (2023) and Karłyk-Ćwik (2021), humour can become a defence mechanism against adverse suppressed rage which could result in violent actions. This explanation of humour is relevant to the South African societal situation riddled with societal inequality, oppression of the powerless and man-made abject poverty and lack. The South African history is characterised by violent episodes that resulted in a strained race-relations among the various peoples who call the country their original home. It is therefore worthwhile to study the effects of such an abstract element called humour that kept people laughing even in the face of calamity.

According to Dionigi, Duradoni & Vagnoli, (2023) humour is explained differently according to varying cultures, but the general understanding is that it is used to ease any kind of pain, especially emotional or traumatic pain. This ability to ease pain is also explicitly explained by Wood et al. (2018), who posit that “humour can also be used as a tool in the education process to ease tensions and create a safe environment to discuss issues of cultural differences and inequality.” South Africa is a diverse racial, cultural and traditional nation where misunderstandings and

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conflicts naturally happens, and humour is one of the immediate inherent tools to ease the tension. If humour has the power to even create a safe space to have a conversation to tackle differences of any nature as the scholars above declared, then it is worth employing to resolve challenges and maintain favourable sustainable resolutions.

The more inclusive definition of humour was offered by Nwankwo (2024) who quoted Ruch & Köhler 1998. According to these scholars, "humour has been described [as] 'a socio-cultural construct, seen as an attitude or world view that allows one to perceive and react to the world in ways that are forbearing and lenient'". This emphasises how the Relief theory posits about humour, that it is a psychological phenomenon (Freud 1960,1991), and in the definition above, it is a process which help individuals to forbear or tolerate pain which eases the discomfort (Msimanga, Tshuma & Matsilele 2022). The forbearing character of humour may be the reason some scholars decided to study the lying part of humour, that like an addiction, it provides a temporary relief while the root cause of the pain continues, even more severe. Such individual scholars, according to Morreall (1989), even go to the extent of rejecting the value of humour in people's lives. The value of humour is highlighted in the way it serves people who need a coping mechanism. In most cases, such individuals inherently use laughter to process a situation that is foreign to the conscious mind, hence the tapping into the subconscious for relief (Freud 1960, John 2009, Soundary 2003).

Utilising the medium of literature, numerous South African authors have ridiculed the injustices against the poor and powerless by the minority powerful people. During the colonial civil wars such as the Anglo-Boer war, humourists such as Charles Bosman, who used the character of Oom Shalk Lourens to satirises both the British and the Afrikaner people's way of life in order to expose the imminent flaws displayed by a race that colonised and oppressed the indigenous original inhabitants of South Africa (Meihuizen 1991, Hayden 2002, Mackenzie 2003). During the height of Apartheid, many black authors also used humour to expose the injustices of the regime against the majority of the people who faced a plethora of unjust discriminatory laws. To cope with the inhumane treatment of people of colour in South Africa, humour became the catalyst for revolutionary resilience in the face of adversity (Noah 2016). The hunting down, detention without trial and incarceration of political activists and ordinary law-abiding citizens, unequal distribution of resources, unequal education system and many more injustices caused many South Africans to exist in despair and desperation. To ease the strain caused by the cruel policies of Apartheid, South Africans turned to humour as a stimulant for pain and as a tool to rebel.

Humour, according to Freud (1990), is universal. It is used in every society, culture and communities, but what is humorous in one culture may be offensive to another. For instance, racist and homophobic jokes are considered offensive (Myers 2002), but in a democratic state, people can create offensive jokes about leaders, even the president and get away with it. In any context or situation, humour is crucial as it is a protective gear against stress. Therefore, this study wanted to explore and interrogate the existence and effects of humour emanating from English literary works in the South African social context.

Research Problem

The notion of humour in the South African English literature space was subtly explored mostly in terms of entertainment, and as a coping mechanism only, but the resilient and revolutionary nature of humour was presented in a limited dimension. This study wanted to show that in addition to the entertainment and coping idea, humour can be weaponised and utilised as a resilient and revolutionary agent against societal atrocities mostly caused by the power dynamics and different classes. According to numerous studies, humour was and still used by South Africans to rebel against injustices during apartheid and even the post-apartheid era (Donian 2021, Hammett, Martin & Nwankwo 2024, Makombe, Manase & Anastasijevic 2025). This humour infused rebellion happens in various forms, and literature is one perfect example. It is therefore the intention of this study to critically study both the entertaining, coping mechanism and resilient nature of humour expressed in English literary works in South Africa.

Research Findings

The study found out that humour is a human element that can be used to rebel against injustices, especially in a class-divided society. In addition to this nuance rebelliousness nature, humour can be a tool to ease emotional pain resulting from injustices that characterise a society with differing power-dynamics. The study also found out that the societal stigmatic perception of humour as a jesting mechanism does not diminish the disarming and empowering potentialities encapsulated in humouring a difficult situation.

Methodology

The study used the qualitative, conceptual method to sample relevant texts that represent humour infused retaliation against injustices. These texts represent a wealth of humorous data produced during and after colonialism to either ridicule, fight and cope with the socio-economic injustices rampant in South African communities. The characters in the texts were used to voice the mentality of the whole population who use humour to survive. One of the texts uses a male voice, while the other uses a female character who symbolises the two gender dynamics in typically harsh environments that represent numerous communities in the country. The study analysed conceptual data thematically, where patterns in the selected texts and secondary data were critically discussed to get the underlying meanings and perceptions of humour in communities devoid of any form of empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

The Freud's Relief Theory

The Relief Theory is Sigmund Freud's way of expanding and applying the principles of the Psychoanalytic Theory to the area of humour. This declaration stems from the comparable tendency by both theories to emphasize the importance of the subconscious mind in people's lives. According to Freud (1960,1991), humour is a subconscious, spontaneous response often in defence against adverse phenomena. This is not to say that humour cannot be purely entertainment or a depiction of the non-seriousness (Dynel 2017), but the focal lens here is on humour utilised as a tool to suppress and cope with stress (the relief element) or rebel against injustice (the resilience part) (Simione & Gnagnarella 2023). This explains events where individuals would suddenly laugh in the presence of danger without even noticing, meaning that this is a sort of defence mechanism and a way of trying to process the complex situation in the subconscious mind. The unconscious mind becomes defensive to a sudden confrontation and releases humour in the form of laughter to provide the subject ample time to process the situation (Pardiwalla 2020). This kind of humour can result in a humorous confession, with effects of either diminishing the intensity of the matter being confessed or coping with the consequences (Martin 2007). Either way, humour is used to process and cope with the situation or rebel.

The two theories (Psychoanalytical and Relief theories) are also compatible in the terms of explaining repressed ideas or hidden trauma can manifest as jokes. Such repressed ideas, according to the theories, are often regarded as taboo or shun by society and could be euphemised through humour to lighten the offensiveness of the ideas. This notion often opens a gap for criticism of the humour or relief theory, where the untruthfulness and deception of humour is cited (Dynel 2017). In this instance, humour is considered deceitful because just like a drug, it offers a temporary 'solution' to a continuous problem. Whether true or not, the fact is that humour exist and is used both as relief for pain and resilience against injustices of any kind.

Literature Review

The Existence of Humour in English Literature in South Africa

As briefly explored in the introductory section, humour is used both as a coping mechanism and as a tool for resilience against all kinds of challenges. This existence is there to counter-act the turbulent history of South Africa characterised by colonialism and apartheid, humour is still utilised to combat the injustices in the post-apartheid era to critique the misuse of 'democracy', where corruption and lack of service for the majority of South Africans is rife. During the colonial and apartheid era, humour was used in a subtle manner to expose atrocities such as racial segregation and many colonial and apartheid policies. In the post-colonial era, humour is still used as a communication tool to highlight culture, traditions and the

recurrent social inequalities due to corrupt practises by government officials (Tshuma, Msimanga & Tshuma 2024). Humour is still used as a rebellious tool against the maltreatment of South Africans by the post-apartheid authorities, but also as a means of ‘easing’ the pain (Freud 1960). It is because of this coping and resilient nature of humour that numerous South African literary authors such as Zakes Mda and Sindisiwe Magona used it to expose the injustices against the voiceless.

Resiliency and Revolution in Humour

Resiliency involves the capability to function under unfavourable conditions by employing any mechanism in order to survive the ordeal/s (Kuiper 2012). In South Africa, the systemic oppression and degradation of the majority population resulted in numerous typical traumatic problems associated with colonialism and apartheid, such as violence that continue to claim people’s lives (Ntsepo & Pillay 2025). The retaliation against such violent treatment is not always physical, but often in the form of media such as literature, hence the numerous analysis of the existence of humour in South African literary works that rebel against injustices through writing. To be resilient simply means being incapable of giving in nor giving up, therefore in such instances, humour is used as a tool to stand against misfortunes. The argument here is that humour has the ability to empower those who are powerless (Marra 2019), and to disempower the powerful because it has the potential to expose the hidden weaknesses of those who appear to be powerful. This disarming effect of humour can only materialise through the resilient efforts and desire for a better existence, equal rights and justice, empowering education system and the equal distribution of resources

Under normal circumstances, humour evokes laughter which in turn stimulates both physical and emotional health (Louie et al. 2016). In the context of where this natural stimulus is created, it becomes effective to the point of healing emotional pain and suppresses the negative energy that can potentially cause irreparable damage to people’s lives. This destructive nature of emotional pain or trauma (according to studies) is capable of torture that can result in more serious mental health issues (Kulasekara 2017, Rogobete 2011). The argument here is on the effectiveness of humour to resist and rebel against the danger posed by traumatic experiences, which to many South Africans during and after the infamous apartheid era, was and still inevitable. Therefore, humour is one of those solutions to pain and anxiety strong enough to repel the adverse nature and consequences of trauma.

Societal Stigmas Against Humour

The perception of humour varies according to varying factors. In a society that is riddled with many forms of discriminatory tendencies, humour can be double-sided. The victims of injustices, for instance, naturally use humour as a coping mechanism and a weapon to fight against inhumane treatment, while the culprits use it to discourage, ridicule and belittle victims (Martin et al. 2003). This means that both protagonist and antagonist in humorous literature experience it in differing

levels as ; as a means to inflict pain, and as a relief from pain. This oxymoronic relationship between pain and humour analysis is lacking in many studies about humour. The two-text selected for this study poignantly explain how humour is used in both extremes of human existence. This is one of the elements of humour studies did not explore to the fullest.

One of the notable societal stigmas about humour is its relegation to mere jokes and clowning. This stigmatic perception devalue humour into a mere amusement where there is no shred of staidness, but in the selected texts: *Ways of Dying* (1995), by Zakes Mda and, *Mother to Mother* (1998) by Sindiwe Magona, it is the mechanism capable of dismantling power-dynamics in a society divided into unequal classes. This is possible because humour can empower the oppressed mostly associated with the lower-class communities. Such communities can employ it in an indifferent manner to rebel and to cope during painful encounters (Xu 2025). The importance and value of humour as explored by Gini (2017), who perceives it as a catalyst between sanity and insanity, depict the value of this phenomenon to explain this further, this scholar explains one of the most important effects of humour on people's mental health, which emphasises the old saying of it being the best medicine.

Based on the arguments above, it is clear that the society need to view humour in a different light, not as just entertainment, but a means to rebel against injustices, ease pain and preserve mental health.

The Existence of Humour in Mda's "*Ways of Dying*" (1995)

Zakes Mda is a South African author, playwright and renown political revolutionary who uses the paradox of humour and death particularly in one of his critically acclaimed text: *Ways of Dying* (1995). Born Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni Mda in 1948 in Herschel, Eastern Cape, (Steele 2007), Mda is one of the pioneering authors to confront the gruesomeness of apartheid and the post-colonial challenges with both pain and humour. This courage is reflected in *Ways of Dying* (1995), as the paradox of humour and death is depicted in the character of Toloki, the professional mourner.

Ways of Dying (1995) is a tale of a typical African city where the citizens do whatever they can to survive a subaltern existence. It is a story that exceptionally narrates the transition from apartheid South Africa to a democratic Rainbow Nation, with attempts at reconciliation that is overshadowed by political violence and criminality. It is a story of survival and defiance against adversity where Mda (1995) used the protagonist, Toloki to describe the moral decay, abject poverty and the survival prowess of the people in the city. The novel also tells how humour became both a relief and a weapon against the numerous challenges the city faces regularly. The fusion of events during apartheid and postcolonial South Africa shows how the people utilises humour to cope with painful events during both eras, which depicts the fact that, as much as there are changes, most of the adversities stay the same.

The novel fuses and compares the apartheid era challenges and postcolonial South Africa with a humorous effect to expose the injustices against the marginalised and powerless. In one of the interviews with 'Africultures' Mongo-Mboussa (2005), Mda reveals his faith in the power of humour to cope and fight

against injustices. To expose such injustices, the author used characters such as Toloki who uses humour as therapy against the situation facing the majority of South Africans even in this post-colonial era. The fact that Toloki, the protagonist, is a professional mourner depicts the decaying moral fibre of black culture. It is humorous that a fully grown black man is reduced to crying at funerals to earn a living, meaning 'death' is his business. It is common knowledge that certain businesses thrive on people's death, such as funeral parlours, but Toloki's business is an act of pretence. On the other hand, his profession was necessary as he helps bereaving families to cope with the loss. Mda (1995) shared both the humorous effect and value of Toloki's profession in this quotation:

Toloki is not just any mourner. He is a Professional Mourner. A whole vocation has evolved out of people dying. (p. 15)

In this quotation, Toloki is both proud of his profession and aware of the challenges happening in his community. This character is conscious of the senseless deaths caused by many atrocities that characterises life in black communities during and after apartheid. The setting of the story is a typical city in South Africa with challenges of urbanisation such as overcrowding, poverty, crime, violence and senseless deaths. Toloki emphasises the intensity of death and the humorous effect of his profession saying:

As long as there are funerals, I'll survive. (p. 42)

This becomes humorous in the sense that survival is associated with death, which means that other people's sorrow is survival to this character. Mda (1995) also used the satirical effect in describing Toloki's attire for his profession as a professional mourner. The author used a scarecrow metaphor to describe the suit he wore but also used the noun 'reverence' to show how respectful and dignified his profession was to him as a ... "self-contented visionary" and those who lost their loved ones. To continue with the scarecrow metaphor, this manmade creature normally looks ridiculous, but its function is crucial: to scare animals and birds from destroying crops in the farms. The comparison here is perfect because just like a scarecrow that looks humorous, Toloki's attire and his profession look and sound funny but crucial in the community that seem to be constantly mourning the frequent deaths of community members.

In *Ways of Dying* (1995), Mda explains the way the characters deal with painful situations. The city in the story depicts typical characteristics of postcolonial South Africa, where people can still laugh in the face of misfortune. After one of the violent episodes in the community, many people's shacks burned down, and they had to rebuild so that life continues as usual: enduring poverty, lack, violence and marginalisation by the government they empowered, but the same institution seems to disempower the masses. Toloki and Noria, like all the other characters, suffered the same fate but could still have episodes of laughter in the face of tragic events. The juxtaposition of death and humour is reinforced when Nora had the courage to laugh with Toloki after losing her child and shack, but the rebuilding of the shack

(and laughter thereof) symbolises resilience through humour. This also exposes some of the major themes of the story, such as the will to survive, rebuilding and reconstruction after tragedies, and doing what people can to live a just, dignified life.

The moral decay in the story is depicted in Chapter 1, where two groups of people met (one was a funeral procession while the other a wedding celebration). Toloki, as a professional mourner managed to chase the wedding crowd and was proud of his bravery, only to be disillusioned by a drunk in the crowd by saying:

It is the perfume, ou toppie. It is too strong... it is the perfume that he splashes all over his body as part of the ritual of his profession before he goes to a funeral. (p. 1)

In a morally sound community, the wedding crowd would have made way for the funeral procession without the arguments that issued as a way of respecting and honouring the dead. In this instance, the quarrelling that followed depicts the community's lack of decency while the subsequent humour consolidates how people can find humorous anecdotes whilst grieving. The symbolism of life and death in the wedding and funeral in this instance is narrated effectively by infusing the caricature of Toloki and his bizarre usage of fragrance. This also shows how humour can be utilised in both painful and celebratory moments, especially, to diffuse unpleasant occurrences. The class division in the community is also presented in a humorous effect, where the rich pokes fun at the poor. The wedding driver in the novel uses words such as 'posh cars', and 'beautiful people' when he refers to his wedding crowd, while using derogatory words such as '*skorokoro*' (slang for very old car) and 'ragged souls', against the mourners, which was funny to him. This means that humour was derived from a painful experience where a mother lost her son, while the driver decoded humour in the suffering of other people.

In the story, Noria also showcases the power and resiliency of humour despite the community's hardships. She is known of her joyous laughter, which has an uplifting effect on those who experienced it, including Toloki. One of the villains in the story, Jwara was used to contribute to Toloki, Noria and the childrens' happiness through his humorous figurines. This humour emanates from Jwara's work, not his personality like Noria, thus depicting humour's dynamic nature. Jwara is also caricaturised as a "towering handsome giant", humorously making fun of his physical appearance as a villain but also described as a good-looking father and businessman. Mda (1995) also uses satire to critique and ridicule social institutions such as religion in the novel. The author's portrayal of the religious squabbles amongst Christian denominations was humorously narrated using the meeting between Toloki and the Archbishop. While the respectful Toloki represent a world without faith, the Archbishop symbolises the judgemental, self-righteous behaviour contrary to a man of his standing.

According to Freud (1960), humour can be a tool to unconsciously fight against injustices, such as an unequal, valueless Eurocentric education system that does not empower people. In *Ways of Dying*, Mda uses humorous wit to ridicule the intelligent unemployed men who could discuss philosophy but were unable to fend for their families. Here, the author humorously exposes one of the social challenges in South Africa: unemployment, which affects even the educated, whose 'education'

becomes useless as some are reduced to begging. The education system is also ridiculed here, as it can produce outspoken individuals who are aware of the recurring unfavourable conditions but philosophically talk about them without the mental capacities to change the situation.

The value of humour was expressed by the young Toloki at the funeral of one of the pupils at his school, when he jokingly said to Noria: "I am going to die laughing" (p. 152). The phrase expresses the power of humour even and its potentiality to overcome the fear death. In this instance the paradox of humour and death is used to accentuate how Toloki used humour to shield the pain of loss he felt for the dead schoolmate.

To conclude, Zakes Mda used humour in the novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995), to expose the injustices that affect mostly black people during the apartheid era and the contemporary postcolonial period in South Africa. The novel explores the value of humour as a coping and resilience agent to shield victims of injustices from fighting and cope with life under harsh conditions.

The Use of Humour in Sindisiwe Magona's "*Mother to Mother*" (1998)

Sindisiwe Magona is a South Africa award winning author who wrote novels, poems, articles and plays for about three decades (PUKU 2016). Magona is one of the privileged South African who experienced life in two different eras: apartheid (colonialism) era and the postcolonial era. As a writer, Magona critiques the injustices against the majority of South Africans often in a humorous manner. In "Mother to Mother" (1998), Magona, just like Mda, critically narrates the struggles of South Africans during and after the apartheid regimes. In the novel, the plight of ordinary South Africans is painted as one of suffering, poverty, crime, marginalisation, politics and the unequal economic system. As some authors believe that literature imitates reality, this novel also mimics real life as it tells the story of Amy Biehl, a white Fulbright scholar who was brutally murdered by a gang of black men, revealing the brutal violence and unhealthy race relations that continues in South Africa.

Some of the painful events that happened to Mandisa in the story can be compared to events that occurred in the life of the author in reality, such as single motherhood due to men leaving them alone to raise the children (Moodley 2004). The fact that Mandisa never actually talks to the dead girl's mother is ironic because the novel is narrated in such a way that elements of reconciliation are crucial. The lack of actual communication between Mandisa and Linda Biehl (the dead girl's mother) highlights the need for reconciliatory talks to bridge the gap that exists among racial groups. The whole letter, which is Mandisa's way to sarcastically blame society for putting so much pressure on mothers and motherhood, as she is blamed for Mxolisi's sins. Being in Mandisa's position of a mother whose child is accused of murder is naturally painful, but the author used sarcasm (humour) to protect the protagonist from society's prosecution of the victims in Mandisa's and similar situations. In reality, the youths who killed Amy Biehl were granted amnesty by the (TRC) Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Van Vuuren 2010), thus,

humouring the objectives of the TRC which is supposed to encourage reconciliation and justice.

The story revolves around the life of the protagonist and narrator, Mandisa, whose son is incarcerated for being involved in the killing of a white girl. During the apartheid era, this was a capital offence, a fact that can cause any mother in Mandisa's shoes to be distressed, especially because Mxolisi's father, China, left and never returned (Whitehead 2012). The themes of child pregnancy and absent parenthood (absent fathers), as well as the effects it has on the children, are critically and humorously explored. In the story, Mandisa inwardly resents Mxolisi as she puts the blames of her miserable life, but is disturbed and felt compassion for her child as she understands the trouble he created for himself and the family.

When Mxolisi was born, Mandisa named him Hlumelo (Spring) because she wished something good may come out of his life, but ironically, the exact opposite occurred that caused her to live a miserable shameful life. On the issue of names, Mandisa reveals her boss' ignorance and laziness to learn and pronounce African names correctly, providing the "clicks" stereotype when it comes to some South African languages. Writing the name "MA-NDI-SA" in capital letters and dividing the syllables reveals the humorous attempt at shielding Mandisa's frustration at hearing her name mispronounced and misspelled on a daily basis. Mandisa's bragging about her virginity is also dramatically ironic because she later became pregnant and the first husband and father to her son (China) disappeared to end the loveless, resentful marriage. Her sacrifice to stay pure (virgin) was destroyed when she succumbed to China's love, but such love did not stand the shame and resentments of child pregnancy.

The story also reveals the cruelty of the apartheid government policies, such as the Group Areas Act (1950), which forced people to relocate to new areas causing disruptions in their lives (Maharaj 1994). The novel is a critical narration of the effects of apartheid on ordinary South Africans whose lives were reduced to survival due to the hardships they faced daily. In continuing with the heinous policy of the Group Areas Act and forced mass relocations, Magona (1998) used humour to explain how people laughed at the prospect of leaving their homes for new ones they did not even know. In the words of the narrator, she says:

Our parents laughed at the absurdity of the rumour of the removal of Africans, all Africans, to a common area set aside only for them (p. 42)

The laughter mentioned in the quotation shows how many people responded to the bad news of relocation with humour as a defence mechanism and a coping strategy to deal with the enforced idea designed to group people according to race, culture and traditions. The irony here is that the audience already knows that the forced removal to Gugulethu was not a laughing matter, but a serious process that disrupted many people's lives. It also symbolises the strength and perseverance of the powerless and forgotten in employing humour to fathom painful occurrences such as losing one's home and the uncertainties of starting a new life at an unfamiliar location.

The two main spatial settings of the novel are described in a humorous manner to lighten the doom that described the location. Mandisa, the main and first-person narrator in the novel, describes one of the settings, Gugulethu as:

... a place like a tin of sardines but the people who built it for us called it Gugulethu, Our Pride. The people who live in 'Our Pride' call it Gugulabo – Their Pride. Who would have any gugu about a place like this? (p. 27)

The quotation reveals Magona's skill of using the power of humour to cope and rebel against adversity as explained by Freud's Relief Theory (1960). The main character, Mandisa paints a vivid picture of a typical squatter camp, whereas the 'sardines' simile and metaphor expresses the overcrowding of such marginalised dwellings that still exists in the postcolonial era South Africa. The comparison of the people of Gugulethu to sardines is humorously used to describe the social and economic condition of the people, as a tin of sardines is tightly packed, and is one of the foodstuffs readily available because of its affordability. The township's overcrowding is further explicitly euphemised by comparing the houses to a crowd of people who are... "leaning against each other, pushing at each other" (p. 24). The personification used here is effective in humorously describing the densely populated location, which is a serious housing problem even today in South Africa.

Despite the hardships experienced in such places like Gugulethu, a typical township in South Africa, people like Mandisa can still find a reason to smile through humorous utterances that either helps to cope or to rebel against the dilemma. The bizarre ability to employ humour and pride in the face of calamity helps people like Mandisa to survive the apartheid injustices such as forced removals, violent crimes, incarceration without trial, abject poverty and lack. Another different setting where Mandisa's grandmother lived according to the story is a rural area called Gungululu. Unlike Gugulethu, this setting is described by the author in the following statement:

Mandisa also spends a few months with her grandmother in Gungululu, which is a village that Mandisa refers to as a "far-away desert". (p. 99)

Rural areas normally depend on agriculture, but Gungululu is described as a desert. A desert is a naturally dry area often with low annual rainfall, a landscape with few signs of life, and normally a difficult place to be a dwelling because it is not suitable for agriculture (Walker 1996). This means that for the majority of South Africans, the places of residence, whether urban or rural, became agents of oppression and strife. The harsh reality of Gugulethu after the forced removals and relocation extends the dramatic irony, which also symbolises Mandisa's promising life (as some of the people who knew the young Mandisa wished for her) turned out to be a life described by overworking and strife in Gugulethu. To appreciate the compliments from her mother's ginger beer customers about her beauty and wishes of a brighter future, Mandisa says "...the compliments soaked through the marrow in my bones" (p. 40), but the metaphor here was ironically overshadowed by the harsh reality in Gugulethu. The violence in this setting is humorously expressed using a symbolic jacket being kicked by an irate police officer in one of the violent

events. The powerlessness of the jacket to fight back represents the state of the community who were harassed by the police who were supposed to protect them. It was funny for the audience to see the police officer kicking wildly at an empty jacket, wishing it was a person.

According to Freud (1960, 1991)'s Relief theory, a life of unfulfilled dreams may result in stressful sensations that needs healing mechanisms such as humour in order to cope with the situation (Morreall 2009). The characters in the story, most of them, lead a life of unfulfilled dreams. Mandisa, for instance, aspired to be a nurse to help her people, a dream which did not materialise because of some unfortunate disturbances including the unplanned pregnancy and unwanted marriage. The subtle irony here is that the people in Mandisa's community all aspired for a better life, but the exact opposite materialised, hence the need for a coping and fighting mechanism called humour.

Mxolisi's contrasting behaviour also creates a situational irony in the story. Mandisa tries to recollect her son's good deeds by saying..." did he not risk his life saving a girl from a group of men who wanted to rape her" (p. 60). This quote is Mandisa's ironical attempt to salvage the few moments when her son was a humanitarian, rather than the stereotypically perceived thug and killer who terrorise the community. His (Mxolisi)'s life was summarised by his mother in chapter 12, where she sarcastically compared his tomorrow to his yesterday, emphasising the fact that as he was born poor (yesterday), he is destined to die useless and poor (tomorrow).

The narrator continued to ridicule the cruel actions by the governments against its own people. For instance, the soldiers are compared to "unruly children" sent by the government to exact the wishes of those in power against the needs of communities. On the needs of communities, such as education, Mandisa recollects one song they used to sing which was about a nun killed by Africans in far-away East London, depicting how the government of the era would use education and even music to brainwash the pupils. The situation irony here is that instead of teaching the learners about the good of Africans, they were exposed to the martyrdom and superiority of the white race.

Conclusion

The study explored the value of humour as an inherent psychological phenomenon in people's lives. The discussion presented humour as analysed in one of the entities that imitate life: literature, where humour and pain are studied in unison. A thorough analysis of the two literary works, Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) and Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998) depicts that humour is used both as a coping mechanism and a tool to fight against adversity. Despite the fact that some scholars disregard the value of humour because of its temporality, the study revealed that humour is a human entity embedded in the conscious and subconscious to provides relief from suffering, of which the characters in both texts experienced in their lives. The conclusion is that humour is invaluable, especially to people who are confronted with difficult and traumatic situations, and this situation describes the existence of the majority of South Africans, during and post-apartheid eras. Therefore, the incorporation of humour is natural, uncontrollable at times, but have beneficial effects. It is one of the weapons inherently used to defuse and disarm stressful conditions and enhance physical and mental health.

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