

# Analysing the use of humour in the South African English literary works to understand its role in building resilience and challenging societal stigmas

*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 was based on Freud’s Relief Theory to explored 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 history of South Africa 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.” (p.179). South Africa is a diverse racial, cultural and traditional nation where misunderstandings and conflicts naturally happens, and humour is one of the immediate inherent tools to ease the tension. If humour has the power

1 to even create a safe space to have a conversation to tackle differences of any  
2 nature as the scholars above declared, then it is worth employing to resolve  
3 challenges and maintain favourable sustainable resolutions.

4 The more inclusive definition of humour was offered by Nwankwo (2024,  
5 p. 291) who quoted Ruch & Köhler 1998, 204). According to these scholars,  
6 "humour has been described [as] 'a socio-cultural construct, seen as an attitude  
7 or world view that allows one to perceive and react to the world in ways that are  
8 forbearing and lenient'". This emphasises how the Relief theory posits about  
9 humour, that it is a psychological phenomenon (Freud, 1960/1991), and in the  
10 definition above, it is a process which helps individual to forbear or tolerate pain  
11 which eases the discomfort (Msimanga, Tshuma aAnd Matsilele, 2022). The  
12 forbearing character of humour may be the reason some scholars decided to  
13 study the lying part of humour, that like an addiction, it provides a temporary  
14 relief while the root cause of the pain continues, even more severe. Such  
15 individual scholars, according to Morreall (1989), even go to the extent of  
16 rejecting the value of humour in people's lives. The value of humour is  
17 highlighted in the way it serves people who need a coping mechanism. In most  
18 cases, such individuals inherently use laughter to process a situation that is  
19 foreign to the conscious mind, hence the tapping into the subconscious for relief  
20 (Freud, 1960; John, 2009; Soundary, 2003).

21 Utilising the medium of literature, numerous South African authors have  
22 ridiculed the injustices against the poor and powerless by the minority powerful  
23 people. During the colonial civil wars such as the Anglo-Boer war, humourists  
24 such as Charles Bosman, who used the character of Oom Shalk Lourens to  
25 satirises both the British and the Afrikaner people's way of life in order to expose  
26 the imminent flaws displayed by a race that colonised and oppressed the  
27 indigenous original inhabitants of South Africa (Meihuizen, 1991; Hayden,  
28 2002; Mackenzie, 2003). During the height of Apartheid, many black authors  
29 also used humour to expose the injustices of the regime against the majority of  
30 the people who faced a plethora of unjust discriminatory laws. To cope with the  
31 inhumane treatment of people of colour in South Africa, humour became the  
32 catalyst for revolutionary resilience in the face of adversity (Noah, 2016). The  
33 hunting down, detention without trial and incarceration of political activists and  
34 ordinary law-abiding citizens, unequal distribution of resources, unequal  
35 education system and many more injustices caused many South Africans to exist  
36 in despair and desperation. To ease the strain caused by the cruel policies of  
37 Apartheid, South African turned to humour as a stimulant for pain and as a tool  
38 to rebel against the 'monster' or 'devil' (Sepamla, n.d).

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

**1 Research Problem**

2

3 The notion of humour in the South African English literature space was  
4 subtly explored mostly in terms of entertainment, and as a coping mechanism  
5 only, but the resilient and revolutionary nature of humour was presented in a  
6 limited dimension. This study wanted to show that in addition to the  
7 entertainment and coping idea, humour can be weaponised and utilised as a  
8 resilient and revolutionary agent against societal atrocities mostly caused by the  
9 power dynamics and different classes. According to numerous studies, humour  
10 was and still used by South Africans to rebel against injustices during apartheid  
11 and even the post-apartheid era (Donian, 2021; Hammett, Martin & Nwankwo,  
12 2024; Makombe, Manase & Anastasijevic, 2025). This humour infused rebellion  
13 happens in various forms, and literature is one perfect example. It is therefore  
14 the intention of this study to critically study both the entertaining, coping  
15 mechanism and resilient nature of humour expressed in English literary works  
16 in South Africa.

17

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**19 Research Findings**

20

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

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29

**30 Methodology**

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

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## 1 **Theoretical Framework**

2

### 3 *The Freud's Relief Theory*

4

5 The Relief Theory is Sigmund Freud's way of expanding and applying the  
6 principles of the Psychoanalytic Theory to the area of humour. This declaration  
7 stems from the comparable tendency by both theories to emphasize the  
8 importance of the subconscious mind in people's lives. According to Freud  
9 (1960/1991), humour is a subconscious, spontaneous response often in defence  
10 against adverse phenomena. This is not to say that humour cannot be purely  
11 entertainment or a depiction of the non-seriousness (Dynel, 2017), but the focal  
12 lens here is on humour utilised as a tool to suppress and cope with stress (the  
13 relief element) or rebel against injustice (the resilience part) (Simione &  
14 Gnagnarella, 2023). This explains events where individuals would suddenly  
15 laugh in the presence of danger without even noticing, meaning that this is a sort  
16 of defence mechanism and a way of trying to process the complex situation in  
17 the subconscious mind. The unconscious mind becomes defensive to a sudden  
18 confrontation and releases humour in the form of laughter to provide the subject  
19 ample time to process the situation (Pardiwalla, 2020). This kind of humour can  
20 result in a humorous confession, with effects of either diminishing the intensity  
21 of the matter being confessed or coping with the consequences (Martin, 2007).  
22 Either way, humour is used to process and cope with the situation or rebel.

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

33

34

## 35 **Literature Review**

36

### 37 *The Existence of Humour in English Literature in South Africa*

38

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

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

#### 9 10 *Resiliency and Revolution in Humour*

11  
12 Resiliency involves the capability to function under unfavourable conditions  
 13 by employing any mechanism in order to survive the ordeal/s (Kuiper, 2012). In  
 14 South Africa, the systemic oppression and degradation of the majority  
 15 population resulted in numerous typical traumatic problems associated with  
 16 colonialism and apartheid, such as violence that continue to claim people’s lives  
 17 (Ntsepo & Pillay, 2025). The retaliation against such violent treatment is not  
 18 always physical, but often in the form of media such as literature, hence the  
 19 numerous analysis of the existence of humour in South African literary works  
 20 that rebel against injustices through writing. To be resilient simply means being  
 21 incapable of giving in nor giving up, therefore in such instances, humour is used  
 22 as a tool to stand against misfortunes. The argument here is that humour has the  
 23 ability to empower those who are powerless (Marra, 2019), and to disempower  
 24 the powerful because it has the potential to expose the hidden weaknesses of  
 25 those who appear to be powerful. This disarming effect of humour can only  
 26 materialise through the resilient efforts and desire for a better existence, equal  
 27 rights and justice, empowering education system and the equal distribution of  
 28 resources.

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

#### 41 42 *Societal Stigmas Against Humour*

43  
44 The perception of humour varies according to varying factors. In a society  
 45 that is riddled with many forms of discriminatory tendencies, humour can be  
 46 double-sided. The victims of injustices, for instance, naturally use humour as a  
 47 coping mechanism and a weapon to fight against inhumane treatment, while the

1 culprits use it to discourage, ridicule and belittle victims (Martin et al., 2003).  
 2 This means that both protagonist and antagonist in humorous literature  
 3 experience it in differing levels as ; as a means to inflict pain, and as a relief from  
 4 pain. This oxymoronic relationship between pain and humour analysis is lacking  
 5 in many studies about humour. The two-text selected for this study poignantly  
 6 explain how humour is used in both extremes of human existence. This is one of  
 7 the elements of humour studies did not explore to the fullest.

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

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

### 24 25 26 **The Existence of Humour in Mda’s “*Ways of Dying*”(1995)**

27  
28 Zakes Mda is a South African author, playwright and renown political  
 29 revolutionary who uses the paradox of humour and death particularly in one of  
 30 his critically acclaimed text: *Ways of Dying* (1995). Born Zanemvula Kizito  
 31 Gatyeni Mda in 1948 in Herschel, Eastern Cape, (Steele, 2007), Mda is one of  
 32 the pioneering authors to confront the gruesomeness of apartheid and the post-  
 33 colonial challenges with both pain and humour. This courage is reflected in *Ways*  
 34 *of Dying* (1995), as the paradox of humour and death is depicted in the character  
 35 of Toloki, the professional mourner.

36 *Ways of Dying* (1995) is a tale of a typical African city where the citizens  
 37 do whatever they can to survive a subaltern existence. It is a story that  
 38 exceptionally narrates the transition from apartheid South Africa to a democratic  
 39 Rainbow Nation, with attempts at reconciliation that is overshadowed by  
 40 political violence and criminality. It is a story of survival and defiance against  
 41 adversity where Mda (1995) used the protagonist, Toloki to describe the moral  
 42 decay, abject poverty and the survival prowess of the people in the city. The  
 43 novel also tells how humour became both a relief and a weapon against the  
 44 numerous challenges the city faces regularly. The fusion of events during  
 45 apartheid and postcolonial South Africa shows how the people utilises humour

1 to cope with painful events during both eras, which depicts the fact that, as much  
2 as there are changes, most of the adversities stay the same.

3 The novel fuses and compares the apartheid era challenges and postcolonial  
4 South Africa with a humorous effect to expose the injustices against the  
5 marginalised and powerless. In one of the interviews with ‘Africultures’ Mongo-  
6 Mboussa (2005), Mda reveals his faith in the power of humour to cope and fight  
7 against injustices. To expose such injustices, the author used characters such as  
8 Toloki who uses humour as therapy against the situation facing the majority of  
9 South Africans even in this post-colonial era. The fact that Toloki, the  
10 protagonist, is a professional mourner depicts the decaying moral fibre of black  
11 culture. It is humorous that a fully grown black man is reduced to crying at  
12 funerals to earn a living, meaning ‘death’ is his business. On the other hand, his  
13 profession was necessary as he helps bereaving families to cope with the loss.  
14 Mda (1995) shared both the humorous effect and value of Toloki’s profession in  
15 this quotation:

16  
17 “Toloki is not just any mourner. He is a Professional Mourner. A whole vocation  
18 has evolved out of people dying.” (p. 5)

19  
20 In this quotation, Toloki is both proud of his profession and aware of the  
21 challenges happening in his community. This character is conscious of the  
22 senseless deaths caused by many atrocities that characterises life in black  
23 communities during and after apartheid. The setting of the story is a typical city  
24 in South Africa with challenges of urbanisation such as overcrowding, poverty,  
25 crime, violence and senseless deaths. Toloki emphasises the intensity of death  
26 and the humorous effect of his profession saying:

27  
28 As long as there are funerals, I’ll survive (p.46).

29  
30 This becomes humorous in the sense that survival is associated with death,  
31 which means that other people’s sorrow is survival to the this character. Mda  
32 (1995) also used the satirical effect in describing Toloki’s attire for his  
33 profession as a professional mourner. The author used a scarecrow metaphor to  
34 describe the suit he wore but also used the noun ‘reverence’ to show how  
35 respectful and dignified his profession was to those who lost their loved ones.  
36 To continue with the scarecrow metaphor, this manmade creature normally looks  
37 ridiculous, but its function is crucial: to scare animals and birds from destroying  
38 crops in farms. The comparison here is perfect because just like a scarecrow that  
39 looks humorous, Toloki’s attire and his profession looks and sounds funny but  
40 crucial in the community that seem to be constantly mourning the frequent death  
41 of community members.

42 In *Ways of Dying* (1995), Mda explained the way the characters deal with  
43 painful situations. The city in the story depicts typical characteristics of  
44 postcolonial South Africa, where people can still laugh in the face of misfortune.  
45 After one of the violent episodes in the community, many people’s shacks  
46 burned down, and they had to rebuild so that life continues as usual: enduring  
47 poverty, lack, violence and marginalisation by the government they empowered,

1 but the same institution seems to disempower the masses. Toloki and Noria, like  
 2 all the other characters, suffered the same fate but could still have episodes of  
 3 laughter in the face of tragic events. The juxtaposition of death and humour is  
 4 reinforced when Nora had the courage to laugh with Toloki after losing her child  
 5 and shack, but the rebuilding of the shack (and laughter thereof) symbolises  
 6 resilience through humour. This also exposes some of the major themes of the  
 7 story, such as the will to survive, rebuilding and reconstruction after tragedies,  
 8 and doing what people can to live a just, dignified life.

9 According to Freud (1960), humour can be a tool to unconsciously fight  
 10 against injustices, such as an unequal, valueless Eurocentric education system  
 11 that does not empower people. In *Ways of Dying*, Mda uses humorous wit to  
 12 ridicule the intelligent unemployed men who could discuss philosophy but were  
 13 unable to fend for their families. Here, the author humorously exposes one of the  
 14 challenges in South Africa: unemployment, which affects even the educated,  
 15 whose ‘education’ becomes useless as some are reduced to begging. The  
 16 education system is also ridiculed here, as it can produce outspoken individuals  
 17 who are aware of the recurring unfavourable conditions but philosophically talk  
 18 about them without the mental capacities to change the situation.

19 To conclude, Zakes Mda used humour in the novel, *Ways of Dying*, to  
 20 expose the injustices that affect mostly black people during the apartheid era and  
 21 the contemporary postcolonial period in South Africa. The novel explores the  
 22 value of humour as a coping and resilience agent to shield victims of injustices  
 23 from fighting and cope with life under harsh conditions.  
 24  
 25

### 26 **The use of humour in Sindisiwe Magona’s “*Mother to Mother*” (1998)**

27  
 28 Sindisiwe Magona is a South Africa award winning author who wrote  
 29 novels, poems, articles and plays for about three decades (PUKU, 2016).  
 30 Magona is one of the privileged South African who experienced life in two  
 31 different eras: apartheid (colonialism) era and the postcolonial era. As a writer,  
 32 Magona critiques the injustices against the majority of South Africans often in a  
 33 humorous manner. In “*Mother to Mother*” (1998), Magona, just like Mda,  
 34 critically narrates the struggles of South Africans during and after the apartheid  
 35 regimes. In the novel, the plight of ordinary South Africans is painted as one of  
 36 suffering, poverty, crime, marginalisation, politics and the unequal economic  
 37 system. As some authors believe that literature imitates reality, this novel also  
 38 mimics real life as it tells the story of Amy Biehl, a white Fulbright scholar who  
 39 was brutally murdered by a gang of black men, revealing the unhealthy race  
 40 relations that continue in South Africa. The fact that Mandisa never actually talks  
 41 to the dead girl’s mother is humorous because the novel is created in such a way  
 42 that elements of reconciliation are crucial. The lack of actual communication  
 43 between Mandisa and Linda Biehl (the dead girl’s mother) narrates the need for  
 44 reconciliatory talks to bridge the gap that exists between racial groups. In reality,  
 45 the youths who killed Amy Biehl were granted amnesty by the (TRC) Truth and  
 46 Reconciliation Commission (Van Vuuren, 2010), thus, humouring the TRC.

1 The story revolves around the life of the protagonist and narrator, Mandisa,  
 2 whose son is incarcerated for being involved in the killing of a white girl. During  
 3 the apartheid era, this was a capital offence, a fact that can cause any mother in  
 4 Mandisa's shoes to be distressed, especially because Mxolisi's father, China,  
 5 left and never returned (Whitehead, 2012). The themes of childhood pregnancy  
 6 and absent parenthood (absent fathers), as well as the effects it has on the  
 7 children, are critically and humorously explored. In the story, Mandisa inwardly  
 8 resents Mxolisi as she puts the blames of her miserable life, but is disturbed and  
 9 felt compassion for her child as she understands the trouble he created for  
 10 himself and the family. The story also reveals the cruelty of the apartheid  
 11 government policies, such as the Group Areas Act (1950), which forced people  
 12 to relocate to new areas causing disruptions in their lives (Maharaj, 1994). The  
 13 novel is a critical narration of the effects of apartheid on ordinary South Africans  
 14 whose lives were reduced to survival due to the hardships they faced daily. In  
 15 continuing with the heinous policy of the Group Areas Act and forced mass  
 16 relocations, Magona used humour to explain how people laughed at the prospect  
 17 of leaving their homes for new ones they did not even know. In the words of the  
 18 narrator, she says:

19  
 20 Our parents laughed at the absurdity of the rumour of the removal of Africans, all  
 21 Africans, to a common area set aside only for them (42)

22  
 23 The laughter mentioned in the quotation shows how many people responded  
 24 to the bad news of relocation with humour as a defence mechanism and a coping  
 25 strategy to deal with the enforced idea designed to group people according to  
 26 race, culture and traditions. The irony here is that the audience already knows  
 27 that the forced removal to Gugulethu was not a laughing matter, but a serious  
 28 process that disrupted many people's lives. It also symbolises strength and  
 29 perseverance of the powerless and forgotten.

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

33  
 34 ... a place like a tin of sardines but the people who built it for us called it Gugulethu,  
 35 Our Pride. The people who live in 'Our Pride' call it Gugulabo – Their Pride. Who  
 36 would have any gugu about a place like this? (p. 27)

37  
 38 The quotation reveals Magona's skill of using the power of humour to cope  
 39 and rebel against adversity as explained by Freud's Relief Theory (1960). The  
 40 main character, Mandisa paints a vivid picture of a typical squatter camp,  
 41 whereas the 'sardines' simile and metaphor expresses the overcrowding of such  
 42 marginalised dwellings that still exists in the postcolonial era South Africa. The  
 43 comparison of Gugulethu to sardines may also be a way the author used to  
 44 describe the social and economic status of the people, as a tin of sardines was  
 45 one of the foodstuffs readily available because of its affordability. Despite the  
 46 hardships experienced in such places like Gugulethu, a typical township in South  
 47 Africa, people like Mandisa can still find a reason to smile through humorous

1 utterances that either helps to cope or to rebel against the dilemma. The bizarre  
2 ability to employ humour and pride in the face of calamity helps people like  
3 Mandisa to survive the apartheid injustices such as forced removals, violent  
4 crimes, incarceration without trial, abject poverty and lack.

5 Another different setting where Mandisa's grandmother lived according to  
6 the story is a rural area called Gungululu. Unlike Gugulethu, this setting is  
7 described by the author in the following statement:

8  
9 Mandisa also spends a few months with her grandmother in Gungululu, which is a  
10 village that Mandisa refers to as a "far-away desert" (p. 99).

11  
12 Rural areas normally depend on agriculture, but Gungululu is described as  
13 a desert. A desert is a naturally dry area often with low annual rainfall, a  
14 landscape with few signs of life, and normally a difficult place to be a dwelling  
15 because it is not suitable for agriculture (Walker, 1996). This means that for the  
16 majority of South Africans, the places of residence, whether urban or rural,  
17 became agents of oppression and strife. The harsh reality of Gugulethu after the  
18 forced removals and relocation extends the dramatic irony, which also  
19 symbolises Mandisa's promising life (as some of the people who knew the young  
20 Mandisa wished for her) turned out to be a life described by overworking and  
21 strife in Gugulethu.

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

### 31 32 33 **Conclusion**

34  
35 The study explored the value of humour as an inherent psychological  
36 phenomenon in people's lives. The discussion presented humour as analysed in  
37 one of the entities that imitate life: literature, where humour and pain are studied  
38 in unison. A thorough analysis of the two literary works, Mda's *Ways of Dying*  
39 (1995) and Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998) depicts that humour is used both  
40 as a coping mechanism and a tool to fight against adversity. Despite the fact that  
41 some scholars disregard the value of humour because of its temporality, the study  
42 revealed that humour is a human entity embedded in the conscious and  
43 subconscious to provides relief from suffering, of which the characters in both  
44 texts experienced in their lives. The conclusion is that humour is invaluable,  
45 especially to people who are confronted with difficult and traumatic situations,  
46 and this situation describes the existence of the majority of South Africans,  
47 during and post-apartheid eras. Therefore, the incorporation of humour is

1 natural, uncontrollable at times, but have beneficial effects. It is one of the  
 2 weapons inherently used to diffuse and disarm stressful conditions and enhance  
 3 physical and mental health.

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