



# Comparative analysis of black queer feminist isiXhosa and English poetry

Tsosheletso Chidi, Nompumelelo Zondi & Gabi Mkhize

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Black queer feminist literature remains under-researched. This reflects the societal marginalisation of black queer authors in South Africa. Our article offers a comparative analysis of the representation of black queer women by black queer and cisgender authors in selected isiXhosa and English poetry. The poems selected are from *Unam Wena* (2021) by Mthunzikazi Mbungwana and *red cotton* (2018) by vangile gantsho. Firstly, we explore how queer feminism is captured from a Xhosa perspective. Secondly, we explore how English is used to expose readers to black queerness, and, thirdly, we question how literary scholarship influences or limits black queer feminist literature and the functionality of queer feminist poetry as representations of black women. Discourse theory is used to examine how authors of the selected poetry construct knowledge about black queerness from a feminist perspective and shape how people understand it. In this article we adopt a narrative enquiry within the constructionism paradigm with qualitative textual analysis. Our analysis of the poetry reveals that, although the selected poets use two different languages, the same protest voice is foregrounded, with observable differences being primarily technical—namely how form, sound, and structure are employed to set the tone and mood in the issues addressed. **Keywords:** poetry, queerness, blackness, women, discourse, heteronormativity, heteropatriarchy.


## Introduction

In this article, we focus on the role of queer feminist poetry in representing black queer feminist poets in South Africa. Acknowledging a considerable gap between legal protections for homosexuality and the reality faced through lived experiences is essential. While the law hardly discriminates on sexual orientation—the Civil Union Act signed in 2006 by the South African government gave lesbians and gay people legal marriage rights—socially, same-sex sexuality remains only marginally accepted in South African society (Sandfort and Reddy 2). Despite this progressive legislation and the inclusion of the same-sex rights clause in the post-apartheid constitution, discrimination against same-sex sexuality and what this entails persists (Van Zyl, Gordon and Gouws 1). Against this background, we analyse selected poetry from *red cotton* (2018) by vangile gantsho.<sup>1</sup> The other poetry collection we explore in the article is *Unam Wena* (2021), written by Mthunzikazi Mbungwana.<sup>2</sup>

The choice to examine the two poetry collections is informed by the fact that they represent black queer realities in contrasting versions and languages. Both collections explore themes of home, belonging, and consciousness and represent black queer realities in diametrically opposed versions and languages. Both collections hold thematic gear around a place called home, belonging, and consciousness. The two selected poetry collections confront


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each other's forms of representation of black queerness. Their work illustrates how being queer comes in many shapes and shades in a South African socio-economic context, such as access to education, job opportunities, and health facilities. Theo Sandfort and Vasu Reddy (2) assert that no singular, uniform story can fully capture the multiple strands of sexuality as a complex human attribute and quality. Through such confrontation, it is evident that different black queer women come from radically different socioeconomic classes in South Africa, and the representation of black queer women cannot follow any singular trail or system. In addition, black communities have various cultural and religious differences concerning an understanding of queerness amongst women. This further stretches the complexity around black queerness regarding how one represents a black queer woman without excluding or neglecting others. The form in which representation of black queer women is captured in the two selected poetry collections will be understood differently by different readers. The relevance of the latter is that it is essential to consider when analysing the representation of black queer women that some black readers may not understand or accept it at all. Other black readers may be witnessing black queerness in literature for the first time, since books are unaffordable for many South African readers and very few books have been written in indigenous languages about the topic of homosexuality.

These collections demonstrate the many ways black women, whether queer or not, experience violence at some stage of their lives. These women are aware of the violent spaces which they occupy. However, they are still persistent in constructing their realities. Wesley Paul Macheso (1) validates this when he argues that, for African writers, poems are one of the ways to rehumanise queer subjects in these disabling heteronormative societies to grant voice and agency to identities that have been multifariously subjugated and/or deliberately erased. The collections are working to rehumanise queer subjects and expose that people can be homophobic without knowing it, because their culture and language have conditioned them to think or act in a certain way. In analysing these poems, we argue that the poets employ poetry as a source to write about their lives and to reclaim queer subjects in a heteronormative South African space by allowing expression and representation through poetry.

Given that queer literature by black authors or the representation of black queer characters are still rare (Andrews 8), Mbungwana and gantsho's poetry not only grants a broader perspective of queer realities, but also offers two unique narratives of two human beings, stripping away the sexual orientation lens that queer people are often viewed through. In the discussion, we employ discourse theory to study how the authors of the selected poems construct knowledge about black queerness from a feminist perspective. We also look at how the selected poems are used as a source to shape how people understand the subject of black queerness.

### **Comparative textual analysis of selected isiXhosa and English poems**

The two selected collections indicate that the poets are observant of their geographic locations and historical and cultural provisions. Their poems represent different sites for understanding various complexities and registers of being a black Xhosa queer woman. An essential element of their identity is rendered by a linguistic means that is profoundly gendered and linked to a patriarchal cultural system constructing femininity as an inferior subject. The poems demonstrate that, as much as queer women in rural areas experience rejection and violence, the same is experienced by middle-class urban black queer women, albeit in a different language.

*UToki ulala evundwini / UMamise phandle yinja  
UMamise yinjakazi ekhusela yonke le mibundlwana  
yashiywa nguToki iqothole / UToki liqhawe eliqwalelayo*

UToki sleeps in the garden / UMamise is a dog that sleeps outside  
UMamise is a female dog that protects all the puppies  
left by UToki / UToki is a hero  
(Mbungwana 19)

Mbungwana writes her poetry in isiXhosa, and poems such as "UMamise / UToki" give the reader specifications of the geographic location from which the poem was written. As the poem begins, Mbungwana illustrates "that these are village dogs", meaning that depictions are made from a rural perspective. This poem is a figurative portrayal of the inequality struggles that black, queer women and black women in general are likely to experience in rural areas where males are held in high regard and women are seen as objects to men. The poem suggests that UToki, the male dog, sleeps in the garden, and UMamise, the female dog, sleeps outside. Thus, UMamise's placement

outside the house, even beyond the confines of the garden, symbolises her marginalised status, highlighting the distance not only from the physical shelter but also from the societal norms and privileges associated with the domestic space. The struggles that Mbungwana represents in this poem also imply that, even if homosexuality were entirely accepted in indigenous communities, black queer men and women would still not be equal. To stretch the interpretation further, this means gay men would be privileged over lesbian women if UToki, as a male, is given preference over UMamise.

gantsho writes in English, and the cited poem invites us to the struggle of not fitting in within your community or family norms because of language limitations.

i could never play with the other children by the river my tongue did not belong in the water  
or these kitchen conversations  
asked too many questions, for an eight year old  
it swam too easily floating on its back staring at clouds showing off its english  
(gantsho 7)

This poem, “sorting beans” (7) illustrates the silent war between black urban versus black rural people who feel equally judged by the other group. The poem portrays the image of a black girl who does not feel she fits in her current surroundings in the rural village, referencing her experience of language (“my tongue”), making her an outsider amongst other black children. The girl also cannot play with other children by the river because she will be ridiculed for not speaking “better isiXhosa”, nor can the girl participate in conversation with older women, owing to her urban upbringing, which has not prepared her for how a child behaves in a rural setting. For a girl, it is uncomfortable to find herself in the kitchen with the aunts, because she is curious and asks too many questions when cultural expectation does not allow a child to do so. It is not a simple act for the ‘girl’ to play by the river with other children, because she can swim and float in the water, whereas the other children can only play around the water.

The segregation between rural and urban areas in South Africa is a lingering legacy of apartheid, and its impact continues to affect black communities, perpetuating trauma to this day. Economic inequality is a prominent consequence of this historical segregation, particularly evident in urban areas where residents have access to better opportunities and quality education. It is a common aspiration for all communities to seek improved living conditions and better education for their children. The inherent question arises: How does the system determine who benefits from the economy? This perpetuates the division between those in rural and urban areas, leading to accusations that some communities are favoured over others. Adding to the complexity of this issue is the concept of a “coconut”—a term applied to children from urban areas. This term implies being black on the outside but white on the inside, reflecting a perceived cultural disconnection. In their article “Coloniality and Identity in Kopano Matlwa’s Coconut” Peter Moopi and Rodwell Makombe (2) explain that a coconut is a metaphor of coloniality in that it speaks to the continued manifestation of colonial ways of being even after the end of colonialism. To be a coconut is to live in two worlds and yet belong to neither. It is important to note that this term is not used to celebrate black children who excel in English or exhibit proficiency in a particular language. This situation highlights the deep-seated challenges rooted in historical injustices, emphasising the need for comprehensive efforts to address economic disparities, educational opportunities, and cultural stereotypes to foster a more equitable and inclusive society. In this context, the poem subtly underscores the intersectional nature of navigating identity and the pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles and behavioural norms. The discomfort she feels in the kitchen with older women, where cultural expectations limit her curiosity and expression, hints at the restrictive nature of heteronormative gender roles imposed on her from a young age.

The selected poetry collections broaden and, at the same time, complicate our understanding that representations of black queer women could not only be limiting but also be multiplicative. In that, it requires the reader to reflect that queer feminist poetry does not exist outside of existing vulnerabilities and prejudices. As the authors of this article, we position queer feminism as an evolving field that delves into the intersectionality of gender and sexual identity. Queer identities within Xhosa culture, much like in other cultural contexts, grapple with intricate dynamics of acceptance and understanding. In our effort to construct a definition of queer feminism, we utilise Mbungwana and gantsho’s poetry to probe how queer individuals, especially women, are perceived, labelled, or referenced within the Xhosa cultural framework. This exploration entails delving into linguistic nuances and the terminology employed within these communities. Within our framework, we acknowledge the

wide-ranging attitudes toward queerness that can exist within any cultural group. Consequently, the experiences of queer individuals, including queer women, may be significantly influenced by both traditional practices and contemporary social dynamics.

Mbungwana's poetry, dissimilar to gantsho's poetry, represents the difference in poetics of identity throughout her collection. Mbungwana builds up a momentum of demonstrating that the location in which one finds themselves significantly contributes to who they are because of their surroundings and cultural practices. It is challenging to create and express a different identity and, to make matters worse, a different sexuality. Mbungwana's poetry demonstrates a fully-fledged Xhosa black queer woman who, amid difference, can use language successfully to speak of herself as a queer black woman. gantsho's poetry also represents a Xhosa queer woman who is fully aware of her linguistic incongruities between English and isiXhosa. She is reconciling with the subjectivity of notions of her Xhosa identity. In her poetry, she does not say, "I am a black queer woman", but she prefigures the poetics of her different or 'other' sexuality in an astute fashion that allows all black women or black girls and eventually queer women to see themselves through the lens of her poetry.

Referring to the poem below, it encapsulates the broader experience of a woman within the cultural context. gantsho's poetry not only speaks to the experiences of a queer woman but is crafted in a way that resonates with a broader audience, including heterosexual females. The ritual of covering the girl's vagina until marriage as mentioned in the poem below is a cultural practice that is relatable to many black girls, irrespective of their sexual orientation. This illustrates gantsho's ability to address and include diverse aspects of the black female experience in her poetry. Therefore, we argue that gantsho's poetry offers an inclusive representation that goes beyond sexual orientation, touching on shared cultural experiences that are relevant to a wide spectrum of black women.

the day i turn twenty-one, my brothers each grab one of my feet. plant me deeply into a sister-bed and cover me with soil. when i detach myself from my legs, mama covers my vagina with a cloth her uncle gave her when she was twelve years old. she tells me to keep it covered until i meet my husband.  
("disappearing" 29)

The last line in the verse exposes heteronormative and heteropatriarchal expectations that a female partner is likely to encounter when married to a male partner. Fikile Vilakazi and Gabi Mkhize (7) uphold the following about heteronormativity:

Heteronormativity is the way in which social institutions reinforce a socially contracted 'normative' belief that human beings fall into two distinct binaries of sex and gender: male/man and female/woman. This ideology produces the idea that those sexes/genders exist to fulfil reproductive roles and hence that all intimate relationships ought to exist only between males/men and females/women.

Vilakazi and Mkhize cite the last line in gantsho's poem "disappearing" to mean one of two things; either homosexuality is not considered in her family, or it is not known at all.

It is perceived as "normal" in society for every mother to assume that their female child ought to marry a man, which reinforces heterosexuality and marginalises other sexualities. For instance, the mother covering the girl's legs with a cloth in this poem has several implications. Firstly, it implies that the girl must not be sexually active until she meets her husband. Secondly, the girl is only encouraged to preserve her body for the promise or dream of marriage, not for health or any personal reasons other than preserving her body to please the opposite sex.

The poem's first line alludes to practices such as *ukuhlolwa* and *umemulo*. *Ukuhlolwa* is a cultural practice that encourages young women to undergo virginity testing to preserve their virginity until marriage (Mvune 28). The hypocrisy around this practice is that it is cultured in a fashion that benefits the girl's family. Usually, during *ilobolo* negotiations, if a girl's virginity is verified, extra cattle is to be given to the mother of the bride—hence, her virginity will determine the number of *ilobolo* cows that will be paid to her family. In that sense, the girl's mother will receive an extra cow if her daughter remains a virgin until marriage. *Ukuhlolwa* extends beyond the realm of *ilobolo* and is also integral to cultural ceremonies such as *intonjane*, as Gyamerah *et al.* (705) elucidate. *Intonjane* serves as a significant rite of passage, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood within the community. The ritual entails a female seclusion lasting eight days, symbolising a connection with ancestral spirits and providing comprehensive education on sexual and reproductive health. *Inkciyo* is also another mechanism to regulate

premarital sexual activity. This cultural practice reflects the societal importance placed on female chastity and is considered a pivotal element in the community's moral fabric (Gyamerah *et al.* 705).

The first line also suggests *umemulo* because it is a ceremony that marks the transition of a girl into womanhood and shows that she is now ready for marriage. *Umemulo* is a girl's-coming-of-age ritual (Zondi 196). Nompumelelo Zondi (196) makes further iterations about how this ritual promotes gender inequality through songs that are sung during such ceremonies when she states: "The fact that these songs are sung in the presence of men implies that features of patriarchy have been accepted as natural and that women in this society need men to endorse their actions. In the process, women further promote cruelty against one another, unintentional as it may be, in what I term 'horizontal' gender oppression".

Zondi offers a strong portrayal of how cultural practices endorse gender inequality. According to culture, men and women are unequal, which falls within the heteropatriarchal normativity. In this poem, gantsho further ties this concept with the exclusion of homosexuality in her mother's expectations.

The practice of *ukuhlohwa* normalises the notion that marrying a virgin is a male privilege. However, a boy child is not encouraged to preserve his virginity until marriage because he is superior to a girl, iterating the protest about gender inequality in Mbungwana's poem "UMamise / UToki".

In the poem "disappearing", gantsho (29) draws a representation of heteronormative sources of our society. Gender inequality exists in almost all classes, races, and cultures. Tsosheletso Chidi, co-author of this article, asserts that, during her childhood as a Mopedi girl in Limpopo, boys were allowed to open their legs when sitting down, but she was always reminded to keep her legs closed regardless of her posture. She uses that experience to iterate that these opposing standards stem from the Sepedi tradition known as *go anega dinonwane*, or oral storytelling. If during story-time her grandmother (*Makgolo*) notices that she is opening her legs after telling her tale, the girl child will be called by the grandmother and physically disciplined, inflicting this discipline on her ears.

In Sepedi, it is said, "*makgolo o mo sobile ditsebe tša go se kwe*", iterating that a particular girl child is ill-disciplined; thus, her ears are deaf. Chidi uses these lived experiences to conclude that such practices give the boy child the idea that he is better than a girl child. Though oral history forms an integral part of black culture and heritage, it, too, had and has tenets of gender inequality, whereas black queer feminist poetry functions to dismantle patriarchy and allow women to bring forth the ideas about their realities unrestrained.

### **The functionality of queer feminist poetry as a representation of black women**

There is a new breed of black queer female poets in South Africa aware of their space in the literary landscape and society. Anna Chitando (61) maintains that African female writers have proclaimed their presence on the global literary scene in a way that cannot be overlooked. She declares they are good examples to the African girl child as they have challenged colonialism and patriarchy to author their own stories. Thus, this section of the article seeks to pause and ask what is black and what is queer?

As a colour, black historically symbolises evil, fear, and inferiority. It is also often used to associate a specific group of people with negative qualities. Historically, white as a colour has often been associated with purity, innocence, and superiority, contrasting with the negative associations with black. Those labelled white are therefore privileged whilst those labelled as black oppressed (Tsiri 5). Historically, the word "queer" was used to condemn those who identified as part of the homosexual community. However, the term has been reclaimed as acceptable and now aims to dignify and enfranchise the excluded sexualities outside of heterosexuality (Habib 4). In solidarity and defiance, it would appear limiting to reference only sexually identifying poems to prove that the poets mentioned in this article are queer. This article acknowledges that the context of black, queer feminist poetry goes beyond poetry that demonstrates sexual orientation. In this article we demonstrate how these women connect through poetry, and although using different languages, their poetry always crosses between paths of queer feminist poetry. These women created a language through poetry in which they protect each other against violence, trauma, and oppression of heteronormative hierarchies. They use poetry to construct discursive knowledge about queer identity and shape how people understand it.

### **The emergence of black queer feminist poetry**

Documenting poetry, especially women's poetry, is crucial so we don't forget the value of women's truths and cultural productions (Molebatsi 86). It is essential for women and black queer women to document poetry that

tells the truth about who they are. The comparative analysis of this article was guided by the fact that black queer feminist poetry is a rapidly emerging genre in South Africa that attention should be paid to. Poetry is not only a dream and vision: it is the skeleton architecture of life. It lays the foundations for a future of change, bridging our fears of what has never been before (Lorde 38). Mbungwana and gantsho have collectively formed a skeleton of what black queer feminist poetry looks like.

In 2016, as part of her Master of Arts Degree in Creative Writing, gantsho authored a poem, “mama i am burning”, which now forms part of her poetry collection *red cotton*. In 2019, as part of her Master of Arts Degree in Creative Writing, Mbungwana authored a poem, “Ihambo”, which now forms part of her poetry collection, *Unam Wena*. In this poem, she also talks about burning and the flame calling her name. In 2020, Itumeleng Qhali, referred to as “Qhali”, authored a poem for her Master of Arts Degree in Creative Writing, “Itumeleng”, which now forms part of her national indigenous language choreopoem “Loss-Ilahleko”. In this poem, she also depicts a burning woman when she says, “Mama ndiyatsha”.

The poetry of these three women portrays an inter-lingual dialogue among black female poets and the power bestowed in black women’s writing. Their poetry bears witness to a burning woman in our present society. They use poetry to hold an interactive dialogue with each other and with other women. Qhali (62) makes a bold statement about the rising scholarship of black female poets who are in control of their narratives in her choreopoem:

[...] *amahlathi ayaphila* / the forests are alive  
and there is a quiet army rising with one voice *baxelele* / tell them.<sup>3</sup>

The forests symbolise an army of black female poets dismantling homophobia, patriarchy, inequality, and gender-based violence. To emphasise her statement, she closes it with a call to action: “tell them”. Qhali plays a significant role in spearheading the multilingual mission of feminist poetry. As part of her mission through her choreopoem, she has published authors such as Tsosheletso Chidi, Maleshoane Mphutlane, Nthabiseng Jahrose Jafta, Hlayisani Shiburi, and Hope Netshivhambe, to name a few. These are authors who have been part of the South African literary landscape over the years as poets and writers and they form part of *Loss-Ilahleko*, a poetry anthology curated and published by Qhali.

Being queer is an open invitation to all opposed to patriarchal heteronormative binary configurations of sexual orientations (Nyanzi 13). This article also notes the contributions of other black female poets who do not identify as lesbian or queer if their writings echo the voice of black queer feminist poetry. In her essay “Queering Queer Africa”, Stella Nyanzi made it clear that it is important to grow and expand the scholarship of Queer Africa without regulating who has the right to write about queerness because we are all members of the African society, and homophobia affects us all. Nyanzi (13) continues to state the following in her essay: “Whose right is to determine who, what, where, when and how queer is? If queer is allowed to be queer, why are boundaries of inclusion and exclusion forcibly drawn—and usually based on essential readings by others of the perceived body under scrutiny”.

Through poetry as a vital locus of cultural meaning, women have self-consciously created lineage, history, and identity. In this sense, feminist poetry is a social constructionist project (Gaber 24). It would be an injustice to poetry as a language and a source that holds human beings together to speak about their lives and exclude others because of their heterosexual identity. Homosexuals and heterosexuals are not working against each other but are different because of their sexualities that are constructed to be hierarchal—e.g., heterosexuality is “normalised” and homosexuality is the “other” (Mkhize and Vilakazi 8). In this regard, it would be a prejudice to this article if the significant role of Meysha Jenkins, Lebo Mashile, Ntsiki Mazwai, Natalia Molebatsi, Napo Masheane, Flow Wellington, and MoAfrika wa Mokgathi’s contributions were not noted. In acknowledging their significance, it is imperative to highlight their unique contributions to poetry and activism. Jenkins was a revolutionary activist involved in international solidarity movements, notably advocating for racial inclusion at the University of California, Riverside, who later came to South Africa. Mashile, Masheane, and Mazwai—collectively known as “Feela Sistah”—are amongst those mentored by Jenkins and are now internationally acclaimed South African black poets. Wellington is a poet and owner of Poetree Publications. Wa Mokgathi is a poet, author, performer, cultural activist, teaching artist, curator, and award-winning radio presenter-producer. She is the co-founder of the NGO “Hear My Voice” and works together with Qhali and gantsho as part of a poetry and healing movement called Small Girl Rising. These groups of women influence literary scholarship of

non-conformist literature through their work. Their work has sometimes faced limitations, as it is impossible to represent all black women using a singular uniform, and, as a result, representation of realities of some women are neglected or misrepresented.

### **Discourse theory and adoption of narrative inquiry within the constructionism paradigm**

Discourse theory is not just a personal communication but a more extensive system of thought within a particular historical location that makes certain things thinkable and sayable and regulates who can say them (Laclau and Mouffe 176). Within this context, discourse theory structures a method to write poetry and talk about the practice of homosexuality at this time in history when black queer women are joining an extensive conversation that has been ongoing. At the heart of this conversation is the question of what black queer feminist poetry is. Researchers who employ discourse theory can attempt to regulate the rights of black women to express their experiences of queerness and trauma and the associated violence. In this sense, discourse theory allows black women to tell their stories through poetry as their tools.

Mbungwana and gantsho's poetry focus on the fact that it is impossible to speak about homosexuality in an indigenous community without depicting the practice as taboo. The resistance to accepting the practice of homosexuality in indigenous communities is based on the premise that such sexual orientation or consequent sexual behaviour violates basic principles and beliefs of African reality (Matolino 1). The following verse in gantsho's (2) poem "i'm standing in the middle of the road" illustrates this:

i'm standing in the middle of the road trying to drown out my  
mother's voice. she tells me i'll go to hell for all the men who come in and out of my bed. she doesn't know about the  
women. i wonder if there is a worse kind of hell for people like me.

These verses imply that the poet's mother would be even more scandalised if she knew her daughter was having sex with women, rather than shaming her for sleeping with several men. Mbungwana (43) makes a supplementary illustration about the impossibility of speaking about queerness/homosexuality without the implication of it being taboo in indigenous languages and communities in the following verses from "Umqolomba":

*Ulwimi lam luyandicalucalula imbali iyandikhanyela  
Andinagama ndingusisi-bhuti ongemntu*

My language discriminates against me history denies me  
I don't have a name. I am a she-him a nobody

Just like in all her poems, Mbungwana demonstrates that language is essential as it could indicate people's views on a subject. The above verses reveal that indigenous communities can use language to exclude the practice of homosexuality, especially in the first line. It is easier for her community to claim that they do not know how to identify her within their culture and history because, in their language, they do not have words to describe her and, therefore, she cannot be recognised as part of the/her community.

In the second line, Mbungwana further states that the way her language discriminates against her has amounted to her being a nobody without a name, a "she-him". This verse fully demonstrates the attitude of her community towards homosexuality through language. Discourse theory also demonstrates that language is about power, and Mbungwana, in the previously mentioned verses, uses her language (isiXhosa) and that of her community to expose them for discriminating against her through language.

Drawing from their poetry collections, Mbungwana and gantsho boldly state their existence as black queer women regardless of society's approval. They also manage to construct a knowledge paradigm that informs society about black queer realities by ontologically giving their perspective based on their circumstances. Their collections also demonstrate that they come from diverse backgrounds, indicating that their queer realities differ.

Given that both Mbungwana and gantsho's literary works are poetry, we argue that they were able to constitute discourse about homosexuality in indigenous communities. Their poetry collections can also shape how different people understand or do not understand homosexuality. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue that discourses include certain elements and present them as uncontested while excluding certain elements. In so doing, discourses naturalise specific perspectives and thus enable them to gain hegemonic dominance (178).

Considering this, in this article we analysed the selected poems from Mbungwana and gantsho's collections to explore how the poets represent the inclusion or exclusion of homosexuality in mainstream society.

### **The use of protest voice, form, sound, and structure set the tone and mood in the two collections**

It is easier to sense a protest voice in Mbungwana's poetry, mainly when she writes about how language discriminates against the character in the poem and how the church adds to that discrimination. Mbungwana depicts a woman who knows her place in society and protests it. However, there is so much pain beneath her protest because the protest comes from a place of discomfort. Mbungwana's poetry also demonstrates that protest can be more demonstrative than violent. Mbungwana is concise and intentional about what she says without using vulgar language, yet a sense of protest and rage is still visible. The form of her poetry follows no uniform structure. Her poetry follows free verse form. The length of her lines is very short, precise, and to the point. She is not trying to sound trendy or fashionable and does not follow any rhyme schemes. That has helped her convey meaning about any message she wants to send. The free verse form also emphasises the writer's level of freedom so that she is not confined to following any known form.

As an example, Mbungwana's (30) poem "Amanxeba" can be discussed.

*La mabele ndandisaya kuqamela ngawo*

*La ngamanxeba esithembiso [...] sithandwa uyandibona na*

I used to pillow on these breasts

These are the wounds of promise [...] dear do you see me

In this poem, the length of the lines, the length of the poem, and the structure of the poem validate that more can be said with fewer words. The significance of this is that it will be easier for the reader to remember this writing for its uniqueness and shortness. Using fewer words in this poem sets a tone and mood of deep sadness, showing that there is not much more to say. Lastly, Mbungwana uses capital letters to set a powerful tone in all her titles, including the book title.

vangile gantsho uses lower case to make her poetry practical, accessible, and specific. The use of lower case to sign her name and the titles of her poems sets a distinct tone that allows the reader to read between the lines and interpret the physical appearance of the poem. In "spit and gravy", gantsho (33) writes:

last night i spat on his plate. stirred it into his gravy

i use red cotton to sew the navy button onto his jacket

The lexical register of this poem alludes to a silent protest. The character in the poem is against the acts of violence of her uncle towards his wife, but the character is just a girl and does not have the strength to fight her uncle. She resorts to spitting in his gravy and using red cotton to sew a navy button onto his jacket. Beneath the simplicity of the poet's choice of words lies a wave of anger that also illustrates the tone and mood of the poem. gantsho also follows free verse in her poetry, and she does not depend on rhyme schemes to give her poems impact.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we analysed selected poems from two collections: *Unam Wena* and *red cotton*. Mbungwana and gantsho's poems represent black isiXhosa female poets who are aware of their spaces in the literary landscape and society. Our analysis focused on how these collections represent black queer women. We posit that these collections speak against homophobia, patriarchy, and the fight for equality between black women and men. Our discussion posits that, within the South African framework, queer representations are emerging at a rapid rate. Our analysis of the poems established that the two selected poets produced and published black female, queer literature without being what we like to refer to as heteronormatively edited: editing text in a manner that makes it convenient for the heteronormative hierarchies. The poetry we discussed demonstrates that, although homosexuality is still discriminated against, the poets make bold statements about their existence. They know they are marginalised but still strive to document their existence in a South African literary landscape. South African black female poets use poetry as a source and language to hold space for each other and represent the queer realities and realities of every black woman in South Africa. Representing these realities is to empower, liberate, and fight for justice and equality. In this article, we also made it clear that it is essential to note that



women who identify as heterosexual and homosexual are not enemies; they are women and writers who exist beyond sexual labels, meaning they can exist and write about the same subject matter without feeling that they are stealing from each other.

#### Notes

1. Henceforth referred to as *red cotton* as written on the book's cover page, and the name of the author will be written in small letters as she chooses to. This is a phenomenon that is not unique in feminist studies as bell hooks, an American feminist author, adopts the same style.
2. The poems used in this article were translated by Zodwa Mtirara, an isiXhosa translator and poet.
3. This is not a poetry verse. It is a stand-alone statement that Qhali made on page sixty-two of the choreopoem. This statement is also an example of how her poetry is able to move between isiXhosa and English in the same poems.

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