



Citizenship and social status in Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan*

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An intersectional feminist stance was reflected in South African literary texts as early as the 1970s. Miriam Tlali's pioneering work *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975), for example, explores how black women are most palpably confronted with intersecting oppressions and inequalities because of mutually reinforcing axes of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. These social categories provided the basis to differentiate groups from each other and were utilised to produce unequal power relations. Such inequalities were not only created by the apartheid regime, but also by African Customary Law, although the latter was subject to the twin influences of colonialism and apartheid. In this article I analyse five key passages of the novel through an intersectional lens by looking into the correlation between these systems, intersectional axes, citizenship, and social status. The close reading of the extracts shows that the characters' civil rights are curtailed, and their social status reduced through inter alia dehumanising stereotypes, racial and gendered naming strategies, and polarising pronouns. Furthermore, the discursive counterreactions of the black female protagonist Muriel are charted. These consist of rational argumentation, norm-breaking, objectification, and distancing techniques. Her retorts represent her resistance against multiple subjugations and take the shape of what is now called intersectional feminism(s). **Keywords:** intersectionality, citizenship, social status, apartheid, African Customary Law, Miriam Tlali.

Introduction

About halfway through Miriam Tlali's debut novel *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975), the eponymous protagonist, Muriel, makes a telling statement: "I'm not happy here because I'm between two fires" (*Muriel* 50). It predominantly refers to the inner conflict she experiences while working in the white-owned furniture and electronics shop Metropolitan Radio in Johannesburg, which thrives on the exploitation of black customers (Samuelson 763). Nevertheless, it may also be read in a whole different light since it aptly illustrates the intersecting struggles and multidimensional forms of oppression which many South Africans encountered daily during the second half of the 20th century. This period was permeated by the apartheid system, which was grounded in a "white supremacist capitalist ideology and black patriarchy" (Boswell, *And Wrote My Story Anyway* 205). This resulted in discriminatory effects for black persons, women, people of the lower classes, ethnic minority groups, people from the LGBTQIA community and still many others. All these groups were categorised in terms of inter alia race, gender, and class—social categories which overlapped, thereby reinforcing each other and culminating in specific detrimental consequences for individuals (Gouws 19–20).

To provide insight into the interlocking nature of oppressions under apartheid, in this article I focus on how the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and class unfold themselves in Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan*.¹ The novel elaborates on the way in which the characters grapple with these social categories, "what is now widely understood as intersectional[ity]" (Gqola 31). The experiences of the protagonist will be highlighted because she bears and thereby reveals the consequences, not only of apartheid legislation, but also of African Customary Law. As a result, her circumstances represent the "unique challenges for black women in South Africa" (Wing and de Carvalho 80). In this respect, Tlali's novel functions as a case study in a larger research project which seeks to uncover underexposed intersections, inequalities, and ensuing counterreactions in literary texts written by women during

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v6i1i.16064>

DATES:

Submitted: 29 April 2023; Accepted: 15 January 2024; Published: 30 April 2024

the apartheid period.² To achieve that objective, in this article I deploy intersectionality as a tool to uncover multi-level power mechanisms in apartheid South Africa that manifested themselves in relation to citizenship and social status. These loomed large during the apartheid era and were intertwined with race, ethnicity, gender, and class. By zooming in on several key passages in Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan*, I intend to examine the intersections of those social categories and their consequences at the micro scale of the protagonist's daily work life. Moreover, I will investigate the interaction between this personal impact and the overarching effects of apartheid legislation and African Customary Law. Finally, I will identify Muriel's discursive counterreactions to bring to light how women resisted these overlapping systems, which gave rise to disparate manifestations of intersectional feminisms in South African literatures.

Intersectionality as a tool to uncover multi-level power mechanisms

Already long before its coinage in 1989 by the American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw and its ubiquity in women's studies, intersectionality was adopted as an angle to examine "interlocking relations of dominance" (Gouws 19).³ The 19th century African American pioneer Sojourner Truth deployed it to explore the overlapping effects of race, gender, and class on the lives of black women (Gouws 20). This multi-layered approach also caught on across American borders, as far as in South Africa, because it provided a means of understanding the effect of a "white supremacist patriarchal state such as apartheid" (Gqola 190). Around 1970 Desiree Lewis and Gabeda Baderoon (8) speak of "anti-apartheid feminists" who fought against the intertwined oppressions of racism and gender violence.

To gain insight into this South African situation, which is characterised by multi-level power mechanisms, intersectionality offers the most suitable framework. Nevertheless, it does not function as a predetermined method, so it has to be operationalised as a concrete tool to uncover these dynamics. In this sense, it can be adopted as a "critical lens" (Gouws 19) to scrutinise not only social categories but also ensuing consequences which can take the form of, among others, racism, classism, sexism, and ethnocentrism (Arndt 32). When an intersectional lens is applied to literary texts it gives rise to a "new way of reading" (Collins *et al.* 694) which focuses on the "simultaneity, complexity [and] irreducibility" of these overlapping systems (Carastathis 54). It does so on multiple levels of social reality by taking into account how they influence both "institutionalized practices and lived experiences" (54, 128). While the former belongs to the meso level composed of organisations or social structures including legislation (Winker and Degele 52), the latter is part of the micro level which zooms in on "everyday micro-practices in a range of social spaces such as work and home" (Moolman 93). Moreover, those two levels are embedded in an overarching macro level constituted by ideology (Winker and Degele 52). All three cannot be seen in isolation from each other, since power relations on an individual scale are often legally and ideologically grounded (Carastathis 71), and because "who people are" can never be understood apart from "the way things work" (Nash 16). This was certainly the case in South Africa, where apartheid laws and African Customary Law determined the hierarchy among, and rights of its residents based on social categories. Therefore, in this article I will deploy intersectionality as a tool to examine how these legislative systems interact with and influence the protagonist's daily discriminatory experiences in *Muriel at Metropolitan*. As discrimination can take on versatile forms, attention will be paid to inequalities, exclusion, subordination, stereotypes, and prejudice (Carastathis 63).

Intersectional effects of apartheid legislation on citizenship and social status

Especially during the apartheid years, citizenship played a key role in South Africa because it determined the degree of freedom and equality people experienced (Moolman 93). Due to a series of laws with the Population Registration Act (1950) at the core, it was principally dependent on a person's place in the racial and ethnic hierarchy (Wing and de Carvalho 61).^{4,5} Situated at the very bottom were black Africans, labelled "'surplus' non-citizens" by the apartheid regime (Hames 58). As a result, their civil rights were severely restricted "in all areas of life, including housing, land ownership, education, health care, employment, judicial administration, freedom of speech, freedom of association, public accommodations, and marriage" (Wing and de Carvalho 60). The Group Areas Act (1950), for instance, robbed them of their freedom of where to live and work by confining them to allocated separate 'homelands' (Himonga and Nhlapo 14). Furthermore, their freedom of movement was limited by the Native Laws Amendment Act (1952) which forced them to carry passes and prohibited them from frequenting urban areas for longer than 72 hours (Boswell, *Wrote My Story* 32–3). At first this law only applied to black men, but

four years after its introduction pass books also became mandatory for black women, containing a written record of their “identity, employment, place of residence, and tax records” (Wing and de Carvalho 63). In the racial and ethnic hierarchy, black Africans were directly followed by the other groups of Asians and ‘coloureds’, who held an intermediate position (Boswell, *Wrote My Story* 15).⁶ This pyramid structure not only bolstered white supremacy but was part of a “divide-and-rule politics, resulting in the fragmentation of the country” (Bennett, *A Sourcebook of African Customary Law for Southern Africa* vii). By legally dividing black Africans, Asians, and ‘coloureds’ into separate groups, the apartheid regime aimed to drive a wedge between them to prevent their joint revolt against the system (Gqola 153). Such a mutual “social and psychological alienation” was achieved by assigning them inter alia different sets of labour standards which resulted in an economic gap (Boswell, *Wrote My Story* 16–7). While black Africans encountered deplorable working conditions and severe exploitation, Indians and particularly ‘coloureds’ had access to better jobs, although still in “low- and unskilled forms of labour” (17). This association of racial and ethnic classification with economic circumstances clearly illustrates the interdependence of social categories such as race, ethnicity, and class as well as their combined effects on citizenship. In this regard, Shamim Meer (36) speaks of “racial and class oppression as key causes of poverty, inequality, and a lack of rights for most South Africans”. Since class and classism are linked to employment, the acquisition of money and education levels (Moolman 99) belonging to the working class exacerbated the social status of black people and thus further curtailed their civil rights (Hames 58). Nevertheless, the relationship between race, class, and citizenship worked in the opposite direction as well, with a clear split concerning living conditions and “personhood” between “black people in economic and political power [...] [and] the black working and underclasses” (Moolman 99). Although the vast majority of black Africans belonged to the latter group during the apartheid era, there were also a few who were part of the middle class (Wing and de Carvalho 90). Besides being “racialized through the apartheid state” and correlating with class, citizenship was also directly related to gender in the period spanning from 1948 to 1990 (Moolman 98). In this context, Barbara Boswell (*Wrote My Story* 10) refers to “the gendered ways in which the nation constructs its citizens”. This portrayal was often contradictory with women acting as symbol for the nation in South African legal and literary imagery on the one hand, but in practice being largely devoid of civil rights on the other (Cullhed 90). The latter was particularly true for black women who were “excluded from citizenship by intersecting racial and gender hegemonies” (Boswell, “Rewriting Apartheid South Africa: Race and Space in Tlali and Lauretta Ngcobo’s Novels” 1332). These colluding systems were constituted by colonialism, apartheid, and African Customary Law, the effects of which on black women’s status as citizens are examined in the section just below, since I focus on the position of Tlali’s black female protagonist Muriel in this article.

Colonialism and apartheid’s influences on African Customary Law, status, and citizenship

Besides apartheid legislation, black Africans were generally also subject to African Customary Law which applied to personal matters (Allott 182) such as “marriage, land tenure, inheritance and succession” (Elias 7). This particularly affected black women negatively, which led Adrien Wing and Eunice de Carvalho (97) to designate it as “a very significant site of oppression”. Nevertheless, there is a big discrepancy between its original conception and its interpretation under the colonial and apartheid regimes, whose twin influences completely distorted black women’s status as citizens (Tamale 147). Defining African Customary Law in its original state alone is a difficult endeavour (Allott 147), since it by no means took on the form of a “monolithic code” (Bennett, *Sourcebook* x). Its composition was largely area-specific due to the “ethno-cultural diversity of African communities” where it was applied (Obiora 228), ranging from, among others, South Africa and Botswana to Nigeria and Sudan (Bennett, *The Application of Customary Law in Southern Africa: The Conflict of Personal Laws* 63; Elias 3). Even within South Africa itself, there were mutual differences between several groups “because of the differing histories, alliances, hostilities, and ethnic outlooks of the multitude of linguistically distinct peoples comprising the country (Xhosa, Zulu, [...], Venda, Sotho, [...])” (Ettin 47–8). However, despite these “local variations [...] by and large, the broad principles in all the various systems are the same” (Ndulo 88). Nevertheless, these slightly deviating manifestations of African Customary Law were further complicated by the transformation they underwent due to the intricate interaction with colonialism and apartheid. The largely unwritten rules, stemming from ancestral and religious systems which were entrenched in everyday practices and customs kept alive by oral tradition (Allott 203; Himonga and Nhlapo 27), became subject to far-reaching codification by the British colonial administration (Bennett, *Application* 44).⁷ The latter’s preservation of African Customary Law created the illusion of autonomy for the indigenous communities, while in effect it was deployed to prevent revolt and control them (Himonga and

Nhlapo 7, 24). To achieve these underlying objectives “[...] new rules of customary law were invented or constructed”, while at the same time “[...] diverse customary and emerging practices were remoulded and ‘unified’ according to rigid principles that elevated and entrenched gender discrimination” (Himonga and Nhlapo 24, 172). The result was a split between the original ‘living’ customary law and the colonial ‘official’ customary law, with the latter supplanting the former (25). This “colonial product” dismissed the previous dynamic customs and therefore distorted the prevailing gender relations by imposing its own Western patriarchal and capitalist standards (Tamale 141, 148). Although black women were often not considered equal to black men in precolonial times, their standing could differ from case to case because it was not only based on gender, but also on age and socio-economic factors (Obiora 234). Moreover, they had more latitude and were embedded in a strong and protective family network (Bennett, *Sourcebook* vii). In this context they played a vital role gathering food and raising children, which made other community members dependent on them (Obiora 235). Under British colonial rule, by contrast, which was grounded in “masculinist assumptions and biases” (227), their sociopolitical status declined drastically (Tamale 147). According to Bennett (*Sourcebook* ix), African women’s predicament “took on an extreme manifestation in South Africa” as they lost all legal autonomy. This directly correlated with their position as minors under male tutelage (Bennett, *Application* 66), which often made black women reliant on the goodwill of their husband or closest male relative, such as their father, brother, uncle, or cousin (Wing and de Carvalho 64). These men acted as their guardians and consequently had the ultimate decision-making power in matters such as property, inheritance, and marriage (Wing and de Carvalho 64). This system was already in force under living customary law but became statutory under official customary law (Himonga and Nhlapo 114). In this respect, Chuma Himonga and Thandabantu Nhlapo (112) state that “under official customary law, the marriage of a black woman resulted in her becoming a minor and, therefore, of unequal status with her husband”. The upshot of this measure, in addition to denying black women fundamental rights and making them practically completely dependent on spouses or male relatives, was that it enshrined in the law their status as “second class citizens” (Ndulo 89). The colonial legacy of black women as minors persisted into the twentieth century (Cullhed 11). Therefore, Himonga and Nhlapo (13) speak of “a distinct continuity between the colonial period, the Union period and the apartheid era”. In that sense, the British colonial administration laid the legal foundations for these successive systems by transforming African Customary Law and black women’s status as citizens. As a result of the interaction between colonialism and apartheid, their situation was only exacerbated since they were “relegated [...] to the lowest form of citizenship in South Africa prior to 1993” (Wing and de Carvalho 59). This interplay of sexism and racism led to inequalities regarding property ownership, inheritance, and marriage, and therefore illustrates the direct consequences of such intersections (Wing and de Carvalho 60, 63). While in precolonial times ownership was predominantly situated on the family level, it became an individual right under these twin influences (Bennett, *Sourcebook* ix). Furthermore, property ownership was reserved for men because the colonial laws “privileged men over women”, entailing that the latter were practically barred from it (Himonga and Nhlapo 172; Wing and de Carvalho 63). “[The] male head of the family had sole control over the family’s assets”, which remained in male hands even after their death, because black women could not inherit (Wing and de Carvalho 65–6). These belongings were passed on to the first-born son or, in the case of childlessness, to the closest male relative (Wing and de Carvalho 65–6). Other practices from living customary law that changed significantly under the colonial and apartheid rule were wedding rituals. These were, moreover, inextricably linked to black women’s status as citizens, since “their rights turn[ed] on the pivot of the marriage relation” (Obiora 228). Similar to property ownership, customary marriage was a family affair because it was heavily influenced by the endorsement of the spouses’ parents (Bennett, *Application* 137). In this respect, the future husband asked his guardian, usually his father, for some kind of property such as cattle, which he had to offer to the father of his future bride to solemnise their union (143). This custom of lobola or “bridewealth” acted as authentication of the marriage and as a guarantee that the woman in question would be provided for by her parents should there be a divorce (Bennett, *Sourcebook* 195). In its original manifestation, lobola was esteemed as an indispensable proof of a husband’s commitment and “a public measure of [a black woman’s] worth” (Wing and de Carvalho 65), which “enhance[d], not diminish[ed] [her] status [...]” (Obiora 231). Nevertheless, the practice was often distorted in its “form and function” due to colonial and apartheid capitalism (Bennett, *Sourcebook* 201). Bennett (*Sourcebook* 202) claims that in many cases money became the main currency instead of livestock, while the requested sums kept increasing because the bride’s parents started using them as compensation for the upbringing of their daughter, debts, or everyday costs. Consequently, lobola lost its role as financial safety net for the woman herself and turned

from a functional marriage ritual into a payment method. According to authors such as Muna Ndulo (93), bridewealth “ceased to be a source of African pride, as it [became] an institution [...] characterized by the domination and exploitation of women”. Numerous South African feminists shared this view by claiming that it contributed to their oppression and acted as a “linchpin of [their] legal subordination” (Wing and de Carvalho 65). They perceived it as “a sale of the bride”, which reduced black women to a capitalist commodity and restricted their independence (64).

Intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in *Muriel at Metropolitan*

As addressed just above, “the coexistence of [official] customary law with the pervasive effects of [...] apartheid practices present[ed] unique challenges for black women in South Africa” (Wing and de Carvalho 80). These also figure prominently in Tlali’s partly autobiographical literary debut *Muriel at Metropolitan*, which was the first English novel by a black woman published in South Africa during the apartheid era (Cullhed 12). This remarkable feat elevated Tlali to the status of a pioneer as “one of the founders of Black woman’s literary tradition in South Africa” (Gqola 187). Equally innovative are her narratives themselves, which examine the impact of race, ethnicity, gender, and class on the characters’ lives and thus “the intersectional nature of black women’s locations within apartheid [...] South Africa” (Boswell, *Wrote My Story* 2). Since *Muriel at Metropolitan* is narrated in the first person from the perspective of the black female protagonist Muriel, the focus is mainly on her experiences working in a furniture store in Johannesburg (Cullhed 72). These are marked by the relentless struggle of “constantly [...] negotiating her self [sic] in relation to a myriad of other ‘selves’, linked to gender, class, age, education and urbanity” (Muhlebach 76). Moreover, one of the driving forces behind the plot is citizenship, or rather the lack thereof, as Muriel is confronted with “the intersecting realities of being a disenfranchised citizen [...]” (Boswell, “Overcoming the ‘Daily Bludgeoning by Apartheid’: Black South African Women Writers, Agency, and Space” 423). This inferior status and the corresponding unequal distribution of civil rights is directly linked to intersecting social categories and the intertwined hegemonic systems of apartheid legislation and African Customary Law, as will be demonstrated by analysing five key passages.⁸ It is exactly by zooming in on this interaction in Muriel’s daily life that the novel makes palpable oppression, discrimination, and inequalities on a personal level. This makes it the ideal case study for investigating intersections of different axes of oppression and ensuing discursive counterreactions. Citizenship and social status run like a central thread through Tlali’s novel, especially during the conflicts between the black protagonist Muriel and her white female colleagues, Mrs. Kuhn and Mrs. Stein. In this context, the interconnectedness with intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and class becomes the most evident, because “the store functions as a simulacrum for apartheid South Africa [...]” (Boswell, “Rewriting” 1333).

The first of the selected passages that will be analysed is situated in chapter eight where a heated dispute takes place when Mrs. Kuhn interrupts a conversation between Muriel and her black colleague Adam as she deems them too loud. She tries to silence them by resorting to insults such as “baboons” (*Muriel* 42). Viewing this naming strategy through an intersectional lens reveals how a racist micro-practice in the workplace is embedded in the larger whole of the white supremacist apartheid ideology. By comparing them to animals, which is a typical technique to dehumanise black people (Moolman 95), the character of Mrs. Kuhn reproduces the racial and ethnic hierarchy installed by the Population Registration Act, which considered black Africans inferior beings. In this way, she deploys the social category of race to reduce their social status and implicitly elevate herself as a white ‘civilised’ woman. This racial stereotype is also connected to apartheid legislation because it is used to exclude Muriel and Adam from the civil liberty of freedom of speech. In the same vein, Mrs. Kuhn looks down on Muriel by asking her immediately afterwards: “What *are* you, after all?” (42), implying she does not consider Muriel her equal at all. Muriel, on the other hand, does not allow herself to be dragged into the use of pejorative language and consistently and respectfully keeps calling her white colleague by her name (Muhlebach 79). Her retort to the rhetorical question directly runs counter to the dehumanisation by explicitly characterising herself as a human being and presenting this as an obvious fact. Moreover, the statement: “I am a human being, of course” (*Muriel* 42) contains, according to Cullhed (86), a refusal of “being defined in stereotypical terms of race or gender [by] rejecting any label others want to pin on her [since] she first and foremost regards herself as a person worthy of respect”. By discarding such imposed identities on an individual scale, she also repudiates the overarching intersectional power dynamics of racism and sexism which are embedded in the apartheid system (Carastathis 71; Gouws 19).

In the same passage the quarrel continues, even after the arrival of Mr. Bloch, the boss. Besides the racial stereotypes used earlier to degrade the black employees, Mrs. Kuhn now unambiguously represents Muriel as a gendered subject by calling her “that girl” (*Muriel* 42). Looking at this phrase from an intersectional perspective clearly illustrates the simultaneity and irreducibility of intertwined systems such as racism and sexism. The social categories of race and gender are inextricably linked and contained in the term, which not only highlights Muriel’s position as a woman, but racialises her as well. ‘Girl’ and its male counterpart ‘boy’ were often used to belittle black people and therefore contest their adulthood and position as full citizens (Muhlebach 80). In this sense, it diminishes Muriel’s social status and “serve[s] as humiliating metaphor to delineate and perpetuate apartheid structures which relegate black people to a level of non-adulthood” (80). On top of that, the expression which Mrs. Kuhn utters almost casually during everyday conversation reflects the hierarchical and unequal power relations of the apartheid system. In the racial “boss-boy/girl dichotomy”, the former dominant role was reserved exclusively for white people, while the latter subordinate one was always filled in by black men or women, who often did household work and were for instance named ‘garden boy’ or ‘tea girl’ (79). Later in the same text passage, she also accuses Muriel of instigating Adam and other black men frequenting the shop to behave “cheeky” towards the white staff (*Muriel* 43), again using a condescending phrase as if speaking about children. Diametrically opposed to Mrs. Kuhn’s emotional reaction stands Muriel’s reply, which seems to embody the voice of reason. In a rational manner she takes the edge off the white woman’s argument by presenting communication with male colleagues and customers as an essential part of her job. By asking her: “What do you think I am, a doll or something?” (43), she temporarily puts a stop to the dispute and directly echoes Mrs. Kuhn’s aforementioned rhetorical question. According to Cullhed (76), this articulation expresses her “refusal to be silenced, to be ‘a doll’, [...] [which functions as] a protest against both apartheid and patriarchy”.

The second selected excerpt is located just a few lines further, where Mrs. Kuhn resumes the discussion even after an intervention of Mr. Bloch. This time she insinuates that Muriel’s mastery of English turns her into a know-all who does not hesitate to speak her mind. Nevertheless, she also states that Muriel only has a limited command of the language by saying that “she knows a bit of English” (43). This derogatory remark serves to downplay Muriel’s knowledge and education level and relates to prejudices based on race and class. In her reply, Muriel broaches the intersections of these social categories herself while showing their interconnectedness with gender as well: “Thank God I did not have to pick my English up in your kitchen or your backyard” (43). Through this statement she shows how apartheid legislation had direct consequences on the everyday life of black African people by barring their access to quality education and consequently relegating them to menial jobs. By referring to the stereotypical spaces of the kitchen and the backyard, she focuses specifically on black women’s labour situation, who at the time often worked as domestic servants in white people’s houses (Wing and de Carvalho 68). This ties in with Tamale’s claim (6–7) that “the process of capitalist exploitation cannot be separated from racial and gender hierarchization”. At the same time, Muriel distances herself from the fate that befell these women, because her answer seems to imply that she owes her linguistic competence to a type of higher education. Later in the novel, it is confirmed that she is better qualified than her white female colleagues as she studied at university (*Muriel* 93). Since her race and gender intersect with her education level, the latter slightly compensates for the disadvantages arising from the former social categories, which results in an enhanced status and a better position compared to her peers (Muhlebach 82). Furthermore, because of her scholarly background she directly goes against the apartheid state’s discriminatory mechanisms to create inequality and subordination by “subjecting Black people to a type of education that would keep them in subservient roles as manual labourers, and perpetuating the master, servant and maid relationships” (Hames 62). Therefore, Mrs. Kuhn fails in her scheme to reduce Muriel’s status based on her race and class position.

In the third featured passage Mrs. Kuhn gives it another try by differentiating herself and Mrs. Stein from Muriel. She claims that Muriel considers herself on equal footing with the white women because of her middle-class status and says about Muriel to her white colleague: “she thinks she’s like us, you know [...]” (*Muriel* 43). Through this sentence, Mrs. Kuhn refutes any resemblance between them, while the stressed use of ‘us’ clearly creates a distance because it also evokes an unspoken ‘them’. The use of these pronouns illustrates how “ethnic and racial divisions relate to discourses of collectivities constructed around exclusionary/inclusionary boundaries” (Yuval-Davis 201). In contrast to the previous two extracts where Muriel reacted in a controlled and polite manner, she now goes along with Mrs. Kuhn’s discursive strategy by overtly disassociating herself from her white colleagues: “That’s an insult, Mrs Kuhn, [...] I don’t think I’m like you. I don’t *want* to be like you.

I am very proud of what I am" (*Muriel* 43). It is evident from this statement that she regards being equal to them as an insult and takes pride in her own identity. Just afterwards she describes her white colleagues as resentful and superficial by calling them "too small, too full of hatred" and "always occupied with issues that do not really matter" (43), thereby distancing herself from them in terms of character traits. Later in the same passage she also does so through the formal properties of her language use while worrying about how she might have crossed a line with her retort and what the possible outcome might be:

Any moment now I shall have my pass-book signed off and with that, unless I find another job within a short time, will go my right to be in the magisterial district of Johannesburg for more than seventy-two hours. I remembered what my husband had once said; *they* are like the Omnipotent; *they* have the power of life and death over us. (*Muriel* 43)

In the last lines, Muriel deploys an us-versus-them perspective by referring to the white women as "they" and to her own community as "us", which literally posits them as two separate groups based on race. Consequently, she turns the 'othering' around and utilises it as a vehicle of resistance. Moreover, she makes tangible how the racist apartheid system produces inequality through a racial hierarchy with whites in complete control of black people's destiny. By contemplating on how this row might not only cost her her job but her freedom of movement as well, she explicitly mentions the effect of the Native Laws Amendment Act on her daily life. This law obliges black persons to carry their pass-book with them at all times and restricts their access to an urban area such as Johannesburg without a valid reason, thereby acting as a kind of "influx-control" (Gqola 11). In this respect, apartheid legislation interacts with the social categories of race and ethnicity in determining Muriel's rights and duties. Furthermore, it enshrines her status as disenfranchised citizen, who "inhabits Johannesburg conditionally, contingent on her ability to labor and the whims of the white officials who have the power to facilitate or prohibit her entry into the space" (Boswell, "Rewriting" 1333).

The Native Laws Amendment Act also clearly features in the fourth excerpt, which is situated in chapter nine. Here, Muriel and the 'coloured' mechanic Donald discuss the working conditions at Metropolitan Radio, which turn out differently for the two of them as they occupy distinct positions due to the divergent racial and social categories that determine their lives. Although they are both marginalised because of their race and ethnicity, for her, gender and class characteristics such as education level and corresponding job responsibilities also play an important role. While Donald emphasises the injustice of being severely underpaid, Muriel feels torn about her position as an intermediary: "I'm not happy here because I'm between two fires. My own people on the one hand and the white staff on the other" (*Muriel* 50). She considers herself partly to blame for her fellow black Africans' impoverishment because as an administrative clerk she collaborates in the store's capitalist exploitation. As a result, she is perceived as contributing to the apartheid system that plunges black people into poverty and thus distorts their daily living conditions, which are inextricably linked to intersecting social categories such as race, ethnicity, and class. In addition, her job requires her to check their passes containing private data, therefore turning her into "an unwilling agent of apartheid surveillance" (Boswell, "Rewriting" 1334). Hence, she feels jointly responsible for their subjugation as she describes these identity checks as humiliating experiences, especially for black men: "They feel they are being subjected to unnecessary scrutiny. They can't stand that sort of thing, especially from a mere woman" (*Muriel* 50). This utterance illustrates how Muriel has internalised the patriarchal belief that black women are inferior which became ingrained in official customary law under the double influence of colonialism and apartheid. As becomes clear from this instance, these systems distorted the sociopolitical status of black people, resulting in gender inequality and sexism. Whereas Muriel deems these black men's reactions understandable, she cannot accept the attitude of her white female colleagues. Since they consider her a work rival, they spare no effort to make her life a misery when she only wants to earn money to support herself and her family. Their relationship is therefore clearly determined by the apartheid regime which deployed a racial divide-and-rule strategy. That this scheme works is moreover evident from Muriel's language use. She discursively distances herself from them through her narrative voice by referring to them as "the women on the other side" and by means of the stressed pronouns "their" and "they" (*Muriel* 50), thereby sustaining this 'us-them' thinking. This extract shows that Muriel as a black woman is caught between "[...] white supremacy and patriarchy in their various enmeshments, [which] are supported through a network of small everyday acts within larger systems" (Gqola 180).

These multiple oppressions are also addressed in the final passage from chapter three. When used by his white female colleagues to do their shopping, Johannes, a black male employee at Metropolitan Radio who

works as a “tea-boy” (*Muriel* 24), engages in a conversation with Muriel to complain about these white women. Viewing this everyday situation from an intersectional angle shows that the power relationships between the white and black staff members are subject to the racial and ethnic hierarchies under apartheid. Although no specific law is mentioned, they are clearly embedded in the white supremacist apartheid hegemony which assigns white women a higher social status than black men. Their superiority is not only apparent from the task they impose on their black colleague as ‘errand-boy’, but also in the forms of address used. Whereas the white women consistently call Johannes by his first name, he addresses them reverently as “missus”, thereby mimicking them since they refer to themselves as “the madam” (*Muriel* 21). This alleged respect on his part, however, turns out to be feigned, because he calls them “the things” (21) in a private discussion with Muriel which the white women cannot understand due to a language barrier. This dehumanising naming strategy normally used by white people when speaking about black persons therefore also works in the opposite direction. Even Muriel objectifies the white women through her narration by nominating one of them “the cold-drink-and-cream-cake one” (21), which reflects that the white women are primarily driven by capitalist consumption. Moreover, this metonymy adds an additional layer of ironic inversion. By stripping her white colleague of her human identity, Muriel implicitly alludes to one of the state’s mechanisms which converts black people to “a cog in the machinery of apartheid capitalism” (Samuelson 763). Subsequently, the story line shifts to the conversation between Johannes and Muriel, in which gender relations and practices from African Customary Law are referenced. While criticising his idle white colleagues who give him assignments, he mentions lobola: “No wonder their husbands don’t pay any lobola for them. They’re worth nothing. Lazy!” (*Muriel* 21). In his statement he takes the legally enshrined ritual of bridewealth out of its context and links it to a daily micro-practice in the workplace to make his point. Logically, it does not apply to white women, since it forms part of customary marriage which is only practised in black African communities. However, by attributing its absence to their behaviour he stereotypes them as lazy. This prejudice is embedded in racial, patriarchal, and capitalist ideas and clearly illustrates how systems such as sexism and ethnocentrism intersect. The former is reflected in the train of thought that women who do not work are useless, and by characterising them only in relation to men and in the light of the marital relationship, thereby reducing their autonomy. The latter is expressed by implicitly turning the white supremacist hierarchy upside down through the insinuation that black African women are worth the payment of lobola and are therefore superior. Johannes regards bridewealth as a benchmark of female value and deploys it to differentiate black women’s industriousness from white women who are “spoilt”, “lazy”, and thus “worth nothing” (21). In this way, he uses the practice to extol the former, while diminishing the social status of the latter. Nevertheless, his utterance also shows that he has internalised the patriarchal and capitalist standards that became especially dominant after African Customary Law’s transformation under the twin influences of colonialism and apartheid. This becomes clear from the ambivalent picture that is painted of lobola, which is described as a payment method rather than as a wedding ritual. In line with this, women are represented as a form of merchandise and an acquired possession because men will only pay for them if they yield some kind of profit. This makes it seem like Johannes expects something in return for the transaction made, most probably domestic service. Consequently, black women’s social status is still reduced based on race, ethnicity, and gender through the legal hegemonies of official customary law, colonialism, and apartheid. Such unequal gender relations between black men and black women also feature a bit later in the conversation. As opposed to her white female colleagues, Muriel refuses to use Johannes to run her errands, which is rendered through her narrative voice: “I was reluctant to send him. How could I? He was a man and I was a woman. According to our custom a woman does not send a man. We reserve a place, an elevated place, for our men” (*Muriel at Metropolitan* 21). This declaration demonstrates the division of roles and the divergent standing of the sexes with black men being esteemed more highly and even placed on a pedestal by black women. Moreover, this gender imbalance persists regardless of class differences because, as a highly educated woman, Muriel is still considered subordinate to her uneducated male colleague. Therefore, intersections of gender and class do not improve black women’s status since the legal framework of African Customary Law shapes individual power relations in everyday life by creating a gender hierarchy that subjugates them. However, Muriel’s expression can be interpreted in an entirely different manner as well, as pointed out by Boswell. She reads it in the light of womanism, which was coined by both Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Alice Walker around 1985, although independently from each other (Arndt 32). They define the term as a specific approach to African feminism, which highly esteems solidarity between black women, includes men, and distances itself from white Western feminism (Boswell, “Echoes of Miriam Tlali” 203, 213). According to Boswell

(“Echoes” 203), Muriel adopts such a womanist stance by conveying “[...] an unwillingness to side with the white womxn in order to degrade Black men by sending them on frivolous errands”, which functions as a gesture to “display race solidarity with Black men”. Although this interpretation certainly is credible, the other reasoning also still holds true and is further supported by Johannes’s form of address used to refer to Muriel. He calls her “my child” which evokes a hierarchical relationship, both “in terms of gender and generation” (Muhlebach 81). On the one hand, the use of this phrase may allude to his seniority, because his age grants him wisdom and hence a superior position compared to Muriel who is “[...] younger and therefore, according to their cultural values, inferior [...]” (Muhlebach 81). On the other hand, “my child” seems to allude to the position of black women as “perpetual minors” under male guardianship as introduced under living customary law but legally codified under its colonial replacement (Wing and de Carvalho 60). As a result, the existing balance of power between black men and women became distorted by assigning the latter a subordinate social status based on the social categories of race, ethnicity, and gender. Finally, it is noteworthy that, unlike in the previous examples, Muriel offers no discursive counterreaction and seems to go along with the system’s line of thought. This observation has been addressed by Tlali herself, who said to have “muted the criticism of patriarchy in the novel to keep a clear focus on the work’s central struggle”, being the fight against apartheid (Gqola 163). Yet, there are plenty of other cases where Muriel does denounce male authority and domination, although often in guarded terms (Cullhed 16).⁹ That is why Boswell (*Wrote My Story* 201) concludes that Tlali endeavours to “[...] interroga[te] hegemonic discourses of citizenship, whether these relate to apartheid or African national patriarchy”.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to show that intersectionality functions as a useful framework to approach South African women’s writings and, more specifically, to focus on the situation of black women, who in particular grapple with the mutually reinforcing axes of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. In this way, it strives to contribute to existing research about forms of intersectional feminisms in South Africa as conducted by Lewis and Baderoon, Amanda Gouws, Boswell, and Pumla Gqola. By reading Tlali’s novel *Muriel at Metropolitan* through a lens the distinct challenges black women faced came to light, which were simultaneously constituted by racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and classism. These intertwined systems were legally enshrined through apartheid ideology, legislation, and official customary law, producing multiple oppressions, inequalities, and kinds of discrimination on an individual scale such as exclusion, subjugation, stereotypes, and prejudice. By analysing five passages from the novel, the correlation between these macro, meso, and micro levels and their connection with social categories, citizenship, and social status was explored. Zooming in on the everyday experiences in the workplace of the black female protagonist, Muriel demonstrates how under these influences her civil rights are curtailed and her social status reduced. In the selected excerpts race and ethnicity act as all-decisive factors which deny black Africans civil rights and liberties such as freedom of movement and freedom of speech on the basis of laws such as the Native Laws Amendment Act and the Population Registration Act. In addition, this legal framework determines black people’s social status by installing unequal power relations ingrained in a white supremacist hierarchy. In many cases race and ethnicity intersect with gender and class which only exacerbate black women’s vicissitudes by further restricting their citizenship. In this regard, they are infantilised and thus lose their status as full citizens or are confined to subordinate and stereotypically feminine roles. Moreover, the novel shows how the apartheid system interacts with the colonial version of African Customary Law which distorts gender relations and results in sexism, black women’s inequality, and inferior status. Nevertheless, these overlapping systems are often resisted through Muriel’s responses or sometimes also deployed in the opposite direction to criticise white so-called superiority. In conclusion, I argue that an intersectional analysis of Tlali’s *Muriel at Metropolitan* provides insight into multiple oppressions in apartheid South Africa caused by multi-level power mechanisms and founded on interwoven social categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. At the same time, the novel illustrates how these can be opposed discursively through counterreactions that take the shape of intersectional feminisms.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the other members affiliated with the research project, Dr. Martina Vitackova and Prof. Dr. Yves T'Sjoen, for their support, helpful suggestions, and critical revision of the manuscript.

This publication was made possible by the support of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) that finances the overarching research project with the identifier G032323N.

Notes

1. These four social categories were selected because they figure most prominently in *Muriel at Metropolitan*. They are, however, at times also joined by others such as age and sexuality, which will not be discussed here.
2. "Challenging Crossroads: A Critical Discourse Analysis on the Intersections of Race, Gender, Class, Ethnicity, Sexuality and Ensuing Discursive Counterreactions in Female Apartheid Narratives." This research project aims to chart these intersections, their consequences, and evolution in time by applying an intersectional lens combined with critical discourse analysis to study six literary works from the 1970s and 1990s by three authors: Tlali, Nadine Gordimer, and Welma Odendaal.
3. In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."
4. I do not intend to give a complete overview of apartheid legislation because this does not fit in with the article's scope. Instead, I only discuss the segregationist laws I deems directly relevant for the analysis of Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan*.
5. In addition to these racial and ethnic power relations, class and gender also had a decisive impact, which is discussed in more detail below.
6. The racial nomenclature used in this article corresponds with the official terminology used by the apartheid regime which divided the population in separate racial groups.
7. In South Africa this occurred through the installation of the Black Administration Act which, according to Bennett (*Application* 23, 65), resulted in the country "having the most fully documented customary law in Africa".
8. The excerpts incorporated in this article originate only from the first edition as published by Ravan Press in 1975. Considering that this version was heavily edited, among others because of censorship, I also wish to include the novel as intended by Tlali, which was printed in 1979 by Longman under the title *Between Two Worlds* (Gqola 3), in the overarching research project a later stage. In this specific context the censored edition was used since this text is still the most familiar to the reading public. Furthermore, the inclusion of Tlali's version would require a comparison with the one from Ravan Press to clearly illustrate where and why interventions were made, which does not fit in with the scope of this article.
9. An example of this is when Muriel, during a conversation with her black male colleague Adam, does not heed his advice to visit a witch doctor to "strengthen [her] against evil spirits" (*Muriel* 58). Although she does not directly speak her mind or criticise him, she does not submissively accept his recommendation which results in him "regretting [her] apparent state of utter ignorance and stubbornness" (59). Moreover, just after this incident Muriel thinks to herself that Adam "sat dead still, big and rugged like the sphinx, as if he was part of the furniture, stiff and static" (59). Her critical attitude towards his male authority clearly shows from this description, which Cullhed (85) interprets as "Muriel's disapproval of Adam's traditional and paternal values [...] [since] the trope of the sphinx embodies traditional patriarchy: outmoded, static, 'dead', grand in its time but outrun by modernity".

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