

White Liberalism and Black Consciousness in Rosie Motene's *Reclaiming the Soil* (2018)

RODWELL MAKOMBE

Abstract: White liberal gestures of kindness such as interventions to alleviate poverty in black communities are often seen as altruistic initiatives with noble intentions. However, in recent years, these interventions have come under greater scrutiny as scholars question the “white savior mentality” that often frames and propels such initiatives. In fact, contemporary neo-liberal interventions bear resemblance with the colonial civilizing mission because of their preoccupation with fixing problems in “broken” black communities. This article draws on Steve Biko’s notion of black consciousness and some concepts from black feminist thought to explore how Rosie Motene’s autobiography, *Reclaiming the Soil: A Black Girl’s Struggle to Find her African Self* (henceforth *Reclaiming the Soil*) interrupts the hegemonic liberal narrative of white saviorism to insert an alternative narrative of black struggle for self-determination. The study has three objectives. Firstly, it investigates how the autobiography narrates Motene’s lived experiences as a black girl adopted by and growing up within a white family. Secondly, it explores how the autobiography narrates liberal white saviorism in the context of apartheid racism and discrimination. Thirdly, it examines how the contradictions of the apartheid system and the white savior narrative awaken feelings of resentment and ultimately black consciousness in the narrator. The study argues that Motene’s autobiography is a “black consciousness” text that highlights the inherent contradictions of being white and liberal in a society that systemically entrenches poverty and suffering for black people to serve white interests.

Keywords: white savior, black feminism, black child, apartheid, race

Introduction

Reclaiming the Soil is an autobiography that narrates the traumatizing experiences of Rosie Motene, a black South African girl raised by a white family during the apartheid era. Although South African post-apartheid autobiographies such as Clinton Chauke’s *Born in Chains* (2018) and Malaika Wa Azania’s *Memoirs of a Born Free* (2018) have focused on issues of apartheid injustices and the sluggish pace of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, very few autobiographies have narrated the experience of interracial adoption in the context of apartheid.¹ In fact, Lena Englund has shown that most South African autobiographies are generally preoccupied with narrating how marginalized groups (black South Africans)

Rodwell Makombe is Professor of English literary and cultural studies at North-West University in South Africa. He works on postcolonial/decolonial literature and cultural studies.

<https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/files/V22i2a1.pdf>

experienced the horrors of apartheid, on one hand, and the disillusionment of democracy on the other.²

Englund further submits that South African autobiographical writing generally takes an “anticolonial approach” aimed at reflecting on the black African experience both during and after apartheid.³ This approach is different from postcolonial writing because, while the ‘post’ of postcolonialism implicates everyone, the ‘anti’ of anticolonialism enables those who have suffered historical injustices to identify (or ‘name and shame’) those who were responsible.⁴ Anticolonial writing is thus directly connected with the socio-economic inequality of the apartheid past and its persistence in the present. Motene’s *Reclaiming the Soil* can be read as a ‘memoir of disillusionment’ together with Chauke’s *Born in Chains* and Wa Azania’s *Memoirs of a Born Free* because it laments the pervasive lack of cultural pride in post-apartheid South Africa. The injustices that Motene documents in her text, particularly the socio-economic inequalities, do not end with apartheid but spill over into the democratic dispensation. One of the features of South African autobiography that Englund also identifies is the ubiquity of anger and frustration in the narrative, “anger directed not only at the failures of the nation, but also at self, others, and institutions.”⁵ Motene expresses this anger not only at the white liberal family that raised her but also at the failure by the post-apartheid government to “reclaim the soil” both literally and metaphorically.

In line with Englund’s notion of “subjective history” which refers to autobiography as a life story remembered and re-remembered by the author, Motene’s autobiography is also a subjective narrative that not only contests the white savior narrative but also deconstructs the false dichotomy between ‘good’ whites and ‘bad’ whites.⁶ Like most South African autobiographies, Motene’s autobiography is a personal story embedded in the collective experiences of black people during apartheid. Writing about South African autobiography in 1996, two years after the dawn of democracy, Ngwenya states that South African autobiographies tend to construct experiences against “dominant discourses and social institutions” and thus “seek to challenge those imposed identities and [...] replace them with more ‘authentic’ ones.”⁷ One can think of Motene’s autobiography as a resistance narrative, which attempts to break away from colonial/apartheid narratives that represent black people in negative terms. Motene presents herself as an agentic narrator who is not only interested in retelling the story of her life but also expressing her views on white liberals who posture as saviors of miserable black people. *Reclaiming the Soil* is, thus, like most autobiographies “a product of and a response to social, historical and cultural conditions” of the past and the present.⁸ Given that apartheid was a system of racial segregation that did not allow different racial groups to interact, Motene’s novel provides us with an opportunity to explore how the system of apartheid entrenched structural inequalities that made it possible for white saviors to emerge as heroes with a mission to alleviate suffering among black people.

In *Reclaiming the Soil*, Motene tells her story of growing up as a black child in a white family and her numerous encounters with apartheid laws such as the Group Areas Act (1950) and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953). Whenever her adopted family—the Finkelsteins—took her out to whites-only places such as restaurants and swimming pools, some whites would blatantly remind her that she did not belong because she was black. In fact, most whites did not understand why a white family would want to raise a black child. When Rosie

was old enough to go out on her own, she would face the same racist treatment in clubs and restaurants that did not accommodate black people. The relationship between Rosie's mother, a domestic worker employed by the Finkelsteins, is cold, exploitative, and distant. During apartheid, most white people did not respect black people, and, in some instances, they treated them like slaves. The children that Rosie's mother looks after do not recognize that she is an adult who deserves respect. They ridicule and order her around without any regard for her feelings. They call her by an offensive nickname "Boomba" which means a fat woman. Instead of reprimanding their disrespectful children, the Finkelsteins take the name-calling as a trivial matter. In fact, they end up using the nickname too.⁹ *Reclaiming the Soil* is thus the story of Rosie's struggle to find a place in a white family where she does not belong and her realization as she grows older that she has a cultural heritage that she must cherish. This realization is a "black consciousness" moment that takes her life in a completely different direction. She leaves the comfort of "white life" to live among her people in Phokeng, a poor village in the former bantustan Bophuthatswana.

This article draws on Steve Biko's philosophy of black consciousness as well as the black feminism of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins to investigate the contradictions of white liberalism in a racist society and the experiences of a black child who lives in-between these contradictions.¹⁰ It analyzes how the relationship between Rosie and the Finkelsteins is framed by a white savior narrative that focuses on providing opportunities to the black child without interrogating the system that denies such opportunities to black people in the first place.

Rosie Motene: A Background

Rosie Motene is a South African writer, activist, actor, and television personality. She was born in 1974 in the small Royal Bafokeng town of Phokeng in Rustenburg, South Africa. Her father Pathe Motene worked as a petrol attendant in Johannesburg while her mother Jacobeth worked as a domestic worker for a Jewish family in the whites-only suburb of Emmarentia. Shortly after her birth, the Finkelsteins offered to adopt and raise her as their own child. In her 2019 TED talk, Motene explains that the adoption was partly accidental.¹¹ Shortly after her birth, her mother took Rosie to Johannesburg where she stayed with the Finkelsteins. It was during this period that the family fell in love with her and offered to adopt. As a black child growing up in apartheid South Africa, Motene might be considered fortunate because the adoption gave her access to the best education, which most black children could not access under the apartheid regime. Unlike most black children, who attended poorly resourced schools in black townships, Rosie had the privilege to attend Pretoria Girls High School, a predominantly white school at the time. Later, she went to the University of the Witwatersrand where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in dramatic arts, a degree that opened doors for her into the radio and television industry.

Although Motene grew up in a lavish and comfortable home compared to other black children of her generation, she recalls in her autobiography that throughout her childhood and adolescence she "grapp[ed] with feelings of alienation, frustration, and shame" primarily because she did not understand why she was the only black child in a white family.¹² The Finkelsteins raised her the way they raised their white children without paying attention to

Rosie's unique racial and cultural differences. As a result, she grew up not sure whether she was black or white. In fact, given the negativity associated with blackness during apartheid, Motene grew to hate her African identity, which she associated with inferiority. The Finkelsteins see themselves not only as parents but also as saviours who have done the Motenes a favour by offering to raise their child and give her an opportunity for a better life.

In the autobiography, Motene not only narrates her experience as a black child growing up in a white family but also the colonial attitudes of that family who often treated her as a charity case even though her family had not asked them to adopt. The Finkelsteins not only fail to understand Rosie's culture and specific needs, but also intentionally raise her as a white child because they regard African traditions and beliefs as backward. *Reclaiming the Soil* is thus not only a story of self-realization and self-affirmation but also a scathing critique of white savior adoption models that portray the white liberal as a hero on a mission to save the poor black child without interrogating the structures and systems that cause poverty in black communities. Black children such as Rosie become 'charity cases' because of systems and structures that deny black people access to decent economic opportunities.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Black Consciousness and Black Feminism

This analysis draws on Steve Biko's notion of black consciousness and black feminist concepts by black feminist scholars, Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw.¹³ Black consciousness is a philosophy which emerged in the anti-apartheid struggle when black people realized that overtures of solidarity from white liberals were not genuine because the latter were beneficiaries of an oppressive system. It is associated with the work of Steve Biko who argued that the colonial/apartheid system did not allow black people to have "any deep understanding of their own culture or even of themselves" because the architects of the system understood that once black people became conscious of themselves, they would unite and fight against the system.¹⁴ Black consciousness advocated the recovery of African cultures and epistemologies to develop confidence among black people and bolster their struggle against colonial domination. It rejects colonial cultural frameworks that see black people "as agents for some particular function," such as production, and not as human beings. Steve Biko believed that African culture had something to contribute to human civilization to mitigate the decadence of Western culture expressed through its focus of domination and exploitation of the other.¹⁵

In Biko's words, black consciousness entailed "the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers and sisters around the cause of their operation—the blackness of their skin—and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude."¹⁶ Black consciousness is thus premised on racial consciousness, or the understanding that black people are oppressed because of the color of their skin. Motene's autobiography can therefore be read as a black consciousness text which depicts race as both the source of her struggle and a tool of self-liberation. Motene's journey to self-liberation begins when she starts to place value on her cultural heritage, particularly the language and traditions of her people. For Steve Biko, black consciousness is a rallying point for black people to launch the struggle for self-determination. It is a philosophy that seeks to equip black people with "new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life."¹⁷ Black consciousness precedes liberation because it is impossible, as

Biko puts it, to be self-conscious and remain in bondage. Considering the above, Motene's autobiography can be read as a narrative that asserts black identity and refuses to see black people as appendages of white people. The text is a black consciousness narrative as it is "based on a self-examination" and the realization that running away from the black self is tantamount to "insulting the intelligence of whoever created [her] black."¹⁸

Steve Biko does not see white liberals such as the Finkelsteins as genuine in their expression of sympathy for black people. In his analysis of white liberal politics in apartheid South Africa, Biko argued that white liberals were only appeasing their conscience by pretending to be on the side of black people while they continued to benefit from the injustices of that system. For Biko "the liberal [was] in fact appeasing his own conscience, or at best is eager to demonstrate his identification with the black people only so far as it does not sever all his ties with his relatives on the other side of the colour line."¹⁹ The solution to the plight of black people was therefore not solidarity with white sympathizers but unity among black people based on their shared predicament.

The notion of "reclaiming the soil" that Motene's autobiography invokes is a radical gesture to embrace blackness as a legitimate ontological base from which to view and understand the world. For Motene, as it was for Steve Biko, "Black Consciousness makes the black man see himself as a being, entire in himself, and not as an extension of a broom or additional leverage to some machine."²⁰ Although the Finkelsteins have done a noble thing by adopting Rosie and providing her with a decent home, the problem is that they see the black child as a charity case and not as a human being. In fact, the Finkelsteins are embodiments of a decadent western civilization, which as Steve Biko would argue, fails to appreciate human beings as human beings. It places value on the things that humans need at the expense of the humans that need things. For Biko, "the cornerstone of [African] society is man himself—not just his welfare, not his material wellbeing but just man himself with all his ramifications."²¹ Rosie lives a miserable life in the middle of luxury because she feels neglected as a human being. In Lewis Gordon's words, "black consciousness calls for black realisation of the humanity of black folk."²² Motene must realize her own humanity before she can stand up and interrupt the hegemony of the Finkelsteins and the broader apartheid system. Black consciousness is an antidote against white savior overtures of goodwill because it "calls for changing both the material conditions of poverty and the concepts by which such poverty is structured."²³ The Finkelsteins tend to focus on addressing Motene's needs without doing anything significant within their power to change the epistemological foundations of apartheid. They claim to be liberal, yet they keep separate doors, one for black servants and another for whites, in their home. On this note, Gordon states that the white liberal's offer to help has an air of condescension because it masks a profound existential investment in the continuation of the racist system.²⁴

Gordon identifies two kinds of liberalism in Biko's work. There is a liberalism which claims that racism can be addressed through color blindness. This liberalism expects black people to be "colour blind in a world of white normativity, a world where whites hold most of the key cards in the deck."²⁵ Another kind of liberalism is premised on the assumption that black people are less developed beings than whites, therefore it focuses on "bringing blacks 'up' to whites" through initiatives such as providing them with decent education as seen in Motene's

autobiography.²⁶ This kind of liberalism tends to see whiteness as the standard against which black people must measure themselves. White liberalism dovetails with the notion of white saviorism, which in Teju Cole's formulation is preoccupied with salving white conscience rather than addressing real needs in poor black communities. White saviorism, as practiced by the Finkelsteins is "a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage."²⁷

Apart from Steve Biko's black consciousness, ideas from black feminism frame the intersection of race, gender, and class in *Reclaiming the Soil*. While black consciousness emphasizes the centrality of "the self" in liberation discourse, black feminist thought submits that "both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change."²⁸ Black feminism brings together race, class, and gender as intersecting issues that need to be analyzed at the same time and not separately. The notion of intersectionality developed by Kimberle Crenshaw suggests that race, class, and gender (and other axes) are both "sites of domination and potential sites of resistance."²⁹ Black feminism emphasizes self-definition and "consciousness as a sphere of freedom."³⁰ This is evident when Motene accepts her blackness (and the cultural heritage thereof) as pillars on which to build self-consciousness. Patricia Hill Collins posits that empowerment begins when the dominated reject the cultural frames of the dominant formation and embrace their own "individual and cultural ways of knowing."³¹

Black feminism first emerged in the American context to address the unique experiences and challenges of African American women. It foregrounds "black women as intellectual producers, as creative agents, as political subjects, and as 'freedom dreamers' even as the content and contours of those dreams vary."³² The work of Crenshaw and Hill Collins emphasizes the intersection of race, gender and class in the everyday experiences of women of color and underscores what Nash calls "the interconnectedness of structures of domination."³³ Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality is "an analytic fundamentally rooted in black women's experiences, and it constitutes a theoretical, political, and doctrinal effort to do justice to the forms of violence that operate in raced and gendered ways in black women's lives."³⁴ In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," Crenshaw gives a striking analogy of a four-way traffic intersection to demonstrate the intersectionality of oppression.³⁵ Just like traffic where cars flow in different directions, oppression also flows in different directions—race, gender, class etc. Hill Collins' notion of the "matrix of domination" shows that in an oppressive system, there are no "pure victims and oppressors" because "each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives."³⁶ This is true of Motene's experience as an adoptee. Although she benefits materially, she also suffers psychologically because of racism and discrimination. Black feminism insists that to understand the full experience of black women, one needs to recognize that they experience oppression at different levels, in different ways. In *Reclaiming the Soil*, a black child growing up in a white family is discriminated against on many levels. She cannot play with other children because of racist apartheid laws. She suffers low self-esteem because of the white aesthetics of beauty against which she must measure herself. She looks down upon her own mother because she wants to distance herself from the servant class and associate with the elite class of her adopted family.

The contradictions of white liberal gestures of kindness may be interrogated through Rosie's lived experiences with the Finkelsteins. Motene's novel does not only show the limits and limitations of a "white liberal" adoption framework but also the extent to which it is entrenched in white supremacist ideologies. The act of saving a black child from poverty through adoption is not only an innocent gesture of kindness but also a quasi-imperialist adventure that enables white people to deny responsibility for the condition of black people by claiming to be doing good and making a difference in the latter's lives.

White Liberalism and the Politics of Interracial Adoption

Steve Biko formulated black consciousness as a radical theoretical and strategic departure from liberal-oriented ideologies that focused on building coalitions with whites.³⁷ Through the black consciousness framework, Biko argued that black people were on their own and they did not need to unite with those who were beneficiaries of the oppressive system.³⁸ Black consciousness was therefore a light bulb moment for the black anti-apartheid movement and a moment of reckoning for white liberals. Motene's white liberal family is aware that apartheid is a brutal and inhumane system, yet they focus not on opposing the whole system but on mitigating its effects on the life of one black child. Biko's black consciousness questions the sustainability of these tokenish approaches to the structural and systemic problem of racism. It rejects the colonial idea that black people are perpetual children that cannot progress without the guidance of whites. In fact, the Finkelsteins adopt Rosie—not because her parents have failed to raise her—but because they "fell in love with the child," a gesture that portrays the black child as an object of white pleasure/pity. The Finkelsteins abuse their power as employers—and as whites—to impose their will on the Motenes.³⁹

Rosie's father is never consulted before the adoption happens. The power imbalances between the families mean that Path Motene does not have a voice in a process that affects his child. Rosie's mother is powerless because she is only a housemaid. She is, as black feminists would argue, a victim on two levels: race and class. Similarly, when Rosie is finally adopted into the family, she is treated as an add-on. Apart from the color of her skin, which makes her presence in the family awkward, Rosie is also expected to show gratitude for a favor that she never requested. This attitude is based on a colonial presumption that white people know what is good for black people. In some cases, the family behaves as if Rosie does not exist. For example, when Daddy Joe dies the family forgets to pick Rosie from school and they only remember her late in the afternoon.

The Finkelsteins not only see themselves as heroes who rescue Rosie from a life of perpetual need but also as agents of civilization with a mission to induct her into a superior culture. The moment Rosie joins the Finkelsteins, she abandons her religious beliefs and practices and embraces Jewish traditions. The implication is that the Finkelsteins are agents of the colonial project masking as liberals. For the Finkelsteins, adoption is not only about providing a home to a homeless child. It is also about creating Rosie after their own image. Rosie is supposed to hate everything black and celebrate everything white. The moment she starts living with the Finkelsteins, she has no access to black people including her own family. She is even ashamed of her father because she keeps comparing him with her new foster father—Daddy Joe. What Rosie does not understand (given her tender age) is that Daddy Joe is

only a hero because he is a beneficiary of the system that has impoverished and emasculated her father.

Throughout the story, Rosie is bitter about her adoption experience—not because the Finkelsteins fail to provide her basic needs but because they fail to recognize that she is black and has culture, language, and traditions of her own. White liberalism, as Gordon argues, seeks to address the problem of racism by ignoring skin color.⁴⁰ In fact, the Finkelsteins expect Rosie to switch her cultural worldview and capitalize on the opportunities that they provide her to improve her life. Rosie attends a predominantly white Model C school. For black children, Model C schools are instruments of cultural imperialism that alienate them from their languages and cultures. Rosie's school does not allow black students to communicate in their home languages. The intention is to incorporate them into the hegemonic cultural framework and deny black subjectivity.

The irony of Rosie's situation is that despite her elite education, her future career opportunities are constrained by her race. When Rosie fails standard eight, the head teacher tries to convince her to drop to standard grade because—as the teacher reasons—she will probably end up a cashier at the bank anyway.⁴¹ The teacher thinks black people are intellectually inept and therefore incapable of doing anything that requires academic rigor. The Bantu Education policy provided a different syllabus for black schools with Afrikaans as the language of instruction. Instead of science and mathematics, black schools taught domestic and manufacturing skills such as sewing, sculpturing, beading, landscaping etc. These skills only prepared black children for domestic and factory work. As Motene notes, “Bantu education did not allow for black people to develop their full potential or be nurtured into greatness.”⁴²

Scholars such as Fanon and Ngugi have argued that the colonial system used education as a vehicle of mental colonization.⁴³ Biko also argues that the colonial system used both violence and persuasion to conquer colonized cultures.⁴⁴ In *Reclaiming the Soil*, Rosie speaks English even when she visits her parents in Phokeng. Her family starts treating her as a different child because she lives with white people. Apart from speaking in a foreign language to her uneducated parents, Rosie is not allowed to do any chores. In fact, her stay with the Finkelsteins has turned her into a master in the eyes of her parents. However, what is traumatizing for her is that despite her proximity to whiteness, and the benefits that she enjoys thereof, she can never be white. She may enjoy all the benefits of living in a mansion but the moment she goes out she is like every other black person, with no right to walk in certain places and use certain amenities. The Finkelsteins cannot save Rosie from apartheid's racist laws. Thus, she cannot swim in the same pool with white children or play in the same playgrounds.

Interracial Adoption: Weighing the Gains and Losses

Interracial adoption is a complicated experience. For the adoptee, it may come with perks such as access to education or economic opportunity—but it also comes with costs such as loss of self-esteem and self-worth. Rosie's adoption takes place at the height of apartheid when interracial contact was illegal. Given the hostile context, the moment of adoption is a moment of loss, not only of her biological parents but also of culture, traditions, and ways of being. In terms of identity, Rosie resembles Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*—black on the outside and white on the inside.⁴⁵ When she joins the Finkelsteins she becomes part of the family, yet she remains

the odd one out. Everything about her signals white—the food she eats, the language she speaks (English), the friends she keeps, yet she is the only black child. Reflecting on her identity, people like her “are called Oreos, after the famous biscuit with a cream filling inside two chocolate wafers...”⁴⁶ An Oreo, like a coconut, is a symbol of double consciousness.⁴⁷ While Matlwa’s coconut designates a new way of being black in post-apartheid South Africa, the notion of Oreo suggests an artificial identity that develops in relations of in/convenience between conflicting cultures. Black feminist scholars such as Hill Collins and Nash have emphasized the importance of being rooted in a cultural framework to develop subjectivity.⁴⁸

Motene lacks an epistemological base from which to view and interpret the world, hence she is an Oreo—someone with an artificial and transient identity. This symbolism resonates with Rosie’s identity as a black child dislocated from her cultural universe yet not fully integrated into the new culture of her foster family. Like an Oreo that finds its identity through a process that obfuscates origin, Rosie rejects her black family and culture hoping for a new place within the Finkelsteins. In fact, instead of turning white by association, she spends the rest of her childhood and adolescence hovering between blackness and whiteness.

Considering the above, one cannot help but ask if adoption is a blessing or a curse. Is Rosie better off living in a posh suburb with a white family or in a poor black neighborhood with her family? Biko asked a similar question in formulating the idea of black consciousness.⁴⁹ Should black people continue co-operating with white liberals or they should stand on their own? Given the structural inconveniences of life for black people during apartheid, Rosie is tempted to completely cut ties with her poor black family in exchange for the good life that the Finkelsteins offer. Living with a white family guarantees access to material things such as decent accommodation, schools, and clothing. The problem for Rosie is how to deal with the emotional trauma that comes with cultural dislocation. As a black child in a white home, she is afraid to behave in certain ways that may affirm colonial stereotypes about black people. She must always explain why black people behave in certain ways as if she is a spokesperson of the black race.

Fanon’s analysis of blackness in the colonial context aptly captures Rosie’s experience. As Fanon argues, a black man is not far from disgrace regardless of the good things that he has done.⁵⁰ When a black man excels, he is “praised to the skies” but the moment he makes a mistake, he receives condemnation since “what could one expect after all from a black physician?”⁵¹ Rosie is black and thus not far from disgrace. Throughout her childhood, she suffers what Ngugi explicates as “whiteache” or a perpetual desire to identify with and assimilate into white culture.⁵² She prays to God every night to wake up white with blonde hair. The discrimination and negative comments that she encounters in broader white society further motivates her to assimilate whiteness and forsake blackness. She is the “different and special one” or the “lucky one” because the Finkelsteins have saved her from poverty and ignorance.⁵³

Of White Saviors and the System that Produces People Who Need Saving

Biko’s black consciousness is built on an understanding that it is not possible to transform the conditions of black people by collaborating with white liberals as beneficiaries of the oppressive system.⁵⁴ In fact, black consciousness begins when a black person realizes that they are on their

own and that the white liberal is not interested in changing the system. In fact, the white liberal position is self-contradictory because on one hand it acknowledges apartheid as an evil system, yet it does not want to eradicate the system. The Finkelsteins ‘help’ Rosie yet they don’t do anything to dismantle the system that has produced her, even in their own household. The black townships where Rosie’s biological family lives resemble Fanon’s colonial Medina/shantytown – “a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people...a world with no space [where] people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together...[where] people die of anything, anywhere.”⁵⁵ To live in the black township is to live a deferred life, of dreams that never happen. Rosie’s parents work in factories and kitchens only to die as paupers in their home village. Phokeng is synonymous with poverty, poor infrastructure, and inadequate services/amenities. Rosie abhors visiting Phokeng because it reminds her of what she wants to escape—her blackness and the poverty thereof. Phokeng is a zone of non-being, where black people live like animals in dilapidated houses with no flushing toilets. It is not only the long journey from Johannesburg to Phokeng that Rosie hates whenever she must travel home, but also the heat and the images of abject poverty in her village.

The white suburb, Emmarentia, where the Finkelsteins live, represents what decolonial scholar Mignolo calls “the bright side of modernity.”⁵⁶ Unlike Phokeng, Emmarentia is an opulent suburb with “perfectly manicured gardens and huge fences.”⁵⁷ Rosie enjoys the privileges that come with being the “little black princess of the Finkelstein Kingdom...” such as sleeping in her own bedroom and eating breakfast in bed.⁵⁸ Even the architecture of the Finkelstein residence epitomizes the broader architecture of apartheid society. The house has two separate entrances, the front entrance for white people and the back entrance for black people “not allowed to use the main entrance.”⁵⁹ Although this was the norm during apartheid, one might expect the white liberal family to see beyond race and co-exist with black people. Considering the racial segregation that the Finkelsteins practice within their own compound, one can agree with Biko that white liberals are not interested in changing the system.⁶⁰ They have sacrificed their relationship with the broader white community yet still harbor racist attitudes. Whenever they want to threaten Rosie, they tell her that if she did not behave, they would “send [her] to Phokeng” — a Fanonian shantytown where ‘the wretched of the earth’ live.⁶¹

Given Phokeng’s wretched status, Rosie clings on to her new-found identity and distances herself from her people. She goes out of her way to fit into the new family by treating her mother as the black servant that she is. Her relationship with her mother is characterized as “odd and hurtful” because it resembles that of “a mistress and a servant.”⁶² Rosie thinks that adopting a new family means abandoning her biological family and everything associated with it. Treating her mother as a servant not only affirms her new “white” identity but also assures her that she is no longer part of the backward black race. Rosie’s behavior affirms Biko’s claim that the objective of the colonial system is to erase black consciousness in the minds of black people.⁶³ Given that the Finkelsteins adopt Rosie at a young age, she does not immediately understand the meaning of her adoption. This is evident in how she celebrates what she has gained (material things) at the expense of what she has lost (her biological parents, culture, and traditions).

Like most white saviors driven by the spectacle of poverty and suffering in black communities, the Finkelsteins want to “make a difference” without trying to understand the needs of the people they seek to save. Their idea of adoption is tantamount to brainwashing. Rosie comes to see whiteness as positive and blackness as negative. Hence, she hates being ‘grouped’ together with other black people, e.g. her cousins whom she regards as dirty and ignorant. When she visits Phokeng, her parents treat her as a special child. They excuse her from doing chores and serve her fancier food while the rest of the family eat “black food.”⁶⁴ Her mother always reprimands other children when they become too rough with her. Rosie muses that “...perhaps [her mother] felt she had a responsibility to the Finkelsteins to return [her] to them unharmed.”⁶⁵ The Motenes behavior towards Rosie suggest that they have embraced and accepted the zone of non-being allocated to them by the apartheid system. Typical of white liberals—as Biko would argue—the Finkelsteins are interested in appeasing their guilty conscience rather than transforming the system.

Of Caliban’s Language and Adoptee Agency

In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the servant Caliban rebels against his master Prospero by pronouncing “you have taught me a language, and my profit on it is I know how to curse.”⁶⁶ Like Caliban under the tutelage of Prospero, Rosie grows up under the tutelage of the Finkelsteins. Like Caliban, Rosie uses the good education that the Finkelsteins offer to not only write her own story but also to curse her foster parents. She narrates not only the traumatic experiences of interracial adoption but also reclaims what Bhabha calls ‘cultural agency.’⁶⁷ To reclaim the soil is, metaphorically to recover her ancestral Tswana cultural heritage, and thus black consciousness. *Reclaiming the Soil* is in fact a vengeful counter narrative that deconstructs the white savior narrative. Rosie is angry with the Finkelsteins for deliberately alienating her from her cultural heritage. Throughout her life, she forges bonds with white friends, observes Jewish religious rituals, and participates in family affairs of the Finkelsteins, hoping to become a bona fide member. She wishes to erase her blackness so that she could avoid “tell[ing] people that [she] had another family...”⁶⁸ Instead of expressing gratitude for being brought up in a decent home, Rosie is in fact bitter that they separated her from her biological family and robbed her of an opportunity to develop a relationship with her parents.

What is apparent, as Gordon argues, is that black consciousness entails not only changing the material conditions of poverty but also the concepts by which such poverty is structured.⁶⁹ Although the Finkelsteins attempt to cushion Rosie from the reality of blackness, the moment she is exposed to it, she realizes that something is wrong with the white liberal narrative. Motene writes her life story as an adult of thirty years looking back at her life and trying to make sense of her experiences. The way she feels about her parents at the time of writing is different from the formative years of her adoption. We know that when she was younger, she treated her own mother as a servant and did not want anything to do with her black parents. However, after gaining consciousness she describes the adoption as a “sacrifice” —not on the part of the white family but on the part of her parents who had to watch “as another family of a different race, culture and religion raise[d] [her].”⁷⁰

Throughout the work, Motene portrays herself as a victim of a forced adoptive relationship and the Finkelsteins as deliberately manipulative and subtly racist. Given the anger that exudes

through the pages, one wonders how the Finkelsteins would tell the story from their perspective. Rosie is clearly bitter and ungrateful—not only because of how the Finkelsteins manipulated and brainwashed her but also because of the futility of her attempt to pass as white. After realizing that she can never become white and that her adoptive family will never see her as truly part of their family, she decides to reconnect with her parents. In her anger, she seems to underestimate the psychological scars of her traumatic past. Reclaiming a cultural heritage is not only visiting Phokeng and learning to speak Setswana—as she does—but also unlearning racial falsehoods absorbed in the Finkelstein home. As part of reclaiming her Tswana identity, she visits home and spends New Year's with her family. The family performs a ritual to welcome her into the Motene family. She describes the ritual, which can be read as a metaphor of black consciousness, as “incredibly exciting and important for me.”⁷¹ Learning to speak Setswana anchors her culturally and makes her feel that “[she] really belong[s] to [her] true traditional roots.”⁷²

Rosie's journey of reclaiming her identity raises several questions. How can the colonized (and former colonized) wean themselves from addictive relations of dependency with the colonial/former colonial master? How can the colonized (and former colonized) gain self-belief and self-consciousness after years of colonial and neocolonial indoctrination? Rosie performs a traditional ritual and learns to speak her native language. She also learns to prepare, eat, and enjoy traditional Tswana dishes and reconnect with her people in the local communities. Rosie's experience shows that self-liberation is not possible without a radical paradigm shift—what Biko calls black consciousness.⁷³ Rosie must forego the material benefits that come with being a Finkelstein to regain her African identity.

Conclusion

This article drew on Biko's notion of black consciousness and black feminist theory to read Rosie's Motene autobiography as a radical anti-colonial text that rejects the white liberal approach to addressing the problems of black people.⁷⁴ Biko argued that black people are on their own in the world and they cannot rely on the goodwill of white liberals who are beneficiaries of the same oppressive system.⁷⁵ Motene's book shows that gestures of interracial goodwill from sympathetic whites are not enough because they do not address the structural issues that perpetuate poverty and cycles of dependence. Motene's autobiography highlights the intersectionality of oppression for black people who must rely on the generosity of kind white people for survival. Rosie needs not only material things but also immaterial things such as culture and traditions. She suffers dehumanization and oppression on many levels—as a black girl, a poor young woman, and an adoptee. She has no voice because she is “the lucky one” who must always show gratitude for the Finkelsteins' gestures of kindness. Motene's autobiography, like many autobiographies of the post-apartheid dispensation, documents the injustices of the apartheid past and the slow pace of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi. K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Biko, Steve. [1978] 2002. In Aelred Stubbs (ed.), *Steve Biko I Write What I Like: Selected Writings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Brantuo, Nana. 2021. "Rosie Motene's Journey to Art, Authorship and Activism." 10 March. <https://amaka.studio/explore/articles/rosie-motene-s-journey-to-art-authorship-and-activism>.
- Chauke, Clinton. 2018. *Born in Chains: The Diary of an Angry 'Born-free'*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- Cole, Teju. 2012. "The White-Savior Industrial Complex." *The Atlantic*, 21 March. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrialcomplex/254843/>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1: 139- 167.
- _____. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6: 1241-1299.
- Dubois, Wiliam. E. B. 1903. *Souls of Black Folk*. New York: A.C McClurg and Co.
- Englund, Lena. 2021. *South African Autobiography as Subjective History: Making Concessions to the Past*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- _____. 2023. "Writing against Colonialism in South African Memoir." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 59.1: 72-85.
- Gordon, Lewis. [1978] 2002. "Foreword." In Stubbs (ed.), *Steve Biko I write What I like: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): i-ix.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (London: Harper Collins): 221-238.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2007. "On the Coloniality of Being." *Cultural Studies* 21.2-3: 240-270.
- Matlwa, Kopano. 2007. *Coconut*. Cape Town: Jacana Press.
- Moopi, Peter and Rodwell Makombe. 2022. "Coloniality and Identity in Kopano Matlwa's Coconut (2007)." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 63.1: 2-13.
- Motene, Rosie. 2018. *Reclaiming the Soil: A Black Girl's Struggle to Find her African Self*. Johannesburg: Porcupine Press.
- _____. 2019. "Reclaiming my African Identity." TEDxLytteltonWomen. https://www.ted.com/talks/rosie_motene_reclaiming_my_african_identity

- Nash, Jennifer. C. 2019. *Black Feminism Reimagined after Intersectionality*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: Heinemann.
- Ngwenya, Thengamehlo, H. 1996. "Ideology and Form in South African Autobiographical Writing: a Study of the Autobiographies of Five South African authors." PhD dissertation, University of South Africa.
- Quijano, A. 2007. "Coloniality and Modernity/rationality." *Cultural Studies* 29.1: 11–21.
- Shakespeare, W. 2015. *The Tempest* [Mowat and Werstine, eds.]. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Wa Azania, Malaika. 2018. *Memoirs of a Born Free: Reflections on the New South Africa by a Member of the Post-Apartheid Generation*. New York: New Stories Press.

Notes

- ¹ Chauke 2018; Wa Azania 2014.
- ² Englund 2021, 2023.
- ³ Englund 2023, p. 73.
- ⁴ Englund 2023.
- ⁵ Englund 2023, p. 82.
- ⁶ Englund 2021.
- ⁷ Ngwenya 1993, p. 3.
- ⁸ Ngwenya 1996, p. 14.
- ⁹ Motene 2018.
- ¹⁰ Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 1990.
- ¹¹ Motene 2019.
- ¹² Brantuo 2021.
- ¹³ Biko [1978] 2002; Hill Collins 1990, 1991; Crenshaw 1989.
- ¹⁴ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 27.
- ¹⁵ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 31.
- ¹⁶ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 57.
- ¹⁷ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 58.
- ¹⁸ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 58.
- ¹⁹ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 42.
- ²⁰ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 42.
- ²¹ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 41.
- ²² Gordon [1978] 2002, p. xi.
- ²³ Gordon [1978] 2002, p. xi.
- ²⁴ Gordon [1978] 2002.

- ²⁵ Gordon [1978] 2002, p. x.
²⁶ Gordon [1978] 2002, p. x.
²⁷ Cole 2012.
²⁸ Hill Collins 1990, p. 541.
²⁹ Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 1990, p. 545.
³⁰ Hill Collins 1990, p. 545.
³¹ Hill Collins 1990, p. 546.
³² Hill Collins 1990, p. 548.
³³ Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 1990; Nash 2019, p. 6.
³⁴ Nash 2019, p. 9.
³⁵ Crenshaw 1989.
³⁶ Hill Collins 1990, p. 545.
³⁷ Biko [1978] 2002.
³⁸ Biko [1978] 2002.
³⁹ Motene 2018, p. 21.
⁴⁰ Gordon [1978] 2002.
⁴¹ Motene 2018, p. 71.
⁴² Motene 2018, p. 30.
⁴³ Fanon 1952.
⁴⁴ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 41
⁴⁵ Matlwa 2007.
⁴⁶ Motene 2018, p. 32.
⁴⁷ DuBois 1903.
⁴⁸ Hill Collins 1990; Nash 2019.
⁴⁹ Biko, [1978] 2002, pp. 50-51.
⁵⁰ Fanon 1952.
⁵¹ Fanon, 1952, p. 88.
⁵² Ngugi 1986; Moopi and Makombe 2022.
⁵³ Motene 2018, p. 15.
⁵⁴ Biko, [1978] 2002, p. 50.
⁵⁵ Fanon 1963, p. 3.
⁵⁶ Mignolo 2011, p. 43.
⁵⁷ Motene 2018, p. 36.
⁵⁸ Motene 2018, p. 15.
⁵⁹ Motene 2018, p. 43.
⁶⁰ Biko, [1978] 2002, p. 51.
⁶¹ Motene 2018, p. 37.
⁶² Motene 2018, p. 16.
⁶³ Biko [1978] 2002, p. 49
⁶⁴ Motene 2018, p. 41.
⁶⁵ Motene 2018, p. 41.

⁶⁶ Shakespeare 2015, p. 39.

⁶⁷ Bhabha 1994.

⁶⁸ Motene 2018, p. 19.

⁶⁹ Gordon [1978] 2002, p. xi

⁷⁰ Motene 2018, p. 2.

⁷¹ Motene 2018, p. 112.

⁷² Motene 2018, p. 112.

⁷³ Biko [1978] 2002.

⁷⁴ Biko [1978] 2002.

⁷⁵ Biko [1978] 2002.