

Full Length Research Paper

# A qualitative visual semiotic analysis of symbolic violence against female characters in selected South African television soaps

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## Abstract

South African (SA) television is awash with myriad television genres, one of which is soap operas. Soap opera is a serial show that highlights related storylines revolving around the lives of various characters. Soap operas are popular with audiences because they provide human tales that are immersed into concrete or fictitious social reality. However, symbolic violence against female characters becomes a common feature of the genre. Female characters are often portrayed as occupying the periphery of the constructed social hierarchies. Such depictions construct a female character who is vulnerable and envious of the success of their male counterparts. In desperate attempt to succeed, female characters resort to betrayal, deception, witchcraft and promiscuity. The purpose of this paper was to undertake a qualitative visual semiotic analysis of two SA television soaps, *Imbewu* and *Uzalo* to understand how images were used to deploy subtleties of violence against female characters in SA context. The study was situated within Feminist Theory; content/thematic (visual semiotics) was used to analyse data. The study found that television images and other related signs in soap operas were used to disperse narratives that entrenched subjugation, stereotypes and sexist acts that constituted symbolic violence against female characters in SA context.

**KEYWORDS:** Television Soap, Feminism, Symbolic Violence, Semiotics.

## INTRODUCTION

The media has the power to construct meaning through representation. In this context, television is an important medium that creates social realities and shape people's opinions, attitudes, beliefs and various issues affecting society (Sharma & Gupta, 2018). Ozer (2019) posits that television has the capacity to reach to massive audiences and produce various cultural commodities, thereby functions as a major agent in the process of socialisation and has necessarily substantial power to construct social order. SA television industry is booming-viewers have more content to choose from than 20 years ago when they only had the option of a few soaps and dramas (Tielima, 2022). With the creation of television as a medium, serial narratives or soap operas transformed- from their textual beginnings to their visual

evolution in television, they captured the interest and imagination of the audience (Atay & Gorton, 2022). Soap operas are integral part of SA popular culture. These soaps reflect societal norms, values, and attitudes towards different social issues such as family, relationships, poverty, corruption, gender inequality, marriage, infidelity, jealousy, rivalry, family conflicts and other social, political and economic status (Kungu & Gathigi, 2023).

Similarly, over the last few years, SA has seen increase in violence against women, and media (including television, have not helped to change the course (Nobanda, Nkosi and Sibanyoni, 2021). Enaifoghe, Delana, Abosedo and Dlamini (2021) claim that the occurrence of gender-based violence can be attributed

to the systematic gender inequality in the contemporary society that disempowers women, girls and other minorities groups in the society, which further stifles their voices so that their stories are not heard. Mshweshwe (2020) agrees that SA has a strong patriarchal system of social structures that encourage men to dominate, oppress, and exploit women in the public and private sphere. Therefore, it was important, in this paper, to argue through the lens of Feminist Theory, that the forces that create and support inequality, oppression and injustice against women should be tackled. Mkhize and Vilakazi (2021) noted two strands of feminism that bear relevance to this study, namely radical feminism, which is based on the premise that patriarchy is a system that is at the core of women's oppression and believes that women's oppression is best alleviated by the eradication of patriarchy entirely. Similarly, the emergent of postcolonial feminism sought to understand women experiences in relation to history, culture and society (Mkhize & Vilakazi, 2021). Based on the foregoing, this paper sought to explore the phenomenon of symbolic violence that has become integral to television narratives and imagery. Wolf (2020) indicates that for comprehending the 'visual' as an arena of symbolic violence against women, it is of fundamental importance to understand the issue as emerging from interlinked, interrelated and entangled fields of power. Musso (2019) posits that violence against women is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, in which multiple facets, that is, factual, symbolic, structural, institutional merge together in recursive paths reproducing a systemic logic where physical reality and imaginary interlace. In an entertaining way, soaps are embedded in symbols that mark selfhood and social life through the embodiment of values, ideals, patterned behaviours and visual imageries (Sorrentino, 2017). In this context, the study sought to undertake a visual semiotic analysis to understand how the two television soaps, *Uzalo* and *Imbewu* deployed certain concepts, expressions, codes and modes of representing violence against women. This was significant, in the context of Feminist Theory, to imagine how prosocial constructions of women in SA television context could be used to mitigate attitudes germane to symbolic violence. To this end, this paper sought to answer the following research questions:

- How are female characters portrayed regarding affection in these two television soaps?
- How are female characters hierarchised in the social order in the two television soaps?
- How is culture used to unleash symbolic violence against female characters in these two television soaps?
- How is language used as an instrument of domination against female characters in these two television soaps?

- How are female characters sexually objectified in these two television soaps?
- Why are female characters portrayed as deceptive in the two television soaps?

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### 2.3 Television soaps

Mahlatsi (2018) describes a soap opera as a serial show on TV that highlights related storylines revolving around the lives of various characters; the stories in the episodes ordinarily centre intensely around passionate connections, to the point of melodrama. A soap opera is talked over everywhere, inside a social, physical and individual environment. Atay and Gorton (2022) agree that serial narratives have been part of human experience and entertainment since the 1800s. Due to their narrative and format appeal, soap operas have been widely popular around the world. As Iqbal and Abdar (2016) point out, soap operas are part of everyday lives of their audiences. They have successfully been able to present the everyday happenings and also form part of the culture exchange which goes on in both the home and the work place, The popularity of soap-opera rests on its undemanding nature and its preoccupation with everyday concerns. The meanings derived from the knowledge of soaps challenge the dominant discourses about the role of women in the family, on the silencing of women voice, on the social expectations of women behaviour and about the power of women relationship with other members of society (Iqbal & Abdar, 2016).

Thus, it is postulated that most of the foregoing themes and plots were interweaved into multiple stories that have 'no beginning, no end in sight', kind of a narrative pattern that soap operas are famous for. It is therefore contended, in this paper, that these narrative patterns were often created to advance stereotypical and archetypal representations that perpetuate the established beliefs about the nature of the masculine and the feminine. For instance, the archetypal or stereotypical characters inherent to soap operas are, among others, the portrayal of women as victims that encounter untold sufferings, in the form of intimate partner violence, sexual harassment including rape, sexually transmitted diseases, the feminisation of poverty and various hardships (Kungu & Gathigi, 2023). Kungu and Gathigi (2023) further argue that women portrayed are usually poor, uneducated, unskilled, and objects of heterosexual men's desire and pleasure; such women tend to see affluent men as a ticket out of poverty or suffering. To this end, the media constitute an important sphere, not only of ritual of common consumption of and adaptation to gender patterns, stereotypes and roles, but also of ritualisation of self-assurance of gender and its standardisation (Wolf, 2020). Thus, symbolic violence because these ritualisations have underlying strategy of male dominance,

through multitudes of representations of women, who are forced into passive and secondary roles, converted into objects, relegated to the realm of emotions, the private sphere, reinforced feminine stereotypes of weakness, helplessness, and stigmatising women by victimisation (Wolf, 2020).

## 2.1 Symbolic violence

Symbolic violence can be traced back to the seminal work of one French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1991). Bourdieu (1991) defines symbolic violence as soft violence, hidden and invisible; it is unknown to its practitioners and victims at the same time; this violence is reflected in emotional, valuable, moral, and cultural practices; this violence involved symbolic instruments such as language, images, signs, semantics and meanings; it is often revealed in the shadow of a moral symbolic practice against its victims. It is also regarded as a form of internalised oppression or humiliation, the legitimisation of inequality, and hierarchies of expressions of class power that could take many forms, such as sexism, heterosexism, racism and xenophobia (Pieterse, Stratford & Nel, 2018). These forms of oppression or domination exist within a so-called established order, with certain rights, privileges, and injustices. These forms are very often overt and exercised through various social practices, found in, among others, political, economic, cultural and social structures. Pieterse et al (2018) further posit that...symbolic forms of violence may instil greater hurt and harm than physical violence, because it is invisibly embedded in various symbolic structures of social behaviour, communication and cognition and frequently regarded as legitimate by perpetrators and victims alike. Pusposari (2021) suggests that symbolic violence leads to greater actual violence such as psychological and physical; it serves as a gateway to verbal, psychological and even assault

Thus, this paper argues that the way television soaps, through their mode of signification, seek to organise social relations, to make social life happen in specific ways that depend on violent meanings, expression, and action, merit interrogation. The argument is that television soaps use cultural codes to ritualise behaviour regarding one's class, gender, racism and subordination. To this end, the nexus of symbolism of violence and the semiotic field within which violence is expressed becomes a natural occurrence, and thus a subject of inquiry in this paper.

## 2.2 Semiotics

Semiotics is credited to one Swiss linguist, Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1903) and the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) respectively (Chandler, 2007). Peirce and Saussure are widely regarded as co-founders of semiotics, with Saussure linked more to the term semiology, while the term semiotics was linked to Peirce and contemporaries.

Saussure defines semiotics as the science which studies the role of signs as part of social life, while Peirce looked at semiotics as the formal doctrine of signs, closely related to logic (Chandler, 2007). So, in this paper, Barthes' two-stage system of meanings will be used, namely, denotative and connotative to decipher meanings expressed through dialogue, visual narratives and images directed at female characters in the soaps, *Imbewu* and *Uzalo*.

Today semiotics is generally defined as the study of signs. Motsaathebe (2020) defines semiotics as a science dedicated to the study of production of meaning in society. As such it is equally concerned with the process of signification and with those of communication whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged. Curtin (2015) agrees that semiotics is concerned with meaning, that is, how representation, in the broader sense (languages, images, objects) generates meanings or the process by which we comprehend or attribute meaning. Therefore, semiotic analysis acknowledges that variable relationships we may have to representation, which essentially means that the significance of images and objects cannot be understood as a one-way process from image/object to individual, but the result of complex inter-relationships between the individual, the image/object and other factors such as culture and society (Curtin, 2015). In this context, it was important to analyse how images were embedded and used in cultural nuances that tended to inflict violent meanings towards female characters in the two soaps under study. As has already been pointed out, the study was conceptualised within the lens of Feminist Theory.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 Feminist theory

Feminist theory was borne out of feminism- a social political movement and praxis which focuses on the liberation of women from perceived oppression and inequality caused by male hegemony (Fafowora, 2020). Crossman (2020) posits that what makes feminist theory creative and inclusive is that it often considers how systems of power and oppression interact, which is to say it does not just focus on gendered power and oppression, but on how this might intersect with racism, a hierarchical class system, sexuality, disability, and nationality. In this paper, I argue that the media, through television genres (soaps), create gendered stereotypes and maintain patriarchal values, thereby creating a distorted, male-biased view of the world. In this context, violence (symbolic) intersects with forms of social categories such as race, class, age, ability, gender, and find expressions in semiotic frames that television deploys to devalue women's roles and status (Freeman, 2019). By analysing visual narratives and discursive constructs that enmesh subjugation, stereotypes and

sexist acts directed at female characters in the SA soaps *Uzalo* and *Imbewu* respectively, is to lay bare hidden mythologies of violence against women that the media legitimises through an entertainment format.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This was a *qualitative study* that was based on reviewing some selected episodes to analyse the visuals, language, text and cultural signs/codes to demonstrate that symbolic violence was intimately linked to the constructed social system within which it is deployed. On the contrary, data was collected through (re) viewing selected episodes of the two soaps (*content analysis*). Episodes are randomly sampled, through available sampling (non-probability) based on their accessibility on the internet as archived materials. Analysis took the form of *thematic analysis*, with themes created in line with the created conceptual framework of the reviewed literature. Similarly, themes were created based on language of expressions; images; facial expressions; symbols; artefacts and objects used in different episodes, all of which land themselves into the semiotic field that underlie social and cultural practices of the characters.

#### 5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The paper has focused on Season 8 of *Uzalo* and season 4 of *Imbewu* respectively. The following results and findings were reported for both *Uzalo* and *Imbewu*:

##### 5.1 Uzalo

Mma Dongwe looks depressed after her children, Lily, Njeza and Nomka summoned and chased her new boyfriend, Sqhaza (nicknamed General) out of their house, without her knowledge. After making numerous calls to Sqaza, she could not help it, but depressed because his phone was on voice mail and could not return her calls despite that she left numerous messages. Moreover, she apologised on behalf of her children for chasing him out of their house.

On another scene, Nomaswazi followed Mamba, who now works with Nkunzi, the syndicate kingpin of car theft in KwaMashu. Mamba used to work with Nomaswazi's late father, for whom Mamba confessed to have killed. Nomaswazi kills Mamba in revenge of her father and took the body overnight, and dumped it at Nkunzi's business establishment, called KwaNjomane. In another episode, Gabisile, confronts her husband, Nkunzi- about the killing of Mamba, which was splashed all over the newspapers, and was found at Nkunzi's business establishment.

Gabisile, who is now a famous talk radio host (K-Mash FM), could not have it, because she is now an influential person and a heroine, through her programme '*Ushiboshi*' to many people in the township of KwaMashu. Nkunzi did not take it kindly when

Gabisile confronted her, and thereupon told her of disrespecting him since she had gotten some new celebrity status. As a result of the confrontation and the inability to reach an understanding, Gabisile went upstairs, packed her bags and left Nkunzi's house.

##### 5.2 Imbewu (The Seed)

The paper focused on Season 4, and about six episodes were viewed and analysed. In one episode, Zandile, an unemployed young beautiful woman, faces a bleak future because her relationship with her blesser married man, Siphoshe is crumbling. Zandile used to receive a R100 000 monthly allowance from Siphoshe, which she now faces the prospect of losing as the relationship comes to an end.

On another scene, we are introduced to Menzi, a manipulative man who has wormed his ways into widowed women such as MmaZulu, Nirupa, Violet (current wife), to steal a share of their inherited wealth. Both MmaZulu and Nirupa, have inherited Maluju Oil, a company that their long-time friends- husbands built together. Menzi is now involved in a scam with his new lover, Makhozasana, an employee of Maluju Oil, to steal assets and money from the company. However, to achieve the scam, Menzi had to worm his ways into the beds of these widows (MmaZulu and Nirupa) under the pretext of love or romance.

Meanwhile Zandile, who has now lost her blesser boyfriend, had her next target in Nkululeko, who is the current CEO of Maluju, despite that she had an affair with his late father and business mogul, Ngcolosi. She visited him in his office under the pretence of catching up with him since the last time they met at the harbour. On another scene, Nirupa, another girlfriend to Menzi, is distressed of Menzi's sudden disappearance and wondered if she was played again by her new lover. Nirupa went and confronted MmaZulu in her office if she knew anything about Menzi's sudden disappearance.

Things started to gain momentum between Zandile and Nkululeko who slept over at Zandile's house on their first day lunch date. Following constant dates with Zandile, Nkululeko started to give her some money as he got to realise that she was financially needy. On another episode, Nkululeko speaks to Nokuzola, his brother's wife whom he got pregnant and insisted on seeing her. Nokuzola, who was with husband, Zithulele at the time, pretended to be speaking to someone, but Nkululeko, and ultimately dropped the call on him. Few days later, Zithulele and Nokuzola, ran into Nkululeko and Zandile in a restaurant, and thereupon Zithulele asked if Zandile had informed him of the affair she had with their dad. To his shock and disappointment, Nkululeko angrily asked why Zandile did not inform him of her affair with his late father. The thought of losing Nkululeko and money made Zandile rush to inyanga to seek muti that would keep Nkululeko to herself. Zandile was then given a snake that she would stay within the house, and it would

assist her lure Nkululeko. The snake was to bring more money to her, but Zandile needed to sleep with the snake, which she has now named 'Bululu', because it liked beautiful women like her. According to the inyanga, she would make the snake happy, and it would bring more money. In the end, Nkululeko bought Zandile a car.

Makhozasana, Menzi's girlfriend, with whom they plotted to steal from Maluju, planned with Menzi to hijack a shipment that was destined for Maluju. They succeeded in hijacking the shipment, however, Menzi betrayed Makhozasana and stole the shipment before it arrived where the two were waiting. Menzi used the money to buy Nirupa a new German car, the news of which Makhozasana came to discover in the latest board meeting of Maluju, where both Nirupa, MmaZulu sit as co-directors of the company. Makhozasana regrouped with Violet (Menzi's wife), whom Menzi had drugged over a long period and sent to a mental facility. They kidnapped Menzi, and later joined by MmaZulu, at a secret place, where they later killed and buried him in hole that the two (Makhozasana and Violet) dug overnight.

## 6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion below exposes numerous themes around which symbolic violence in the two soaps, *Uzalo* and *Imbewu*, is wrapped, namely:

### 6.1 Females portrayed as emotionally weak and desperate for love

In *Uzalo*, mmaDongwe looks depressed of the thought of losing a newly found lover in 'Sqhaza' (General), who was chased out of her house by her children, Njeza, Lily and Nomka. MmaDongwe is upset that 'General' just disappeared despite that she has left numerous messages and apologising on behalf of her children for summoning and chasing him without her knowledge. In her own words as she leaves the voice note on the General's phone, "I need you, we need you in the house", signal some form of *symbolic violence* in that MmaDongwe seems emotionally indebted to Sqhaza, who has not reciprocated.

The same could be said of Nirupa in *Imbewu*, who had not heard from her new lover, Menzi, for two days, and she had this to say, 'May be some of us are just no lucky with love'. This constitutes *symbolic violence* against women, which Amir and Abbas (2022) describe as the violence which is exercised on a social agent with his complicity. Symbolic violence is the device whereby the socially subjugated naturalises the status quo and blames herself for her structural subordination in society's hierarchies and injustices. In this context, both mmaDongwe and Nirupa blame themselves for not receiving any phone calls from their lovers who have disappeared for days without returning their calls.

### 6.2 Females and material deprivation

In *Uzalo*, symbolic violence is directed at Gabisile, who stays with her rich car theft syndicate kingpin, Nkunzi. Gabsile, who has now become a famous talk-show host on K-Mash radio, packs her bags to leave Nkunzi's house after they had a conflict about Gabsile leaving her job because she no longer has time and respect for her husband, Nkunzi. Conversely, Nkunzi would have initially been shown, through bird-eye view shot, towering on the balcony of the same mansion with a glass of whiskey looking down over the mountainous landscape of Kwa-Mashu township. The juxtaposition of possession versus deprivation in this instance, signals power and dominance against the would-be fight with his wife in subsequent shots, who later packed her possessions and left him in peace in his house. Similarly, Zandile of *Imbewu*, an unemployed slayqueen who receives R100 000 monthly allowance from a married blesser boyfriend, Siphos, finds herself without a car. Siphos's wife came to dispossess her of a car that belonged to her husband company. Women are now portrayed as seekers than givers, thus constitute symbolic violence, because material possessions are demonstrably deployed to subjugate women to men's dominance. Sharma and Bump (2021) postulate that showing women as having no purchasing power and dependent on men for survival result in low self-esteem and create an impression that the role of women in society is secondary to that of men.

Further, Pusposari (2021) posits that symbolic violence is concealed in numerous activities, which among others, includes, exchange of gifts as a technique to put other people in debt and exert influence over them; giving presents to those who do not reciprocate places the recipient in a debt and obligation predicament. In *Imbewu*, Nkululeko, who has now assumed the position of the CEO of Maluju Oil, constantly transfers large amounts of money into his new lover's bank account, Zandile and ultimately bought her a car, as a gift for their newly found romance. In this context, it can be argued that female characters in soaps are generally placed in precarious positions of deprivations, thus creating the mythology of symbolic power of men over women. Male characters are represented as custodians of successful business leadership and as active participants in related socio-political dealings. Women, however, are represented as supportive participants in those businesses and economic dealings, which further suggests that women are incapable of independently and successfully participating in generation of wealth (Ndayi & du Plooy, 2019). This is consistent with the core theme in Bourdieu's work on symbolic violence in that the suffering of women who must come to terms with their position as symbolically or materially dispossessed, and in a sense, have accepted their fate as dominated (Ganuza, Karlander and Salo, 2020). Therefore, the origin of violence against women is found in the symbolic and material structures that underpin

patriarchy (Fernandez et al, 2016).

### 6.3 Culture and symbolic violence against women

One way that symbolic violence is deployed against women in soaps is through cultural capital. In this context, it is argued that media, including television are institutions that function as facilitators for social agents/actors to internalise the system of domination as their seemingly natural position in the social space (Petrikas, 2019). Accordingly, the social space and fields of social practice are characterised by the hierarchical structure, where the dominant position is related to the disposition of capital (symbolic). In the two soaps under study, the socio-cultural field in which the supernatural/ ancestral powers are always sought to overcome troubles of love/romance, mostly by female characters become a fertile ground through which symbolic violence is constantly dispatched against females. In the soap, *Uzalo*, a young Hleziphe consults a male inyanga to seek muti (sqhethu) so that she could have her friend's boyfriend to herself. Similarly, in *Imbewu*, Zandile consults inyanga to get muti that will keep her new rich boyfriend, Nkululeko to herself, particularly against the backdrop of him discovering that she had had an affair with his late father. It is evident that symbolic violence operates within the cultural capital, because the indignity that women suffer in the hands of male dominated social space (as inyangas) is a form of symbolic violence. As seen in the following snippets in events in one selected episode:

Zandile: "why have you been inserting things in my private parts if Siphu will just go back to his wife?"  
 Inyanga (Sangoma): I think there is one thing we can do to defeat Siphu's wife's muti, you have to swallow the gall bladder"

The above-mentioned indicate that television uses voyeuristic narratives to secondarily victimise and aesthetise violence against women in soaps such as *Imbewu* and *Uzalo*. This is consistent with Wolf's assertion that film and television display violence against women as a core element of narrative, showing the violent act as abnormal incidents, sensationalising and eroticising victims (Wolf, 2020).

To this end, cultural capital plays a significant role in societal power relations, as this provides the means for non-economic form of domination and hierarchy (Bourdieu, 2010). Few-Demo and Allen's (2020) feministic perspective attributes this form of violence to intersectionality, which recognises, in this context, that symbolic violence against women is located in wide ranging socio-cultural, economic and political dimensions of the social space in which it occurs. Intersectionality suggests that oppression of women operates via multiple categories, that is, gender, race,

class, age, ability, and that intersecting oppressions lead to different lived experiences (Freeman, 2019).

### 6.4 Language as an instrument of domination against women characters

Pusposari (2021) argues that language is more than a means of communication; it is a tool of power. In both *Uzalo* and *Imbewu*, the use of language becomes a common feature of males spewing venom against their partners who try to be insubordinate to them.

Following the departure of Gabisile from the house she shares with her husband, Nkunzi, he had the following to say about her, as he enquired about her whereabouts from their son:

"your mother is full of herself, she thinks she is better since she got a job as a radio host. She's forgotten that she was out in the cold and I took her in and put a roof over her head. Now she thinks she's better than everyone. I made her who she is today".  
 Similarly, in *Imbewu*, Menzi, who was kidnapped by the three women that he played for love, including his wife that he had deliberately drugged and sent to mental facility, could not show any remorse for the betrayal and hurt that he engendered upon them, respectively. He had the following to say to Mmazulu:

"I helped you, I literally put your family together after you proved that you are a failure, Nokubonga. Ever wondered why your daughter is an alcoholic? Your daughter is an alcoholic because of you Nokubonga. You messed her up good. Ngcolosi must be turning in his grave".

These two snippets demonstrate that male characters can immediately use language to demean females' personal agency and reify their lust for power at any instance when their influence over female characters diminish. As Bourdieu (1991) puts it, the speaker can embed sentences or expressions in practical strategies which have numerous functions and which are tacitly adjusted to the relations of power between speakers and hearers. The symbolic efficacy of words is exercised only in so far as the person subjected to it recognises the person who exercises it as authorised to do so, or, what amounts to the same thing, only in so far as he fails to realise that, in submitting to it, he himself has contributed, through his recognition, to its establishment (Bourdieu, 1991). This paper therefore questions, from a feminist perspective, the structural inequality that is maintained through dominant discourses (Freeman, 2019). To this end, it is argued that the socio-cultural and historical conditions which greatly lean on patriarchy, set the tone of relations which endows individuals with power, status and performative resources (language) to expend discourses of authority (violently) against females, which the victims recognise and legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991). Against the foregoing,

media functions as a sphere of gender standardisations and assurances, in which symbolic and discourse violence form part (Wolf, 2020).

### 6.5 females portrayed as sex objects

One of the subtle ways that feminist groups have expressed concerns about, in the mainstream television narratives, including soaps, is the stereotyping of females as sex objects. Sexual objectification is a form of reduction to body that occurs whenever a person is fragmented into a collection of sexual body parts and functions, evaluated for her/his physical appearance, and considered as a sexual object for the use and enjoyment of someone else wherein personality, abilities and individuality are devalued (Galdi and Guizzo, 2021). This paper argues that media, particularly television plays a crucial role in exposure to sexualising images, text, sounds and experiences. In this context, Karsay, Knoll and Matthes (2018) argue that sexualising media content has been related to reinforced gender stereotypes, an increased acceptance of rape myths. The argument is that by portraying women in ways that emphasise physical beauty and sexual readiness as well as reduce them to decorative and sexual objects is a powerful risk factor encouraging sexual harassment and sexual violence. In the soap, *Uzalo*, Mbatha's utterances towards mmaDongwe that she was wearing miniskirts and chasing young boys is sexist, and smacks of an assault on mmaDongwe's person and integrity. In the same vein, Mbatha declared that he was looking for an honourable woman and not someone who was running an illegal loan shark like mmaDongwe. Similarly, Nkunzi's utterance towards his wife, Gabisile that he didn't like it when she was going out looking good and beautiful reduces her to sexual objects that men could lust for, and thus she would have no moral standing to reject such advances from male strangers. As Butler (1986) points out, feminist theory disputes causal explanations that assume that sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women experience.

Furthermore, in *Imbewu*, Makhozasana, who excitedly narrated to Menzi, her current lover with whom they have hatched a scam to steal money and assets of Maluju Oil, how she slept with Stefan to get him to sign a business deal with Maluju, got a chilling response from Menzi. Menzi told her that she disgusted her, and she must go and get a shower, which suggested she was filthy, dirty and possibly smelly. Santoniccolo, Trombetta, Paradiso & Rolle (2023) found that there was an association between experiences of sexual objectification and internalisation of cultural standards of appearance and body shame... . Again, this form of symbolic violence is consistent with Bourdieu's assertion that symbolic violence is legitimated by all parties concerned, through consent, complicity and misrecognition. Karsay et al. (2018) agree that self-

objectification, which involves adopting a third-person perspective of the body and is manifested by chronic attention to one's own physical appearance (i.e) fears about when and how one's body will be looked at and evaluated. Therefore, women's bodies are portrayed as nothing, but objects of sex to normalise and legitimise male hegemony.

### 6.6 Females constructed as deceptive characters

Nokuzola has kept a secret from her husband, Zithulele, that she was pregnant by his brother, Nkululeko. Nokuzola is constructed as unfaithful, a liar and deceptive character, thus violates the dignity of female characters in the soap, *Imbewu*. Similarly, Nomaswazi in *Uzalo*, brutally shot Mamba to death, but woke up to surprisingly break the news to her family the next day, while she was the one who killed him. Again, Nomaswazi is portrayed as a brutal murderer, who would do everything to hide her darker side.

Futher, Makhozasana (superbitch) had visited Nkululeko and slept with him overnight, to trick him to give up the code of the gate, where the trucks of the company were kept. The code was important for Makhozasana to enable would-be hijackers to access one of the trucks and remove the tracker. This would have been a plan to facilitate the impending hijack of the company truck that was going to fetch the shipment in some few days. Following the successful hijacking of the truck and the shipment, Makhozasana showed up in the subsequent board meeting (Maluju Oil) wearing a dress that resembled a snakeskin. In this context, an imagery is used as a metaphorical brutality against the character of Makhozasana, to demonstrate malevolence and treachery associated with the constructed woman character, thus symbolic violence.

## CONCLUSION

This paper found that despite that television soaps have flooded our television programming in recent times, their narratives remained entrapped in patriarchal frames. The roles of female characters are indifferent and relegated to subjects of domination by male characters. Based on the preceding analysis, it can be argued that the media, especially television, deploys cultural nuances such as clothing, language, artefacts, symbols to entrench violence against female characters in the soaps. Thus, this form of symbolic violence has far-reaching implications regarding the general violence, both symbolic, physical and psychological, that women endure from males in SA context. It is therefore important that producers of local soaps should aspire to construct empowered and strong women characters to steer audience attitudes from harmful stereotypes of male dominance and authority. Similarly, media narratives should attend to non-traditional or counter stereotypical portrayals that feature women as

strong, powerful leaders, and boys and men as emotional and nurturant, characteristics usually ascribed to women in soap constructions.

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