

Narrative Defiance under Apartheid: Literary Counter-Discourses in the Works of Tlali, Magona, Ndebele and Dangor

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Abstract

Apartheid in South Africa functioned as a rigid socio-political system that sought not only to segregate communities but also to regulate cultural expression through extensive censorship laws. During this period, literature became a vital medium through which marginalized voices resisted state control and articulated suppressed realities. This paper examines how Miriam Tlali, Sindiwe Magona, Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele, and Achmat Dangor employed narrative strategies to challenge apartheid ideology. Their writings reflect lived experiences of displacement, identity conflict, and social injustice while simultaneously offering counter-discourses to dominant state narratives. Rather than presenting overt political protest, these authors used storytelling as a subtle yet effective means of resistance. By situating their works within the framework of postcolonial literary discourse, the study highlights how narrative writing functioned as an intellectual intervention against apartheid censorship and contributed to the preservation of collective memory.

Keywords: Apartheid Literature, Narrative Resistance, Counter-Discourse, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

The apartheid regime in South Africa represented one of the most systematic forms of institutionalized racial segregation in the twentieth century, shaping not only the political and economic landscape of the country but also its cultural and intellectual life. Through a rigid network of discriminatory laws and policies, apartheid sought to control the movement, education, employment, and social interactions of non-white populations. However, beyond these visible mechanisms of segregation, the regime also exercised significant control over cultural production, particularly literature. The state's censorship apparatus was designed to suppress dissenting voices by banning publications that exposed racial injustice or challenged the legitimacy of apartheid ideology (Coetzee, 1996). As a result, literary expression became a contested space where issues of identity, memory, and resistance were negotiated. In this restrictive socio-political environment, literature emerged as an important medium for articulating experiences that were otherwise excluded from official discourse. Writers increasingly turned to narrative as a form of resistance, using storytelling to document everyday realities of oppression and marginalization. Rather than engaging in overt political protest, many authors employed subtle narrative strategies that allowed them to critique apartheid policies while circumventing censorship laws (Gready, 1993). These narratives often focused on personal experiences, community memories, and cultural traditions, thereby creating alternative perspectives that challenged dominant representations of South African society.

In *A Dry White Season*, the protagonist learns that the legal system is a weapon used to maintain the racial hierarchy rather than an instrument of truth.

"Justice is a very specialized commodity in this country. It is produced by the State, for the State." — André Brink, *A Dry White Season* (1979), p. 162.

A number of South African writers played a decisive role in reshaping literary discourse under apartheid, and among them Miriam Tlali, Sindiwe Magona, Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele, and Achmat Dangor stand out for the distinctive ways in which they reconstructed silenced experience. Their significance lies not merely in documenting injustice but in reframing how apartheid could be narrated and understood. Instead of accepting the regime's rigid racial binaries and official vocabulary, they re-centered storytelling around lived complexity—around fragmented identities, shifting belonging, and the emotional cost of systemic exclusion. Miriam Tlali's contribution is particularly powerful in its insistence that Black women occupy

the narrative center rather than the margins. Her urban landscapes are not neutral backdrops; they are structured by surveillance, mobility restrictions, and economic precarity. Yet within these constrained spaces, her characters think critically, form solidarities, and assert moral agency. Tlali's storytelling destabilizes the apartheid state's portrayal of Black women as passive subjects. By illuminating their interior lives—their anxieties, humor, anger, and resilience—she transforms ordinary existence into political testimony. The city in her fiction becomes a contested terrain where racial power operates visibly, but also where dignity is quietly defended. Sindiwe Magona approaches apartheid from a deeply introspective angle, blending memory with historical consciousness. Her autobiographical voice does not simply recount events; it reflects on how laws infiltrated imagination and self-worth. Through family narratives, educational struggles, and generational dialogue, she reveals how segregation shaped aspirations and emotional development. Her work demonstrates that apartheid was not confined to public institutions; it entered kitchens, classrooms, and childhood dreams. By translating personal recollection into collective narrative, Magona bridges the gap between individual suffering and communal awareness. In doing so, she asserts that memory itself is a political act, especially when official histories erase or sanitize lived reality.

Njabulo Ndebele, by contrast, interrogates the very mode of representation. He critiques what he perceives as an overemphasis on spectacular violence in protest literature and instead advocates attention to the textures of everyday life. His focus on the "ordinary" is not a retreat from politics but a redefinition of it. By examining domestic routines, moral dilemmas, and quiet endurance, he uncovers the ethical dimension of survival. This perspective challenges simplified narratives of resistance and emphasizes that maintaining humanity in a dehumanizing system is itself transformative. Through this recalibration of focus, Ndebele expands the imaginative possibilities of resistance beyond overt confrontation.

Achmat Dangor's fiction introduces another layer of complexity by destabilizing fixed racial and cultural categories. His characters frequently inhabit liminal spaces, negotiating mixed heritage, cultural ambiguity, and shifting social identities. In exploring hybridity, he exposes the fragility of apartheid's obsession with classification. Identity in his narratives is fluid, relational, and historically layered—an implicit critique of a system that sought to reduce personhood to legal definitions. Dangor's use of metaphor and psychological depth further underscores the impossibility of containing human experience within bureaucratic boundaries. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the narrative serves as a universal allegory for how empires use torture and censorship to justify their own paranoia.

"Once you have a certain kind of power, you find yourself using it in a certain kind of way."
— J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), p. 84.

This research seeks to critically examine the literary architectures of Miriam Tlali, Sindiwe Magona, Njabulo Ndebele, and Achmat Dangor, positioning their selected works as strategic counter-discursive interventions designed to dismantle the cognitive and legal frameworks of apartheid censorship. Within the restrictive socio-political climate of 20th-century South Africa, these authors did not merely record history; they actively re-engineered it. By deploying a postcolonial theoretical framework, this study interrogates how these writers utilized the "power of the pen" to bypass the state's Panoptic surveillance. Through techniques such as linguistic subversion, the reclamation of domestic spaces, and the elevation of "ordinary" life over the state's spectacular violence, their narratives functioned as a "second state" of information. This intellectual defiance was crucial in eroding the ideological hegemony of the minority regime, transforming private trauma into a shared, public archive of resistance.

Furthermore, the study aims to illuminate how these specific narrative strategies fostered a collective consciousness among marginalized communities, bridging the gap between individual suffering and communal mobilization. By documenting the "unspoken" and the "banned," Tlali's pioneered depictions of Black womanhood, Magona's autobiographical

reckonings, Ndebele's "discovery of the ordinary," and Dangor's explorations of racial and sexual identity collectively challenged the state's monopoly on truth. These texts functioned as pedagogical tools, teaching readers to see through the "official" lies of the apartheid apparatus. Ultimately, this investigation highlights that literature served as more than a mirror to society; it was a foundational pillar of the liberation struggle, providing the moral and intellectual scaffolding necessary to envision and eventually inhabit a democratic South Africa.

2. Apartheid Censorship and the Role of Literary Expression

Apartheid censorship cannot be understood simply as a set of legal prohibitions; it operated as a deeply ideological mechanism aimed at shaping how people imagined reality itself. Through legislation such as the Publications and Entertainments Act and its subsequent amendments, the state did more than ban particular books—it attempted to regulate cultural consciousness. By deciding which narratives could circulate and which voices would be silenced, the regime sought to construct a controlled version of truth. As J. M. Coetzee notes in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*, "Censorship operates not simply by prohibiting words, but by regulating the conditions under which they may exist" (Coetzee, 1996, p. 12). This observation captures the subtlety of apartheid's cultural control. It was not only speech that was policed; it was imagination. Literature that exposed racial injustice, depicted black suffering, or questioned segregation threatened the ideological stability of the state, and therefore had to be contained. Writers living and working under such conditions found themselves navigating a tense and uncertain terrain. Manuscripts could be confiscated, publishers intimidated, and authors placed under surveillance or banned. Many works were heavily edited before publication, stripped of explicit political commentary, or circulated underground. In this atmosphere, storytelling required both courage and strategy. Nadine Gordimer, reflecting on this environment in *The Essential Gesture*, remarked that "the writer in South Africa is faced with the dilemma of telling the truth in a society where truth is officially unwelcome" (Gordimer, 1988, p. 7). That dilemma shaped the very structure of narrative form. Instead of direct denunciation, writers often turned to symbolism, irony, layered dialogue, and fragmented narration. The surface story might appear domestic or personal, but beneath it lay sharp critique. This indirect mode of resistance did not weaken literary power; in many ways, it intensified it. By focusing on ordinary life—kitchen conversations, street encounters, childhood memories—writers exposed how apartheid entered the most intimate spaces of existence. Njabulo Ndebele, in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, argues that literature became "a site where the texture of daily life could resist official abstraction" (Ndebele, 1991, p. 42). What he calls the "ordinary" was not apolitical; it was profoundly political. By documenting how segregation shaped love, friendship, work, and aspiration, authors revealed the human cost behind bureaucratic language. The state spoke in terms of policy and development, but literature spoke in terms of hunger, humiliation, longing, and endurance.

Miriam Tlali's *Amandla* offers a striking example of how literary expression confronted state surveillance. In one passage, she writes, "Every street corner seemed to listen; every window held an unseen watcher" (Tlali, 1989, p. 31). The language conveys not only physical restriction but psychological intrusion. By capturing this atmosphere of fear and suspicion, Tlali exposes the everyday consequences of censorship and policing. The narrative does not simply condemn apartheid in abstract terms; it shows how censorship enters daily consciousness.

Similarly, Sindiwe Magona's autobiographical work *To My Children's Children* highlights how restrictive laws penetrated intimate life. She recalls, "The pass laws followed us like shadows, reminding us that even our footsteps were regulated" (Magona, 1990, p. 54). Such lines illustrate how the state's control extended beyond public space into personal identity. The simple act of writing these experiences becomes an assertion of presence against enforced silence.

In Burger's Daughter, the tension between private life and political duty highlights the impossibility of remaining "neutral" in a censored society.

"The internal censor is the most dangerous of all; he sits in your brain and tells you which thoughts are safe to put on paper" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 210).

In Soweto, My Love, the poet reflects on how the state's control over education and literature stifled the dreams of an entire generation.

"We were fed the crumbs of a history written by our masters, until our very dreams were filtered through their fear" (Serote, 1982, p. 58).

The deeper importance of literary expression during apartheid can be understood in terms of memory and preservation. When official institutions controlled newspapers, education systems, and public discourse, much of the lived experience of oppressed communities was either distorted or erased. Government documents often framed segregation as policy, development, or order, but they rarely captured the fear, humiliation, longing, and resilience that shaped daily life. In this context, literature began to function as an unofficial record of the nation—an alternative repository of experience. Through novels, memoirs, poetry, and essays, writers preserved what formal archives excluded. They documented conversations that would never appear in legal files, emotions that statistics could not measure, and small acts of endurance that history books might overlook. This literary record did not simply oppose the state; it offered a fuller account of reality.

The very fact that books were banned and manuscripts scrutinized reveals how threatening storytelling was perceived to be. When a regime fears literature, it implicitly acknowledges that narrative has the power to shape thought and collective awareness. Stories can circulate beyond borders, reach unexpected audiences, and quietly influence moral judgment. Writers understood this, and many continued to produce work even when publication meant risk. By doing so, they affirmed that imagination itself could not be legislated out of existence. The persistence of writing under censorship demonstrates that narrative is not easily silenced; it adapts, shifts tone, and finds new forms.

In this sense, literary expression during apartheid became more than aesthetic practice—it became an ethical responsibility. Writers used realism to ground their stories in recognizable life, allegory to veil critique within symbolism, irony to expose contradiction, and memory to reclaim silenced pasts. Each technique allowed them to navigate restrictions while still asserting narrative agency. Even when direct confrontation was impossible, the simple act of documenting experience challenged the regime's authority to define truth. Literature became a space where silence and speech coexisted in tension, where repression met articulation, and where human voices continued to resonate despite institutional attempts to contain them.

3. Narrative Strategies of Resistance

The works of Tlali, Magona, Ndebele, and Dangor show that resistance under apartheid was not always loud, dramatic, or openly confrontational. Often, it was embedded in tone, memory, silence, and in the quiet determination to narrate lived reality. These writers understood that in a censored society, direct protest could be banned or suppressed. Therefore, they developed narrative strategies that allowed them to critique apartheid from within everyday experience. Their resistance was layered—psychological, emotional, symbolic, and deeply human.

Miriam Tlali's fiction, especially *Amandla*, articulates resistance not through grand speeches or overt revolutionary declarations, but through the deeply personal and interior experiences of Black women living within the suffocating structures of apartheid urban life. What makes her narrative approach particularly compelling is her refusal to turn her characters into mere political symbols. Instead, she situates them within the everyday pressures that shape their existence—long commutes regulated by racial zoning, humiliations in white-dominated workplaces, the constant anxiety of pass laws, and the lingering awareness that one is always being observed. The line, "It was not only our movements that were watched, but our thoughts,

as though even silence could betray us” (Tlali, 1989, p. 74), reveals how apartheid extended beyond physical confinement into psychological territory. Surveillance in her fiction is not only institutional; it becomes internalized, creating a condition where individuals monitor their own speech and even their own imagination. In this sense, Tlali exposes apartheid as a system that sought to discipline consciousness itself. However, Tlali does not leave her characters trapped within this psychological invasion. Within spaces of constraint, she carefully reveals moments of quiet resistance. Women exchange knowing glances, share coded conversations, and sustain one another through emotional solidarity. These interactions may appear small, but they challenge the regime’s attempt to isolate and fragment communities. The domestic sphere, the workplace corridor, or the bus queue becomes a subtle site of defiance. By presenting women who continue to think critically, remember their histories, and narrate their experiences, Tlali transforms interior life into a form of political agency. The simple act of reflection becomes an assertion of autonomy. To think independently under a system designed to regulate thought is itself resistance. Moreover, Tlali’s narrative style reinforces this existential dimension of struggle. She foregrounds interior monologue and emotional nuance, allowing readers to inhabit the psychological terrain of her characters. Fear, doubt, anger, and hope coexist within them, rendering them fully human rather than flattened victims of oppression. This humanization destabilizes apartheid’s logic, which depended on reducing Black individuals to racial categories devoid of complexity. By insisting on emotional depth and intellectual awareness, Tlali challenges the ideological framework that sought to deny such depth.

In *To My Children’s Children*, Sindiwe Magona turns personal memory into something far larger than autobiography; she reshapes it into a shared testimony of a generation that grew up under the shadow of apartheid. Her narrative voice is gentle, reflective, and deeply personal, yet beneath that intimacy lies the authority of lived history. She does not speak as an abstract commentator on injustice, but as someone who carried its weight in her childhood, in her schooling, in her relationships, and in her sense of self. When she observes that “freedom was not something one possessed but something one imagined in the spaces between rules” (Magona, 1990, p. 88), she exposes how apartheid regulated not only movement and opportunity but imagination itself. The system attempted to define where one could live, learn, work, and even aspire—but within those restrictions, Magona identifies fragile yet powerful openings. The “spaces between rules” become quiet zones of psychological resistance, moments where dignity survives despite constraint. What makes Magona’s strategy particularly compelling is her refusal to separate politics from ordinary life. She narrates experiences of family, motherhood, education, and community as inseparable from the broader political structure. In her writing, apartheid is not a distant policy enacted in parliament; it enters the kitchen, the classroom, the streets where children walk. By describing how laws shaped everyday decisions—where to study, how to travel, what dreams felt possible—she reveals how systemic injustice seeps into the most intimate aspects of existence. This collapsing of the personal and the political transforms her narrative into a powerful ethical document. The reader does not encounter apartheid as an abstract regime, but as a lived emotional reality marked by frustration, humiliation, perseverance, and hope. Magona’s storytelling is also profoundly humanizing. She writes as a daughter remembering her elders, as a mother addressing future generations, and as a community member shaped by shared struggle. In doing so, she preserves voices that official history might overlook. Her narrative affirms continuity across generations, suggesting that memory itself becomes a bridge between past suffering and future possibility. Rather than portraying her life solely as victimhood, she highlights resilience—the small decisions, acts of care, and moments of imagination that sustained dignity. Through this intimate mode of narration, Magona invites readers to understand apartheid not only through statistics or legislation but through feeling. Her autobiography thus becomes collective testimony, reminding us that historical injustice is

carried in human hearts long after laws are written and repealed.

Njabulo Ndebele's essays complicate more sensational portrayals of resistance. In *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, he urges writers to move beyond "spectacular" depictions of violence and instead attend to everyday existence (Ndebele, 1991). His claim that "resistance often takes the form of survival, of refusing to surrender one's humanity in the face of dehumanizing conditions" (p. 67) reframes endurance as political action. Ndebele's strategy is subtle but radical: he redefines heroism. By focusing on routine life—family meals, neighborhood interactions, moments of quiet reflection—he asserts that dignity preserved in daily struggle is itself resistance. This approach challenges both apartheid propaganda and simplistic liberation narratives. It insists that the ordinary citizen, not only the activist, participates in the moral struggle against oppression.

Achmat Dangor, particularly in *Kafka's Curse*, employs metaphor and hybridity to destabilize apartheid's rigid racial classifications. His line, "Identity was never a fixed point but a shifting shadow cast by the laws that named us" (Dangor, 1997, p. 102), captures the instability beneath the regime's obsession with categorization. Dangor's narrative strategy involves fluidity—characters move between cultural identities, linguistic registers, and social positions. Through allegory and symbolic transformation, he reveals how apartheid's legal definitions failed to contain the complexity of human belonging. His resistance is intellectual as well as emotional; it dismantles the logic of racial purity by showing identity as layered and historically contingent.

4. Literature as Counter-Discourse

In the wider landscape of the South African liberation struggle, literature cannot be viewed as a secondary or decorative element of political resistance. It became one of the most intellectually rigorous arenas in which apartheid was questioned, exposed, and ultimately destabilized. The regime attempted to construct itself as natural, orderly, and historically justified through legislation, racial classification systems, and state-controlled narratives. By embedding inequality within bureaucratic language—terms such as "separate development" and "population registration"—apartheid sought to transform ideology into common sense. It is precisely at this level of "common sense" that literature intervened. Postcolonial theorists such as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) describe this process as "writing back," but in the South African context it was more than a rhetorical gesture; it was a reconstitution of reality itself. Writers challenged not only policies but the epistemological structures that made those policies appear legitimate. Through narrative complexity and moral interrogation, authors such as Nadine Gordimer, Alex La Guma, and Mongane Serote dismantled the illusion of separateness that apartheid ideology promoted. While official rhetoric insisted on racial isolation, their works revealed social entanglement—economic dependency between races, emotional interconnection across segregated spaces, and the shared vulnerability of a society fractured by injustice. Sanders (2002) notes that such writing disrupted the state's carefully constructed moral narrative by foregrounding contradiction. In Gordimer's fiction, for instance, the white liberal conscience is often portrayed as troubled and implicated, complicating any simplistic moral hierarchy. La Guma's depictions of working-class communities expose how labor exploitation sustained the very system that claimed to protect "order." Serote's poetry gives voice to anger and aspiration simultaneously, transforming personal grief into collective protest. These writers did not merely report inequality; they revealed the ethical incoherence at the heart of the regime.

What distinguishes this literary counter-discourse is its deep humanization of those whom apartheid reduced to administrative categories. Instead of reproducing political slogans, these narratives restore interiority—fear, doubt, longing, and moral struggle. The state sought to classify individuals through racial codes; literature insisted on subjectivity. Through interior monologue, shifting perspectives, and social realism, characters emerge not as symbols but as

fully realized individuals. This restoration of complexity is itself a political act. It denies the regime's attempt to render non-white populations faceless and interchangeable. In doing so, literature challenges the dehumanizing logic upon which apartheid depended.

As Attwell (2005) argues, narrative during apartheid functioned diagnostically—it exposed the “pathologies of power” that structured everyday existence. The violence of the regime was not only physical; it was psychological and bureaucratic. Literature traced how humiliation entered domestic life, how fear infiltrated conversation, and how displacement fractured identity. By transforming private suffering into shared narrative, these texts cultivated a collective ethical awareness. They created what may be termed a “shadow archive”—a parallel record of emotional and communal truth that resisted official erasure. While state documents attempted to sanitize injustice through administrative language, novels and poems preserved lived experience in all its contradiction and pain.

Moreover, the aesthetic strategies employed by these writers intensified their subversive power. Realism anchored their stories in recognizable social conditions, making denial impossible. Allegory and symbolic layering allowed them to evade censorship while simultaneously critiquing systemic brutality. Clingman (1986) suggests that such literature operates at “the frontiers of the future,” implying that it does more than reflect reality—it anticipates change. Indeed, these texts did not confine themselves to documenting oppression; they imagined alternative moral possibilities. By inviting readers to envision dignity, equality, and reconciliation, literature became a rehearsal space for liberation. It nurtured intellectual endurance and emotional resilience, sustaining hope during prolonged struggle.

Ultimately, the counter-discursive strength of South African literature lay in its refusal to replicate authoritarian logic. It did not seek to replace one rigid narrative with another. Instead, it embraced plurality, ambiguity, and ethical reflection. By reclaiming language from bureaucratic distortion, restoring suppressed histories, and articulating visions of justice, writers forged a cultural groundwork upon which political resistance could stand. The literary sphere thus became inseparable from the liberation movement—not as propaganda, but as moral infrastructure. In the convergence of memory, imagination, and critique, literature helped erode one of the twentieth century's most entrenched systems of domination, proving that the struggle for freedom is fought as much in narrative as in law or protest.

5. Conclusion

This study has sought to understand not only what these writers said about apartheid, but how they said it—and why that manner of saying mattered. Under a regime that attempted to regulate thought, language, and representation, narrative became a form of survival. Writing was not simply an artistic choice; it was a decision to exist publicly in a system designed to silence. By closely engaging with the works of Miriam Tlali, Sindiwe Magona, Njabulo Ndebele, and Achmat Dangor, the research reveals that resistance did not always announce itself loudly. Often, it appeared in the careful reconstruction of memory, in the naming of overlooked emotions, or in the quiet insistence that ordinary lives deserved attention.

These writers refused to allow apartheid to define the limits of identity. Instead of accepting imposed racial categories as fixed truths, they portrayed identity as layered, evolving, and deeply personal. Their characters think, doubt, desire, and question. They inhabit kitchens, classrooms, buses, and offices—spaces where power operates subtly but relentlessly. By situating their narratives within these everyday environments, the authors demonstrated that oppression was not abstract; it shaped daily rhythms, relationships, and self-perception. Yet within those same spaces, they also revealed endurance. Small gestures of care, whispered conversations, and moments of introspection became signs that humanity could not be fully controlled. Importantly, this study highlights that literature under apartheid created a parallel sphere of meaning. While the state projected authority through laws and official discourse, these writers produced counter-meanings through storytelling. They preserved experiences that

were excluded from formal archives and challenged simplified national narratives. In doing so, they enabled readers to see beyond propaganda and to question the moral legitimacy of the system. The act of reading itself became reflective and political, encouraging critical awareness rather than passive acceptance.

Ultimately, the research concludes that narrative was not secondary to political struggle; it was intertwined with it. Through memory, imagination, and ethical reflection, these authors carved out a space where suppressed voices could speak and where alternative futures could be imagined. Even within censorship, they demonstrated that thought cannot be fully legislated and that stories possess a quiet persistence. Literature, therefore, functioned as a sustained act of reclamation—of voice, of dignity, and of historical truth.

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