Mother to Mother

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SINDIWE MAGONA

Sindiwe Magona was born in Umtata, a town in eastern South Africa, and grew up in Guguletu, a township outside of Cape Town. She attended primary school in Guguletu, but finished high school through a correspondence course. She then received a bachelor's degree from the University of South Africa, and in 1981 moved to New York to work on a master's degree in Social Work. In between, she did domestic work and worked as a schoolteacher. After receiving her master's degree, Magona worked for the United Nations, first working in radio and then in the Public Information department until retiring to Cape Town, her home, in 2003. Magona wrote throughout her life, spending her earlier years writing autobiographical prose, short stories, and novels, and beginning to explore children's literature in her retirement.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Portuguese traders first began to explore the coastline of South Africa in the 1400s, but Europeans didn't begin to colonize the area until 1600s, when the Dutch East India Company created permanent settlements at what is now Cape Town. The settlements were a port to help passing ships on their way to Asia, but colonization expanded as greater infrastructure was required to serve said ships. Over time, the colony expanded along the coast and inland, with white colonists killing and enslaving (or forcing into indentured servitude) black Africans as they encountered them. Eventually British settlers also arrived, initially only interested in the Cape as a strategic port, but eventually going to war against Boers (or Dutch South Africans), officially taking control of South Africa in 1909. As long as white Europeans had been in South Africa, black Africans were forced to endure racism and discrimination. This was formally written into law in the mid 1880s, and further formalized in 1948—the beginning of the fifty year apartheid which denied civil and human rights to all black South Africans.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Mother to Mother is a novel set during the apartheid in South Africa. Other similar works, which also explore the apartheid through a semi-fictional lens include many of J.M. Coetzee's novels, such as *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Age of Iron*; Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*; Es'kia Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*; and Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan*. As for nonfiction, comedian Trevor Noah's memoir, *Born a Crime*, also centers around apartheid in South Africa, and, like *Mother to Mother*, deals with the tumultuousness of family life. Nelson Mandela's classic prison autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, also focuses on apartheid.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Mother To Mother*
- **When Written:** Mid 1990s
- **Where Written:** Unknown
- **When Published:** 1998
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realistic Fiction
- **Setting:** South Africa
- **Climax:** Mxolisi stabs The Girl.
- **Antagonist:** The Colonial Government
- **Point of View:** First person, Mandisa, addressing second person "You" of The Mother

EXTRA CREDIT

Multitalented. Magona has had several acting roles, including in an adaptation of the first novel published in Xhosa, *Ityala*, and as a voice actor in the animated film *Khumba*.

Ripped from the headlines. *Mother to Mother* is based on a real life murder—Amy Elizabeth Biehl, an American Fulbright scholar studying in South Africa was murdered by a group of young black men. Magona took this tragedy and fictionalized it, imagining a single boy was responsible for the murder, and investigating his life and his history.

PLOT SUMMARY

Mother to Mother weaves back and forth in time, covering the narrator, Mandisa's life from her early childhood, through the birth of her children, through her son, Mxolisi's murder of the Girl, a white American driving through their township of Guguletu. This is interspersed with The Girl, Mandisa, and Mxolisi's experiences on the day of the murder, and the morning after.

The novel also includes interludes in which Mandisa addresses the Mother of the Girl, asking rhetorical questions about the Girl's life and upbringing, expressing her grief for the Girl's death, and attempting to explain—but not justify—Mxolisi's actions.

Chronologically, the novel begins with Mandisa's childhood.

She and her brother, Khaya, were raised in Blouvlei, but were forced to relocate to Guguletu by the South African government. This derailed the educations of many students, although Mandisa and Khaya were able to remain in school for a while, at least until Khaya impregnated his girlfriend, Nono, and Mandisa became accidentally pregnant through non-penetrative sex with her boyfriend, China.

Mama, Mandisa's mother, is furious with her daughter, feeling that her pregnancy will embarrass the whole family, but eventually comes to love Mandisa and her newborn son. Mandisa's parents force her to marry China, who is no longer interested in her romantically, and the two lived together unhappily for two years, until one day China runs away and disappears forever. Mandisa then moves into a hokkie of her own and does her best to raise Mxolisi, eventually having another child, Lunga, with a man named Lungile, and finally marrying a man, Dwadwa, with whom she has her youngest child and only daughter, Siziwe.

Mandisa recounts Mxolisi's childhood. A talkative precocious boy, he stops talking for several years after witnessing the death of two older boys, Zazi and Mzamo. He regains his speech, but during his silence Mandisa realizes the resentment she feels for him, for interrupting her life with an unplanned pregnancy, and dramatically changing the course of her future.

As Mxolisi gets older he becomes involved in youth political movements, like the Young Lions. Increasingly radicalized and violent, this group burns cars, buildings, and even kills black South Africans around their township.

On the day of the tragedy, the Girl is driving some of her black South African friends home from their university, when Mxolisi and others spot her in her car. A group of men converge, chasing her from the car, but Mxolisi is the man to stab and kill her. Mandisa discovers this later, spending the first night after the murder anxiously wondering if her son, who has not returned home, was somehow involved. A late night police raid of Mandisa's house furthers her suspicions.

In the morning, Reverend Mananga stops by and gives Mandisa vague instructions for how to see her son. She follows them and is briefly reunited with Mxolisi, whom she comforts and who comforts her, before he (presumably though not explicitly) turns himself in to the police.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mandisa – The novel's narrator, Mandisa is also referred to as Molokazana and Nohenhake by her husband China's family. Mandisa is the early middle-aged mother of three: Mxolisi, Lunga, and Siziwe. Born in Blouvlei to Mama and Tata, she has one brother Khaya. Mandisa was a respectful, hardworking child and talented student, whose life was first disrupted by her family's forced relocation to Guguletu, and then by her surprise pregnancy. Mandisa and her then-boyfriend, China, had purposefully avoided having penetrative sex, but they conceived anyway, and Mandisa has her first son, Mxolisi. Out of duty, Mandisa marries China, and the two are unhappily married for two years. However, one day China leaves for work and never comes back, leaving Mandisa to fend for herself. As she pieces her life back together and starts anew, Mandisa comes to resent Mxolisi for disrupting her life. Mandisa then conceives a second child with a man named Lungile, who, like China, also leaves her. She eventually marries a man named Dwadwa, with whom she has her youngest child and only daughter, Siziwe. Out of all of Mandisa's children, Mxolisi becomes the biggest troublemaker and the most politically charged. When he gets into hot water for stabbing and murdering The Girl—a white college girl who had ventured into Guguletu, earning her the attention of an angry mob, of which Mxolisi was a part—Mandisa feels great guilt regarding Mxolisi's life and crimes. She feels responsible for him, and is made to feel responsible for his murder of The Girl by people in her community. The book, which she narrates, is a way for her to come to terms with her son's actions, and to apologize to The Mother of the Girl for her hand in Mxolisi's upbringing, while also explaining the factors beyond their control that lead to the tragedy at the novel's center.

Mxolisi – Mandisa's oldest son, and her only son with China. He is originally named Hlumelo, but China's family renames him, claiming their right to do so, as grandparents traditionally name the baby. Mxolisi is twenty, but still in the equivalent of middle or early high school, both because of his own truancy and because of the abysmal school system. Mandisa and Mxolisi have a troubled relationship; she blames him for his own conception (he was unplanned), and, because she had never had penetrative sex before giving birth, she blames Mxolisi for essentially taking her virginity. Mandisa, however, tries to compensate for resenting her son by paying more attention to him, at the expense of her other children, Siziwe and Lunga, who accuse her of favoring their brother. Mxolisi began his life as a sweet child, but when he witnessed the police murder his friends, Zazi and Mzamo, he stopped speaking for several years. He eventually regained his speech, and Mandisa sent him to school, where beatings from teachers discouraged him from continuing to pursue his education. He dropped out without Mandisa's knowledge to work and help her support the family, but she convinced him to return. Eventually he became politically active, and joined the Young Lions, spending his days patrolling the neighborhood, sometimes fighting for his education, but often harassing members of his own community. Mxolisi becomes caught up in a mob that forms around the car of a white university girl when she drives in Guguletu—a place that is extremely unsafe for white people—and when the violence escalates, he stabs and kills The Girl. Mxolisi clearly feels guilt and regret for what he's done, which he confesses to

Mandisa in their final conversation in the novel. Although not depicted, he likely turns himself in, and spends time (if not the rest of his life) in jail.

Mama – Mama, whose name is Kukwana, is married to Tata, and has two children, Mandisa and Khaya. Mama is a strict parent, calling in her children while other parents allowed their sons and daughters to continue to play, expecting them to do many chores around the house, and demanding academic excellence. Mandisa, however, has a relatively good relationship with Mama until she hits puberty, at which point Mama becomes obsessed with Mandisa's virginity, forcing her to undergo vaginal examinations to ensure she hasn't had sex. Though she balks at the invasive examinations, Mandisa takes Mama's warnings to heart and refuses to have penetrative sex with her boyfriend, China. Over time, though, Mandisa begins to refuse the examinations, and Mama banishes Mandisa to live with her grandmother (Mama's own mother), Makhulu, in Gungululu. Mama, a member of a local church, is concerned with her own social standing and the stigma Mandisa's pregnancy could bring upon the family. She cares about her own social capital more than her daughter's wellbeing, and so when Mandisa does finally become pregnant—despite not having penetrative sex—Mama is ashamed and embarrassed, and unable to bring herself to help her daughter. Once Mxolisi is born, however, Mama warms to him and begins to forgive Mandisa for having sex and getting pregnant out of wedlock, accepting her back into her life.

China – Mandisa's first boyfriend, and the father of Mxolisi. In his youth, China was a respectful teenage boy, a good student with a bright future, and never pressured Mandisa for sex, carefully listening to and acknowledging her boundaries. When Mandisa moves away to live with Makhulu in Gungululu, China writes her frequently, and presumably stays faithful. However, when he discovers Mandisa is pregnant, his entire demeanor changes. He scathingly accuses Mandisa of cheating on him—after all, the pair have never had penetrative sex—and believes that she's trying to trick him into taking responsibility as the father of the child. Although he and his family are eventually convinced to acknowledge Mxolisi as part of their bloodline, and China and Mandisa marry out of duty, China never forgives Mandisa or their son for ruining his future. He is forced to drop out of school to work and support the family, and, after two years of unhappy marriage, runs away, never to be heard from again. Mandisa feels similarly, and throughout her life she resents Mxolisi for getting in the way of her own plans for her life.

The Girl – The white girl whom Mxolisi stabs and murders when she drives into Guguletu—a place that is extremely dangerous for white people like herself. Mandisa believes that The Girl was driving through the town in order to drop of her black friends from college, who had warned her about the risks of going to Guguletu, which she had promptly brushed off. As soon as the Guguletu residents spot a white person in their town, though, they begin to chant, "One settler, one bullet," and a mob forms around The Girl's car, rocking it menacingly. The crowd swiftly turns violent, as they chant that Boers (white people in South Africa) are dogs—"AmaBhulu, azizinja!" When Mxolisi fatally stabs her, he is treated like a "king." Although a fictional character, The Girl based on Amy Elizabeth Biehl, an American Fulbright Scholar studying in South Africa, who was murdered by a group of young black South Africans. The story is occasionally told from The Girl's point of view in the third person, but these passages are always Mandisa mournfully imagining what The Girl's final moments were like. The Girl's internal life is not known, instead it is constructed by Mandisa. Mandisa creates a book-smart, kindhearted, dedicated friend, who nonetheless doesn't fully understand the racial dynamics of South Africa.

Makhulu – Mandisa's maternal grandmother and Mama's mother, who lives in Gungululu. When Mandisa stops submitting willingly to Mama's invasive "virginity checks," Mama banishes her to live with Makhulu, despite the fact that Mandisa has never even met the woman. Luckily, Makhulu is a kind caretaker, keeping Mandisa "sane" and "bodily alive," making sure to cook food she knows Mandisa likes, and making sure she feels love even if Mama abandoned her. Much less judgmental than Mama, when Makhulu discovers that Mandisa is pregnant, she accepts the truth: that this was an accident and Mandisa should not be blamed. Instead, Mandisa should be comforted, supported, and accepted by her family.

Lunga – Mandisa's second son, and her only son with Lungile, who eventually leaves her just like China did not long after she gave birth to Mxolisi. Lunga is small for his age, especially compared to his brother. Unlike Mxolisi he is not (yet) involved in student protests, and more regularly attends school. Both Lunga and his sister, Siziwe, accuse Mandisa of preferring their older brother, Mxolisi, to them. In actuality, Mandisa deeply resents Mxolisi for changing the course of her life, but she does shower him with extra attention to make up for her resentment.

Siziwe – Mandisa's youngest child and only daughter, and Dwadwa's only biological child. Both Lunga and Siziwe accuse Mandisa of preferring their older brother, Mxolisi, to them. This is partly true, as Mandisa objectively does give Mxolisi more attention than her other two children. However, this is because Mandisa deeply resents Mxolisi for ruining her life and blames him for his own surprise conception (Mandisa and her then-boyfriend China never had penetrative sex, but got pregnant anyway). Mandisa gives her eldest son more attention to make up for holding such a fierce grudge against him.

Khaya – Mandisa's brother, and Mama and Tata's son. Like Mandisa, Khaya is a smart, well-behaved child. He and Nono, Mandisa's close friend, begin dating when they are all teenagers, and Khaya eventually impregnates her. Unlike

Mandisa, who Mama feels has brought shame to the family, Mama does not see Khaya as responsible for his girlfriend's pregnancy, illuminating a double standard in her treatment of her children based on gender.

Dwadwa – Mandisa's husband, and the father of her youngest child and only daughter, Siziwe. Dwadwa is a good man, who treats Mandisa's first two children, Mxolisi and Lunga, as his own (their fathers are China and Lungile, respectively). Still, Mandisa remains the primary parent of her three children, and is more involved in the internal and external lives of all of her children than Dwadwa is with his biological daughter and adopted sons.

Tata – Mandisa and Khaya's father and Mama's husband. Tata is a more hands-off parent than Mama, going to work during the day to support his family and interacting with his children mostly in the evenings. When Mandisa first becomes pregnant—despite not having penetrative sex with China—Tata refuses to even acknowledge her, but eventually comes to understand her surprise pregnancy is not her fault, and accepts both her and her new son, Mxolisi, back into the family.

Nono – Mandisa's childhood friend, and Khaya's girlfriend and eventual wife. Mandisa and Nono grow apart when Mandisa discovers that Nono has been secretly dating her brother, but the two reconcile over time. Nono becomes pregnant a few months before Mandisa discovers her own pregnancy, which causes Mama to become even more vigilant about monitoring Mandisa's virginity.

Auntie Funiwe – Mama's sister, Makhulu's daughter, and Mandisa's aunt. Auntie Funiwe comes to visit Mandisa in Gungululu and is the first to realize her niece is pregnant—Mandisa herself doesn't even realize it yet. Like Makhulu, Auntie Funiwe is empathetic and supportive of Mandisa, and urges Mama to treat her daughter with kindness and support.

China's Father – A man who cares more about his son, China, and grandson, Mxolisi, than he does about Mandisa, his daughter in law. China's father blames Mandisa for many of his and China's misfortunes, from her pregnancy to China's eventual disappearance after only two years of marriage. He and the rest of his family treat Mandisa as a servant.

Tooksie's Mother – China's aunt and his cousin Tooksie's mother. She is the owner of the house where Mandisa moves in with China and his family after their marriage. Tooksie's mother, like many of the other women in the household actively disrespects Mandisa, and it is Tooksie's mother that gives her a new name, "Nohehake," an insult, which is a "an exclamation of utter surprise" at an "unimaginable monstrosity."

Zazi and Mzamo – Two teenage boys who lived nearby Mandisa and Mxolisi when Mxolisi was a baby. One day some police officers became upset with them, and chased the boys into their home. Zazi and Mzamo hid in a wardrobe, and the police officers searched the house and prepared to leave. However, as they were almost out the door, Mxolisi, who was still a toddler, innocently pointed out Zazi and Mzamo's hiding spot. The police shot and killed the two boys on the spot. In response to witnessing their brutal death, Mxolisi stopped speaking for several years, presumably guilty and traumatized.

Lungile – The father of Mandisa's second son, Lunga. Lungile is Mandisa's lover for a period of years. Mandisa describes him as unattractive but talkative and attentive. He is sweet to her eldest son, Mxolisi, often spending one-on-one time with him. Lungile and Mandisa never officially marry, although they spend years together and have a child. Eventually, Lungile leaves to become a freedom fighter.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Mother – The Mother of The Girl, whom Mxolisi murders. The entire novel is an address from Mandisa to The Mother, who never speaks for herself, and, although constantly present, is not a true character, instead a device through which Mandisa can examine her own life and mistakes.

Reverend Mananga – A reverend in Guguletu. Mananga helps Mxolisi evade the police in the first 24 hours after the murder of The Girl, and helps Mandisa find and reconnect with her son at a safe house.

Tatomkhulu – Mandisa's grandfather. He teaches her about South African history, giving her a more balanced take than the more colonialist, whitewashed history she has learned in school, specifically **the story of Nongqawuse**.

Skonana – One of Mandisa and Dwadwa's neighbors in Guguletu.

Tat'uSikhwebu – A local man in Blouvlei, the first to bring up rumors that the government will be relocating the township to Guguletu.

Father Savage – A white priest in Guguletu who pressures China and his family into accepting Mandisa as China's wife and Mxolisi as his son.

Ribba – A girl a few years older than Mandisa, who died during a botched abortion as a teenager.

Mrs. Nelson – Mandisa's white employer or "Mlungu woman."

Tooksie – China's cousin.

Qwati – One of Mandisa and Dwadwa's neighbors in Guguletu.

Stella – An old school friend of Mandisa's.

TERMS

Hokkie – A shack or small shelter.

Mlungu – The Xhosa word for a white person. Often **Mandisa** refers to her "Mlungu Woman," meaning her white employer.

Guguletu – A township outside of Cape Town where most of the events of the novel take place. **Mandisa** and her family are forcibly relocated to Guguletu after they are made to leave Blouvlei.

Blouvlei – **Mandisa**'s hometown, a town located several miles inland from Cape Town.

Gungululu – A township where **Mandisa**'s grandmother, **Makhulu**, lives.

Vetkoek – Fried bread. The name literally translates to "fat cake."

Iimpimpi – Informers or traitors, specifically those called out by politically active youths.

Necklacing – A type of murder, often carried out by youths, in which a tire is put around the neck of a victim and lit on fire.

Boers – White South Africans of Dutch decent. Sometimes used by **Mandisa** and others as a synonym for all white people in South Africa.

Apartheid – A social and political system of institutional racism adopted by the South African government. It divided black South Africans from white ones, forcing black South Africans to live in worse conditions and depriving them access to education or the potential for economic advancement.

COSAS – Congress of South African Students.

Operation Barcelona – A campaign of schoolchildren, organized by COSAS, ostensibly to support teachers striking for better schools and working conditions. In reality, many students became violent, burning cars and harassing adults.

Ukuhota – A period after a woman becomes married during which she acts as a servant to her in-laws. Often this period lasts from marriage to the birth of a couple's first child, a year or so later.

Sangoma – A healer or medicine woman.

Xhosa / UmXhosa – An indigenous South African language and people group.

Young Lion – A South African youth movement, a group of students initially glorified by the black South African public as advocating for better education and calling out the white government, but which became increasingly violent even towards other black South Africans.

Dowry – Money or goods given to a bride's family from her husband's family (or the other way around) around their wedding.

"One settler, one bullet!" – A rallying cry and chant passed down through generations of black South Africans. The phrase is a call to kill the white settlers, now the white ruling class.

"AmaBhulu, azizinja!" – A rallying cry and chant passed down through generations of black South Africans. It translates to "whites are dogs" or "boers are dogs." Like "one settler, one bullet!" it represents the rage of black South Africans at the discrimination and racism they've faced at the hands of white settlers.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM AND APARTHEID

Every part of the lives of the black South Africans at the center of the novel are influenced and informed by the legacy of white European colonialism and apartheid. Although decades of oppression and forced relocation affects every aspect of the black South Africans' lives, the murder at the center of the novel is specifically a result of racist policies and reflects the specific tensions and resentments of the murderer Mxolisi's generation. Mandisa, the narrator and Mxolisi's mother, argues that the conflict at the core of the book, a white woman's murder at Mxolisi's hands, is the logical conclusion of decades of tension and oppression, which lead both to simmering violent resentment on the part of young black South Africans as well as doomed white Western attempts at intervention and de-escalation. Although the murder comes less than a year before the official end of apartheid, the novel suggests that the legacy of three hundred years of colonial oppression remains inescapable and continues to shape every aspect of South African's future.

Though a fictionalized account, *Mother to Mother* is based on a real crime: the murder of Fulbright scholar Amy Biehl in Guguletu, South Africa, in August 1993. By providing a detailed history of the real-life political climate that its fictional characters face, the novel argues that Mxolisi's violence is the logical outcome of centuries of racist oppression. Mandisa, in her letters to the Mother of the murdered Girl, explains, "Your daughter. The imperfect atonement of her race. My son. The perfect host of the demons of his." Mandisa believes that her son was driven by the hatred instilled in black South Africans because of centuries of mistreatment by white South Africans and colonizers. Mandisa also argues that Mxolisi, having seen the bleak future in store for him—a future seemingly guaranteed by the disenfranchisement of black South Africans under apartheid—turned to anger and protests. She explains that Mxolisi "was only an agent, executing the long-simmering dark desires of his race. Burning hatred for the oppressor possessed his being. [...] The resentment of three hundred years plugged his ears; deaf to her pitiful entreaties. My son,

the blind but sharpened arrow of the wrath of his race. Your daughter, the sacrifice of hers. Blindly chosen. Flung towards her sad fate by fortune's cruelest slings." Both Mxolisi and the Girl, then, tragically become puppets of a larger, centuries-long conflict.

Magona goes on to detail how the more specific political climate of much of Mxolisi's life lead to his radicalization. Black South Africans have become increasingly upset with the white government that quarantines them in segregated slums and then fails to provide them with adequate education or opportunity. Mandisa reports essentially non-stop, increasingly violent protests since the 1976 Soweto Youth Uprising, which have created growing animosity towards all white people. These protests are the result of centuries of colonial oppression as well as apartheid, which began in 1948 and created sometimes-unlivable conditions for black South Africans. Mandisa feels Mxolisi's radicalization was thus not entirely his fault, describing how, with respect to violence, "We had been cheering him on since the day he was born. Before he was born. Long before." Mandisa further describes how the youth were radicalized: "The Young Lions. From near and far, admiration fell on their already swollen heads [...] Our children fast descended into barbarism." Again, this wasn't fully the fault of the children, who were deprived of adequate schooling and whose parents were largely absent, forced to work long hours for low wages. Mandisa does accept responsibility for praising the early stages of her own community's violence, which seemed a fair and logical response to the violence of apartheid. Mandisa explains how the younger generation "went and burnt down their schools" before they "graduated from that and from burning buildings. Unoccupied buildings. Public buildings. Now, they started stoning black people's cars. And burning black people's houses." So intense was their rage that it spilled over onto their own people. This points to the immense strain South Africa's colonialist and racist history placed on black communities, whose understandable anger quickly grew out of control.

Mandisa also details how her own life has been heavily affected by apartheid and colonialist oppression, thus underscoring the deep roots of racism and how a lack of opportunity and resentment accumulated over generations. Born in the late 1950s, Mandisa grew up under intense government-sanctioned racial segregation. Racism robbed her of experiences that could have afforded her a better life, and, in turn, increased her resentment of her white oppressors. Whereas white communities were free to accumulate wealth and power that then led to a better start for their children, black communities didn't have the chance to build that foundation necessary to create a better life for future generations. Instead, they were stuck in a cycle of oppression and poverty, and this understandably led to resentment being passed down from generation to generation. In explaining how she was forcibly relocated to Guguletu, Mandisa calls the city an "accursed, God-forsaken place" occupied by "a violent scattering of black people, a dispersal of the government's making," so impactful that "more than three decades later, my people are still reeling from it." Mandisa's circumstances also mean she is unable to closely watch her children because she must work six days a week. This is the direct result, again, of limited opportunities for black Africans, uneven wealth distribution, and cyclical poverty that makes it impossible to earn enough money to enter the middle class. All of this contributes to Mandisa's absence as a mother, which prevented her from having greater oversight of her children.

The world of *Mother to Mother*, and by extension, the world of all black South Africans in apartheid-era South Africa, is deeply affected by centuries of racist policies. White settlers—who became governors and eventually politicians, police, and military enforcers—regulate most aspects of black South African's lives, leaving them with little freedom and little opportunity, keeping them from education, quality housing, and opportunities for escape and advancement. The murder at the center of the novel is the result of centuries of simmering rage, in which Mxolisi, a kind of sacrifice of his generation, takes out the pain of the oppressed black South Africans on a white woman, who comes to represent all of white colonialism in the region.

FAMILY, TRADITION, AND OBLIGATION

The members of the black South African families at the center of *Mother to Mother* rely on each other and their larger community for support and structure. In a country where many social support systems and government help have failed, black South Africans are left only with the strong, tight-knit communities and family units that have carried them through since before colonization. These groups, tied by proximity, blood, and tradition, offer a sense of comfort and safety in a hard world. However, as Mandisa discovers most poignantly when she joins her new husband's family, they also create distinct expectations and demands that can be incredibly burdensome. The novel ultimately argues that family and community, and the obligations that come with them, are both a blessing and a curse—at once a support system and a prison.

Mandisa's life is a testament to the way that family units can be a source of productive discipline and firm guidance, as well as encouragement and support. As an adult, Mandisa loves and does all she can for her children. At the same time, she believes that as a mother it is her duty to give them rules to follow and keep them in line. She notes, "As I step out of the door minutes later, I hastily throw out a couple of reminders: what they're supposed to do for me that day around the house, what food they're not to touch. [...] Not that I think this makes any difference to what will actually happen. But, as a mother, I'm

supposed to have authority over my children, over the running of my house." To her, love and respect and authority are all tightly connected, and as a parent she is a figure who alternately offers comfort and discipline when necessary. Mandisa's own parents raised her this way: she recalls how her strict mother would bring her and her brother to church while other children had Sunday mornings free, and would rarely let the kids out to play, instead saddling them with errands and chores. Mandisa implies that even though her younger self felt stifled at times, living in accordance with such rigid rules gave her a structure and set of boundaries that she needed as a child. As she got older, Mandisa was motivated to continue with school because of her mother's pressure, and now similarly encourages her children to attend classes. Though Mandisa's childhood was far from perfect, she benefited from the firm structure and moral guidance that her mother provided her with, and went on to model that combination of support and constructive discipline for her own children.

At the same time, the novel highlights how family relationships can require obligations that are too demanding, and how adherence to wider community traditions and expectations can actually burden or isolate individuals and push them away from their families and communities. For instance, when Mandisa becomes pregnant despite having carefully avoided penetrative sex, her mother and father (Mama and Tata) practically disown her and force her to marry China, the child's father, although she is no longer interested in him (and vice versa). Mandisa then suffers in her in-laws' home, as she is treated like a servant as she acclimates to the new household (a common cultural practice called ukuhota) and openly despised by her new husband; however, she feels she has no other choice but to press on and do what her new family and community expects of her. This leads to her own suffering, but also the suffering of China, who eventually leaves her, feeling stifled by his unwanted role as a father and husband. Mandisa's suffering and China's desperate flight reveal how familial and traditional expectations can pull people apart instead of draw them together.

The novel also examines how family can be burdensome in the context of parents and children, noting that parents often logically feel responsible for their children. Although she is not directly responsible for the murder Mxolisi commits, Mandisa nonetheless feels she failed as a mother—a view the wider community also holds—and carries his sin with her. She says, *"God, you know my heart. I am not saying my child shouldn't be punished for his sin. But I am a mother, with a mother's heart. The cup You have given me is too bitter to swallow. The shame. The hurt of the other mother."* Mandisa prays for God to forgive her son, taking responsibility for his spiritual redemption, partially because she feels shame and hurt on his behalf, as well as an obligation to ease his own suffering. Although not directly tied to her son's crime, Mandisa, as his mother, feels bound up in her son's actions and choices.

Finally, because so many expect others to honor family and community commitments, when those fall through, people are left even more destitute than before. When family is all a person has, the lack of support becomes even more noticeable. When Mandisa becomes pregnant, her mother is so disappointed in her she sends her away to live with her grandmother Makhulu. When Mandisa eventually returns, her father refuses to recognize her as his daughter, and his soon-to-be grandchild as a relative. This is incredibly hurtful to Mandisa, who, in a time of great uncertainty, needs the love of family more than anything. Furthermore, while Mandisa's family doesn't accept her, they expect China and his family to unflinchingly accept Mandisa as the mother of their child, and to take care of her. When China eventually runs away after only a couple years of marriage, Mandisa is left with no true support system and no clear future. Despite this abandonment, Mandisa ultimately goes on to create a family with her son, who brings her joy but is also her greatest sorrow. This supports the broader argument that family is an important source of comfort but also has the potential to cause great pain and suffering.

LANGUAGE, STORYTELLING, AND HISTORY

Through songs, letters, chants, legends, and prayers, as well as uses of African languages like Xhosa, the characters in *Mother to Mother* are able to express more than they could through straight prose or monologues. In each of these instances, language serves a deeper purpose as it brings people together and reminds them of their shared experiences. For instance, Mandisa's grandfather, Tatomkhulu, tells her the story of a prophetess named **Nongqawuse**, who told her people that if they killed their cattle and burned their fields, a purificatory storm would come and sweep away all of the white settlers who were stealing their land. The people promptly destroyed their fields and cattle, but the storm never came. Through this story, Mandisa's grandfather roots their current struggles in a larger, centuries-long one, and also reminds Mandisa that she is part of a wider community that extends back for generations. The novel ultimately presents language—in all its different forms—as a means for connecting people and evoking a common past.

The "letters" from Mandisa to the Mother of the murdered Girl, which are denoted by italics, reveal how language can connect people around a shared experience, even across cultural or social barriers. In fact, the whole novel is an address from one mother to another, a format that allows Mandisa, the first mother, an opportunity to reveal her own guilt and remorse around her son Mxolisi's crime, and allows the reader an opportunity to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the Mother of the murdered Girl, otherwise unrepresented in the novel. By

framing her monologue as a conversation or an address, Mandisa is able to consider the tragedy from both sides, ultimately realizing that both women are likely dealing with similar feelings of grief, pain, and loss. Mandisa writes to the other mother, "*you whose heart is torn, know this: I have not slept since. Food turns to sawdust in my mouth. All joy has fled my house and my heart bleeds, it sorrows for you, for the pain into which you have been plunged. It is heavy and knows no rest.*" Through written language, the letter to the Mother, Mandisa is able to express the idea that both women—despite their different nationalities, races, and lives—are bound by the shared experience of grief and sorrow.

The novel is also filled with songs and chants, which are often politically charged and passed down from generation to generation. By using them, the novel's characters are able to draw upon the experiences of their ancestors and assert their common history as targets of oppression. Mxolisi and other young adults have taken many chants from their parent's generation and turned them into their own. One of those chants is "AmaBhulu, azizinja!" which means "boers, they are dogs!" or "whites are dogs!" Mandisa explains that children learned this battle cry from their parents: "our children grew up in our homes, where we called white people dogs as a matter of idiom […] heart-felt idiom, I can tell you. Based on bitter experience." What was once an opportunity to vent about private frustrations became a cry for a greater frustration of black South Africans. Another chant, "One settler, one bullet!" similarly refers to the violent rejection of white South Africans, who originally came to South Africa as settlers. This is the chant the crowd yells as Mxolisi murders the white woman, an act that is brought about not just by coincidence—this woman ending up in Guguletu during a turbulent political time—but by decades of black resentment.

Mandisa's grandfather tells her stories of black South African history, which end up teaching her lessons and showing her patterns in her life and the lives of other black South Africans. The story of Nongqawuse especially allows Mandisa to contextualize the events of her and Mxolisi's lifetimes. Tatomkhulu corrects stories she's been taught in school, giving her the true history of Nongqawuse, a Xhosa prophetess. Nongqawuse told her community that if they burned their fields and killed their cattle, the white settlers would leave. Tatomkhulu explains that "[d]eep run the roots of hatred here / So deep, a cattle-worshipping nation killed all its precious herds […] burned fertile fields, fully sowed, bearing rich promise too," justifying that "[n]o sacrifice too great, to wash away the curse." He ties it to the present, explaining "that deep, deep, deep, ran the hatred then. In the nearly two centuries since, the hatred has but multiplied," into the intense racial tensions of apartheid South Africa. As an adult, Mandisa compares Mxolisi's murder of the white woman to the Xhosa slaughter of its cattle. Like his ancestors, Mxolisi was acting out "the unconscious collective wish of the nation: rid ourselves of the scourge." The woman's death, therefore, using Mandisa's words, was "the eruption of a slow, simmering, seething rage. Bitterness burst and spilled her tender blood on the green autumn grass of a far-away land. Irredeemable blood. Irretrievable loss." Mandisa recognizes that, like the slaughter of cattle over a century before, Mxolisi's murder will be similarly ineffective in stopping violence, and will only create more pain.

Though the story of Nongqawuse doesn't justify or excuse Mxolisi's murder of the Girl, it does allow Mandisa to better understand how such a tragedy happened so close to home, tying together the past and the present. By drawing on the story her grandfather told her, Mandisa is able to see her present circumstances against the bloodstained backdrop of centuries-long persecution that her people have endured. Thus, legends such as this one, as well as chants, songs, and the invented "you" of the Mother of the Girl all work together to connect the novel's characters to one another and to shared experiences or common histories.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE STORY OF NONGQAWUSE

Mandisa's grandfather, Tatomkhulu, tells her the story of Nongqawuse, a Xhosa prophetess. The story symbolizes how far the Xhosa people are willing to go in order to reclaim their land from colonizers, as well as how oppressive colonialism is. Historically, in 1856 Nongqawuse told her community that if they killed their cattle and burned their fields and waited three days, then the cattle and fields would regenerate, and a storm would come and wash away the Boers occupying their land. Tatomkhulu explains to Mandisa that to the Xhosa people then, as well as to the black South Africans in the novel's present, "No sacrifice [would be] too great, to wash away the curse" of colonization. The same resentment that caused people to believe Nongqawuse's prophecy, sacrificing their own land and cattle in hopes of freeing themselves from colonizers, is the same resentment that created phrases like "One settler, one bullet!" and "AmaBhulu Aziainja!" The contemporary South Africans will resort to violence, and create a storm of their own making (through rioting, violence, and the destruction of property), in order to free themselves. In the novel's final pages Mandisa makes a direct comparison between Nongqawuse's promised storm and Mxolisi's murder of the Girl. She writes, "Nongqawuse saw it in that long, long-ago dream: A great raging whirling would come," and sees Mxolisi and the Girl as caught up in a microcosm of that storm—enacting "the deep,

dark private yearnings of a subjugated race," consummating in an "inevitable senseless catastrophe," like Nongqawuse's promised cleansing hurricane.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Beacon Press edition of *Mother to Mother* published in 1998.

Chapter 1 Quotes

My son killed your daughter. People look at me as though I did it. The generous ones as though I made him do it, as though I could make this child do anything. Starting from when he was less than six years old, even before he lost his first tooth or went to school. Starting, if truth be known, from before he was conceived; when he, with total lack of consideration if not downright malice, seeded himself inside my womb. But now, people look at me as if I'm the one who woke up one shushu day and said, Boyboy, run out and see whether, somewhere out there, you can find a white girl with nothing better to do than run around Guguletu, where she does not belong.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Mxolisi, The Mother, The Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The novel opens with an address from Mandisa to The Mother of the murdered Girl—in other words, the novel opens with a lament from one mother to another, hence the novel's title, *Mother to Mother*. Mxolisi, Mandisa's son, was in a mob of young South African men who attacked The Girl, but it's implied that he alone stabbed and killed her. Although Mandisa was not present, and did not physically hold the knife that ended The Girl's life, she feels, and is held by her community, responsible for the murder. Mandisa feels she has become a murderer herself. As Mxolisi's mother, she is held accountable for his actions, the assumption being that she, as his parent, has formed and influenced him. However, Mandisa pushes back—she argues that from the moment of Mxolisi's conception, which happened accidentally, through non-penetrative sex, he has exerted his will over hers. As opposed to being the strong, guiding force that she is expected to be in his life, Mandisa often feels as if she is being pulled along after her son, unable to shape or control him.

White people live in their own areas and mind their own business — period. We live here, fight and kill each other. That is our business. You don't see big words on every page of the newspapers because one of us kills somebody, here in the townships. But with this case of Boyboy's even the white woman I work for showed me. The story was all over the place. Pictures too.

[...]

Why is it that the government now pays for his food, his clothes, the roof over his head? Where was the government the day my son stole my neighbour's hen; wrung its neck and cooked it — feathers and all, because there was no food in the house and I was away, minding the children of the white family I worked for? [...] Why now, when he's an outcast, does my son have a better roof over his head than ever before in his life? Living a better life, if chained? I do not understand why it is that the government is giving him so much now when it has given him nothing at all, all his life.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), The Mother, The Girl, Mxolisi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mandisa notes the double standard in how murders and crimes are reported. In the black neighborhood of Guguletu, deaths are not reported on and the police pass by uninterested. However, when a white woman dies, especially when she is killed in a black area, law enforcement and the wider world become instantly interested. During the novel's events, South Africa in the midst of the apartheid, a state-sponsored segregation of black and white citizens, which actively makes black citizens second class, forced to live in neighborhoods with worse facilities, infrastructures, schools, and law enforcement. Put more broadly, they live in a world with far less care and compassion from the government than other citizens enjoy.

Mandisa argues that now, as a prisoner in care of the state, Mxolisi has all the amenities he never had as a child. This, again, is related to the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, which stripped black communities of many comforts and even many necessities. Although not being rewarded for his crime, the poverty of his upbringing makes Mxolisi's incarceration—complete with food and shelter—seem almost like a prize.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ As I step out of the door minutes later, I hastily throw out a couple of reminders: what they're supposed to do for me that day around the house, what food they're not to touch. "And remember, I want you all in when I come back!" Not that I think this makes any difference to what will actually happen. But, as a mother, I'm supposed to have authority over my children, over the running of my house. Never mind that I'm never there. Monday to Saturday, I go to work in the kitchen of my *mlungu* woman, Mrs Nelson; leaving the house before the children go to school and coming back long after the sun has gone to sleep. I am not home when they come back from school. Things were much better in the days when I only had Mxolisi. […] To remind them of my rules therefore, each morning I give these elaborate, empty instructions regarding their behaviour while I am away. A mere formality, a charade, something nobody ever heeds. The children do pretty much as they please. And get away with it too. Who can always remember what was forbidden and what was permitted? By the time I get back in the evening, I am too tired to remember all that. I have a hard time remembering my name, most of the time, as it is. But, we have to work. We work, to stay alive.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Dwadwa, Mrs. Nelson, Siziwe, Mxolisi, Lunga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

Mandisa subscribes to the idea that a parent's identity, and specifically a mother's, is tied to the way she manages the lives of her children. Although Mandisa recognizes that her children rarely listen to her, and understands that it is difficult for her to be a hands-on parent because she has to spend so much time out of the house earning money for her family, she still feels as though she must put on a performance of being a more controlling, more engaged parent. She feels her children's behavior is her responsibility, and so she must do her best to modify and shape them, even when she is not physically at home. Mandisa knows that her mandates go unheeded, but it is the act of trying to be an authority figure, and not the adherence to her authority, that feels important to her.

Although Mandisa wishes she could be more present, longing for the days when she only had one child and could pay attention to him, her professional opportunities are limited, and she must take what she can get. As a result, she has to work long hours seven days a week to support her family even with help from her husband, Dwadwa. Like many other aspects of Mandisa's life, this is part of colonialism's long legacy—different opportunities are available for white women versus black women, and black women are kept in perpetual poverty because fewer opportunities are available to them, forcing them to work long hours without seeing results, thus keeping them perpetually separated from the families they love.

❝ Wednesday is a school day. However, not one of my children will go to school. This burdensome knowledge I carry with me as a tortoise carries her shell. But, it weighs my spirit down. Two days ago, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) ordered the school children to join Operation Barcelona, a campaign they say is in support of their teachers who are on strike. Students were urged to stay away from school, to burn cars and to drive reactionary elements out of the townships. Flint to tinder. The students fell over each other to answer the call. Now, anyone who disagrees with them, the students label "reactionary." This has struck stark fear in many a brave heart. One student leader has publicly announced, "We wish to make it clear to the government that we are tired of sitting without teachers in our classes." These big-mouthed children don't know anything. They have no idea how hard life is; and if they're not careful, they'll end up in the kitchens and gardens of white homes ... just like us, their mothers and fathers. See how they'll like it then.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Mxolisi, Lunga, Siziwe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Mandisa feels responsible for her children's wellbeing, and she feels it is her job to help guide them in their choices so they have the potential for a bright future. Unfortunately, as a mother, she can only do so much. Mandisa knows that education is the key to success, and finishing one's schooling can open up professional and financial doors in the future. However, as hard as she tries, she cannot make her children go to school, and she cannot guarantee the schools they attend are actually good. This knowledge, Mandisa explains, "weighs [her] spirit down," knowing she can only do so much for her children.

Many people in her children's generation have been increasingly radicalized by community activists. Their schools are low quality, and so students began to protest.

However, these protests evolved, growing from criticisms of the education system, to criticisms of the apartheid government, to criticisms of other black South Africans who do not fully stand with them. While Mandisa is sympathetic to criticisms of the school system, she also worries that her children will drop out never to return, and be stuck in the same cycle of domestic and manual labor that she was sucked into after her first teen pregnancy.

Chapter 3 Quotes

"Mandy!" Mrs. Nelson screams. That is what the white woman I work for calls me: Mandy. She says she can't say my name. Says she can't say any of our native names because of the clicks. My name is Mandisa. MA-NDI-SA. Do you see any click in that?

Related Characters: Mandisa, Mrs. Nelson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Nelson is Mandisa's mlungu woman—her white employer—for whom Mandisa acts as a maid and a cook. Mrs. Nelson's life is very different from Mandisa's; later in the chapter, Mandisa reflects on how Mrs. Nelson's day off is one where she relaxes and sees her friends and has fun, whereas on Mandisa's day off she does all the chores she has been unable to do during the week. Mrs. Nelson, although the beneficiary of centuries of colonial rule in South Africa, doesn't fully understand her privilege relative to Mandisa, and has little respect for her. Although Mandisa's name is technically a Xhosa one, and the language does sometimes have "click" sounds, which can be harder for non-native speakers to say, Mandisa's name is easy to pronounce. By refusing to learn how to say her employee's name, complaining that it is too hard without even putting in the effort to try, Mrs. Nelson shows her disrespect for Mandisa, and her unwillingness to compromise or see the world from her perspective.

Mama did not want to hear any moaning about my not having friends at school.

"Count your blessings," she said. "Do you know how many children would just love to change places with you?"

Change places with me? Change places with me? I'd have done anything to change places with them.

Mama's lack of sympathy only added to my misery. I hated school and envied those children she pitied. What had they done to be that lucky? To me, the prospect of loafing the rest of the year away was quite appealing. What I didn't know then, of course, was that some of those children would never go back to school again. Others who, like Khaya and me, were lucky enough to gain admission to a school, soon found the newness too much and played truant. From this group too, there were those who would gradually drift away from school ... and eventually leave for good.

To this day, there are not enough schools or teachers in Guguletu to accommodate all the children. You heard me talk about Operation Barcelona, just now. There never has been enough of anything in our schools. Therefore, many of the children, even today, do not go to school. There are not enough mothers during the day to force the children to go to school and stay there for the whole day. The mothers are at work. Or they are drunk. Defeated by life. Dead. We die young, these days. In the times of our grandmothers and their grandmothers before them, African people lived to see their great-great-grandchildren. Today, one is lucky to see a grandchild. Unless, of course, it is a grandchild whose arrival is an abomination — the children our children are getting before we even suspect they have come of child-bearing age.

Related Characters: Mama, Mandisa (speaker), Khaya

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After Mandisa and her family are uprooted and forced to move to Guguletu from Blouvlei, Mandisa and Khaya have trouble re-enrolling in school. They manage to find spots at a new school where many of their former teachers are now teaching, but although the instructors are familiar, Mandisa feels unhappy and out of place among hundreds of unfamiliar students. Many students were unable to gain admission to any school, and although Mama insists Mandisa's education is important, Mandsia wishes she was "lucky" enough to have been denied a spot, thinking of her time off from school as a temporary vacation, instead of what it really is—an early end to her education, and a closing of many future doors because of a lack of schooling. Mama understands that Mandisa, still in school, is indeed a lucky one, something Mandsia only realizes years later.

As an adult, Mandisa increasingly understands how a lack of education denies young people so many opportunities. A lack of education limits potential jobs, forcing people to go into manual or domestic work, which is often hard on the body. Additionally, these jobs often pay poorly, keeping their workers in poverty, and shorten their lifespans, as Mandisa alludes to when she explains people rarely live to see their grandchildren. This dearth of opportunities, as well as being linked to a lack of education, is also linked to the long-term history of colonialism, which has denied both education and opportunity to black South Africans, while increasing opportunities for white settlers.

Chapter 4 Quotes

"What is the matter with our people? Don't they know the police will pull this township apart? Is it not enough we kill each other as though the other is an animal and one is preparing a feast? Is that not evil enough? A white woman? Are people mad? Have they lost their minds?" My voice was shrill to my own ears and I saw that my hands shook. Indeed, my whole body was trembling.

"It's schoolchildren who did that," said my neighbour.

I gasped, memories of the debate on the bus returning to haunt me. Words I'd taken not quite seriously, now wore a ghastly sinister shade of meaning.

"Who else would do such a mad thing?"

I thought I detected a note of gloating in her voice. Skonana has no children and somehow manages to make that seem such a virtue. "I have no children and no worries," is her favourite saying, whenever any one of us complains of some misdeed one of our offspring has sprung on us. Skonana seems to equate child with problem. Mind you, looking at what scraps our children do get into these days, she could have a point. But I wasn't going to be the one to tell her that.

Related Characters: Mandisa, Skonana (speaker), Mxolisi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

After Mandisa arrives home on the day of the murder, her neighbor Skonana comes over to gossip about the events that have just transpired. Mandisa is nervous because Mxolisi has not returned home, and she has a feeling he was somehow involved in the crime. Skonana, Mandisa notes, has no children, and both women know it was likely young people who committed the crime. In a society that expects parents to be fully responsible for the actions of their children, childless Skonana knows she is fully blameless, whereas Mandisa could still be implicated, if one of her children is found to be involved. Mandisa knows that in this case, Skonana is right, and that children can lead to problems. However, she's also resentful of Skonana's attitude and lack of sympathy, and her ignorant suggestion that a parent can fully control the actions of their children and therefore bear full responsibility.

Chapter 5 Quotes

The sea of tin shacks lying lazily in the flats, surrounded by gentle white hills, sandy hills dotted with scrub, gave us (all of us, parents and children alike) such a fantastic sense of security we could not conceive of its ever ceasing to exist. Thus, convinced of the inviolability offered by our tremendous numbers, the size of our settlement, the belief that our dwelling places, our homes, and our burial places were sacred, we laughed at the absurdity of the rumour.

"The afterbirths of our children are deep in this ground. So are the foreskins of our boys and the bleached bones of our long dead," Grandfather Mxube, the location elder, told Mama one day, when they were discussing, once again, this very same question of forced removals. Blouvlei was going nowhere, he said. "Going nowhere," he reiterated, right fist beating hard against palm of the other hand.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Mama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

During Mandisa's childhood, her entire community is forced to relocate from Blouvlei to Guguletu. This is part of a widespread apartheid government campaign to create housing for black South Africans outside of Cape Town where they are not allowed to live. This campaign, as result of apartheid, is also a result of the long legacy of colonialism, which directly led to the government-enforced segregation. Although the people of Blouvlei have lived in their township for generations, and are physically tied to the land by burial practices, the apartheid government does not care. Intergenerational relationships are incredibly important to Mandisa's community, as evidenced by the bonds between parents and children, the responsibility older generations feel for younger ones, and the respect younger generations feel for their elders. These bonds make the idea of

relocating even more devastating for the people of Blouvlei. Not only are they leaving their homes, it feels as though they are leaving themselves and their culture behind.

With the passage of time, our schools only grew worse. In 1976, students rose in revolt and, before long, Bantu Education had completely collapsed. It had become education in name only.

My son, Mxolisi, is twenty. Yet he is still in Standard 6. Standard 6! As though he were twelve or thirteen years old. But then, he is not alone, neither is he the oldest student in his class. Twenty. And still in Standard 6. And I am not saying he is the brightest pupil in his class either.

Boycotts, strikes and indifference have plagued the schools in the last two decades. Our children have paid the price.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Mxolisi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Mandisa understands the importance of education. She herself was unable to finish school after she became pregnant with Mxolisi as a teenager, and is sad to see her oldest son stall in Standard 6, which he should have completed seven or eight years ago. As his mother, Mandisa feels responsible for him, and wants what is best for him, but struggles to help him secure a happy, financially stable future. Mandisa understands several factors have contributed to Mxolisi's truancy, which she outlines here. The state of education in Guguletu is abysmal, and has been for almost two decades. Eventually, students revolted, but instead of fixing the education system, this revolt destroyed it, and the apartheid government never invested the resources to fix it. Mandisa understands that this is a problem related to the apathetic government, which is uninterested in supporting or advancing its black citizens, but also a problem that boycotts and strikes have been unable to fix, instead leaving children with no education, and little hope for the future, as they will be unable to get jobs that require a college, or even high school diploma.

AmaBhulu, azizinja! Today's youth have been singing a different song. Whites are dogs! Not a new thought, by any means. We had said that all along. As far back as I can remember. Someone would come back from work fuming: *amaBhulu azizinja*, because of some unfairness they believed had been meted out to them that day. A slap. A kick. Deduction from wages. A deduction, neither discussed nor explained. Unless, a gruff – YOU ALWAYS LATE! or YOU BROKE MY PLATE! or YOU NOT VERY NICE TO MY MOTHER! qualifies as explanation. So yes, our children grew up in our homes, where we called white people dogs as a matter of idiom ... heart-felt idiom, I can tell you. Based on bitter experience.

AmaBhulu, azizinja! they sang. And went and burnt down their schools. That's uncalled for, a few of us mumbled beneath our breath. Well beneath. Even so, we were quickly reprimanded. There was a war on. Besides, those ramshackle, barren things were no schools. No learning took place there.

But swiftly, our children graduated from stoning cars, white people's cars. They graduated from that and from burning buildings. Unoccupied buildings. Public buildings. Now, they started stoning black people's cars. And burning black people's houses.

We reasoned that those black people to whom such a thing happened deserved what they got. The children were punishing them for one or another misdeed. Or, indeed, some misdeeds. They had collaborated with the repressive apartheid government. *Iimpimpi*, informers, we labeled the whole miserable lot. People on whom the students' righteous and wrathful acts fell.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Members of Mandisa's children's generation have inherited chants from their parents, and with those chants attitudes about white people. Mandisa herself remembers learning the chant "Whites are dogs!" (also translated as "Boers are dogs!") from her elders, who returned home from work cursing their white employers. Similarly, the generation after her has learned the expression, along with a hatred of white South Africans from their parents. This expression carries with it centuries of colonial weight. Since invading South Africa, white settlers and now citizens have treated black South Africans as second-class citizens in their own homeland. Although derogatory, the expression comes from a place of disenfranchisement and frustration with a government rigged against its black citizens, forced to

worked for white bosses who have little empathy or respect for their employees.

Unfortunately, an expression that began as a way of letting off steam in a person's household has violently evolved. Mandisa's children and other youths have taken the idiom up as a battle cry, which they use as violent inspiration as they burn down their schools and eventually turn on their communities. The schools, children can argue, are tools of white oppression, but the destruction of their own communities and the infrastructure of their township is more an outlet of rage at apartheid than actual attacks against the apartheid government.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Standard Six and, come year's end, would sit for external examinations. A not insignificant step, as Mama reminded me daily: Gone is the time for playing.

Mama had high hopes for me ... for both of us, my brother and me. Our parents believed that education would free us from the slavery that was their lot as uneducated labourers.

Yes, we had our plans. But the year had its plans too; unbeknown to us, of course.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Khaya, Tata, Mama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Mama often emphasizes the importance of education, and this passage contains one of the many instances of that. In particular, this passage highlights Mama's understanding that education is a gateway to a better life. She and her husband, Tata, did not receive their full educations, and as a result work as day laborers and domestic workers, making just enough to support their family. She wants a better, more comfortable, more stable life for her children, and understands that in a deeply segregated apartheid state, education is one of the few ways to break through the barrier of discrimination to the middle class. Mama cares deeply for her children and wants to give them the life she never had. Even though Mandisa resents this as a child, she too will go on to emphasize the importance of education to her own children, Mxolisi, Siziwe, and Lunga.

❝ But that was not her way of doing things. Not as far as my being in danger was concerned. She seemed to think each time I left the house, I could only return with a stomach. To the disgrace of the entire Chizama clan; not just our family. Besides, she was a secretary of the Mothers' Union at our church. With such high office, she didn't want anyone to say she had raised a rotten potato. By all means, Mama made sure her potato stayed unspoilt.

[...]

That was the beginning of many a trial, for me. Mama's making sure I remained "whole" or 'unspoilt" as she said.

"God put mothers on earth, to ensure the health of their daughters," I heard often, whenever I attempted to resist the practice. Each time she looked, she'd wash her hands thereafter. But I was the one who felt dirty.

Related Characters: Mama, Mandisa (speaker), China

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Mama's obsession with Mandisa's virginity is complicated. She is worried that Mandisa will have sex, become pregnant, and be forced to drop out of school, effectively running her life. However, Mama is also worried about the social stigma she will endure as the mother of a pregnant, unmarried teenager. As the secretary of the church's Mother's Union, Mama and her family face scrutiny. What is perceived as a moral lapse by her daughter would likely reflect back on Mama, and make her seem less moral and pious as a result. Mama's identity is also tied to being a good mother to her children, and "allowing" Mandisa to become pregnant would demonstrate that she'd failed at her God-given duty, "to ensure the health of [her] daughter." However, although Mandisa does eventually become pregnant, it is a freak accident, as Mandisa and China are careful not to have penetrative sex. As worried as Mama is with being a bad mother, Mandisa is obsessed with being a "good girl" and doesn't want to disappoint her mother, making her unplanned pregnancy all the more confusing and tragic for her.

Then, the flood came. A torrent of tears gushing unchecked down her cheeks. Then followed the wailing. Mama keened as though announcing the death of a beloved, honoured relative.

"What will the church people say?" Mama wailed. "What are they to think of me?" The shame to the family would surely kill her, she said.

Auntie Funiwe reminded her that this was a sad accident and that the family had nothing to be ashamed of. "This child has not disgraced the name of the family."

"Oh, you don't know anything," Mama continued her wailing. "My enemies are going to rejoice. They're going to laugh at me now."

"What do you care for such small-minded, mean people?" Auntie asked. "Let them laugh, their turn'll come," she said. "Ours now is to look after this child," she nodded my way. "We must support and protect her now. How do you think she must be feeling?"

Feeling? I was numb, beyond feeling. Mama's coming, her reaction, had drained the last ounce of feeling from me. Fear. Shame. Anger. All these and more mingled together to form one strong thinning liquid that replaced my blood.

Related Characters: Mama, Auntie Funiwe, Mandisa (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

When Mama discovers that the teenage Mandisa is pregnant, despite Mama's impassioned warnings and intrusive virginity checks, and despite Mandisa's cautious avoidance of penetrative sex, Mama is distraught. She sees Mandisa's pregnancy as evidence of her own failure as a mother. However, instead of concerning herself with Mandisa's well-being, and how she's feeling (as her sister Funiwe urges her to do), Mama's first impulse is to reflect on how this pregnancy will reflect on *her*. Because Mama sees Mandisa's actions as a referendum on her parenting techniques, Mandisa's pregnancy seems, to Mama, to demonstrate that she was a failure as a guide and guardian. She worries others will also see it this way, and that she'll be cast out from her social circles and ridiculed by her "enemies."

Chapter 8 Quotes

"I am going to boarding school the following year," he said, his voice flat, with neither gladness nor sorrow in it. With no trace of sadness or regret.

[...]

"The teachers have helped me get a scholarship. They think I am bright, I deserve to get a higher education. And Father has been wonderfully cooperative ... I have his complete support."

I could not believe his insensitivity. Did China really think I had wanted to leave school, have a baby, become his wife ... or anybody's wife, for that matter? Did he think I had not had plans for continuing with my education?

I stood there, my feet weighed a ton. I stood there, and a heavy stone came and lodged itself inside my heart. While he was busy explaining his plans and his difficulties, I saw another side to the boy I had so adored and not that long ago. China was vain. Self-centered. And weak. He was a low-down heartless cur.

Related Characters: Mandisa, China (speaker), China's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

After Mandisa discovers she is pregnant, she returns to Guguletu with Mama. For weeks Mama refuses to let her out of the house, or even out of her sight. Finally, however, Mama returns to work, and on that day China comes over to see Mandisa. Since China and Mandisa never had penetrative sex, China assumes that Mandisa must have cheated on him. Therefore, he doesn't want to be involved with her anymore, or be held responsible for her wellbeing or the wellbeing of their baby. China, like Mandisa and others in their community, understands that having a child young will derail his future. A talented student, he has big plans for his education, which include attending boarding school and (presumably) college. He knows how important education is, and that it has the potential to change his life and the lives of his future family members, but knows that without it he will be stuck in poverty, working grueling, low-paying jobs for the rest of his life.

Mandisa, however, is frustrated with China's unempathetic response to her pregnancy, which is as callous as Mama's initial reaction. Like him, Mandisa is a talented student and had plans for her future. She knows the child is their shared burden, and recognizes how unfair it is that he can choose

to absolve himself of all responsibility and continue on with his life (which he eventually does, leaving her as a single parent). In this passage, she recognizes the way in which her pregnancy will derail both of their lives, but also knows at this point, there is nothing either of them can do, except accept responsibility and come together to raise their baby.

❝ Once more, it was brought home to me what turmoil the coming of this child had brought to my life. Were it not for him, of course, I would still be in school. Instead, I was forced into being a wife, forever abandoning my dreams, hopes, aspirations. For ever.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Mxolisi, China

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Both Mandisa and China have their hopes and dreams crushed by Mandisa's surprise pregnancy. Both talented students, the pair assumed they would continue in school, perhaps go to boarding school, maybe college, and get jobs that required degrees, and compensated well. In this quotation, Mandisa reveals she feels her life is over—her "dreams, hopes, aspirations" abandoned "for ever." She's resentful of both China and Mxolisi. She resents Mxolisi for being born, and China for deciding to marry her after she'd has the baby (her concern has been being an unmarried mother, and so once Mxolisi was born she was no longer interested in becoming a wife).

Later in the chapter, China, who has married Mandisa and quit school so he can work and support his young family, snaps and yells at Mandisa. He tells her to "[l]ook at the mess I'm in. Just look at me! Not yet twenty and already out of school, doing a job I hate!" Mandisa knows "he was talking about our being parents…About his being a father and a husband. The dog in the patch of nettles." Mandisa understands that China feels trapped in their relationship, obligated to take care of her and Mxolisi, but deeply resentful, as he feels his future was stolen from him. Both husband and wife feel defeated and trapped, but whereas China will eventually run away, leaving her to fend for herself, Mandisa commits to being the best mother she can, and creating the best possible life for her children.

❝ "For shoulders so tender, so far from fully formed, great is the weight you bear. You hold yourself and you are held ..." — she paused before saying the word ... "responsible." She said the word with a sigh, as though she were a judge sending a young person, a first offender, to the gallows. Sending him there because of some terrible and overwhelming evidence she dared disregard only at her own peril.

[…]

"Mama," she said, her voice once more her own. "You must free this your son."

I said I didn't understand.

"You know what I'm talking about. Go home. Think about your child. Children are very sensitive. They know when we hate them." After a small pause she shook her head. "Perhaps, I use a word too strong ... but, resentment can be worse than hate."

It was my turn to gasp. My whole being turned to ice. Tears pricked my eyes. I felt my father-in-law's eyes on me and turned mine his way. His brow was gathered, his eyes wide with unasked questions. But the sangoma wasn't done.

"But to come back to why you have come to see me," she broke our locked eyes, "this child has seen great evil in his short little life. He needs all the love and understanding he can get."

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Zazi and Mzamo, Mxolisi, China, China's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

After Mxolisi witnesses the murder of two young men, Zazi and Mzamo, he becomes silent, refusing to talk for the next four years. Mandisa does her best to coax her son to speak, but is unsuccessful. Eventually China's father convinces Mandisa to see a sangoma, or traditional healer, who tells her that Mxolisi has been traumatized not only by watching the murder of two of his friends, but by Mandisa's own resentment. The sangoma helps Mandisa realize that she's resented her son for his entire life. Mandisa was forced to drop out of school and become a wife after her pregnancy, and she blames Mxolisi for derailing her life. Although Mandisa has done her best to be a good mother, the sangoma recognizes that she has been putting a weight on her son, the weight of her lost future. Mandisa realizes she must do a better job of accepting and loving her child, who didn't ask to be born, and in no way intended to ruin her life.

Later in the chapter, Mandisa realizes some of her resentment of her son has come from her feeling that he

took her virginity, As she became pregnant before ever having penetrative sex, Mandisa was technically a virgin when she gave birth (hence the reason why she passed all of her mother's intrusive virginity checks). Mandisa acknowledges that, when Mxolisi "cried, sometimes instead of feeling sorry for him, I felt sorry for myself." However, she realizes that it wasn't Mxolisi's intention to ruin her life, and that as his mother she has to do her best to love and accept him, and not let him take on the burden of her own struggle.

❝ Were he to leave school before finishing high school, he would be sorry for the rest of his life. He would be part of the thousands upon thousands of young people who roam the township streets aimlessly day and night. That is how Mxolisi stayed long enough in school to become a high school student.

Unfortunately, it is in that high school that serious problems started. Mxolisi got himself involved in politics. Boycotts and strikes and stay-aways and what have you? Soon, he was a leader in students' politics and many who didn't know his face knew his name.

These children went around the township screaming at the top of their voices: LIBERATION NOW, EDUCATION LATER! and ONE SETTLER, ONE BULLET! And the more involved in politics he got, the less we saw him here at home.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Lunga, Siziwe, Mxolisi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

Mandisa frequently worries about her children's educations. She understands, as someone forced to drop out of school as a teenager, that she was denied opportunities both because she was a young mother, and because she didn't have a full education. She wants better for her sons and daughter, and warns them of the consequences of dropping out of school. Unfortunately, however, her words and warnings aren't enough. As a concerned mother, she is less powerful than a large-scale youth movement dedicated to improving the school system, but in the end destroys it.

Many of the chants the children use are old chants borrowed from their parents, their grandparents, and generations before. "One Settler, One Bullet," is an old chant, used by Xhosa communities when white Europeans were first settling South Africa. It explicitly refers to a policy of killing white settlers in order to protect Xhosa land from invaders. Now, centuries after colonization, black South Africans still see white South Africans as their colonizers, a fair perception, given the apartheid. In the present, as in the past, angry black South Africans want to kill their oppressors, hoping somehow they can win their country back.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ There is knowledge with which I was born — or which I acquired at such an early age it is as though it was there the moment I came to know myself ... to know that I was. We sucked it from our mothers' breasts, at the very least; inhaled it from the very air, for most.

Long before I went to school I knew when Tata had had a hard day at work. He would grumble, "Those dogs I work for!" and fuss about, and take long swigs from the bottle.

Mama's own quarrel with bosses often came on the day when Tata got paid. For some reason, her dissatisfaction with Tata's conditions of employment seemed to deepen on Fridays.

I remember when, one Friday, she exploded:

"*Sesilamba nje, beb' umhlaba wethu abelungu!* We have come thus to hunger, for white people stole our land." [...] Later, I was to hear those words with growing frequency. "White people stole our land. They stole our herds. We have no cattle today, and the people who came here without any have worlds of farms, overflowing with fattest cattle"

Related Characters: Mama, Tata, Mandisa (speaker), Makhulu

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mandisa reflects upon how knowledge is passed from generation to generation. As a child she understood the expression "whites are dogs" (*AmaBhulu, azizinja* in Xhosa), which Tata would say variations of when he came home from work. Mama, similarly, would complain about Tata's white employers. This dislike and distrust of white South Africans, which stemmed from immense economic disparity, influenced Mandisa, who grew up with the same distrust baked into her psyche. In this way, her parents influenced her, teaching her through common

phrases and idioms the truth of their lived experiences: that centuries of colonization and now apartheid has deprived black people of opportunities, and many white people are actively participating in the disenfranchisement of their black neighbors.

"Mzukulwana, listen to me. Listen and remember what you have heard, this day." Then, in the voice of an *imbongi* of the people, he recited:

"Deep run the roots of hatred here

So deep, a cattle-worshipping nation killed all its precious herds.

Tillers, burned fertile fields, fully sowed, bearing rich promise too.

Readers of Nature's Signs, allowed themselves fallacious belief.

In red noon's eye rolling back to the east for sleep.

Anything. Anything, to rid themselves of these unwanted strangers.

No sacrifice too great, to wash away the curse.

That deep, deep, deep, ran the hatred then.

In the nearly two centuries since, the hatred has but multiplied.

The hatred has but multiplied."

Related Characters: Tatomkhulu (speaker), Mandisa

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Mandisa's grandfather, Tatomkhulu, comes to stay with her family. Through stories and poems, he teaches her about Nongqawuse, a Xhosa prophet who instructed her community to kill their cattle and burn their fields. She promised that if they did, a storm would come and wash away the white settlers who had invaded and stolen their land. However, the prophecy did not come true, and the Xhosa people killed their cattle and burned their lands but were left with nothing, thus allowing the white settlers to more easily take over their former homes. The lesson Tatomkhulu teaches is one about a group of people so filled with hatred for their invaders that they would do anything to get their land back. Now, in the novel's present, Mandisa resents her white employers and the apartheid government, and her children's generation is rioting and protesting in hopes of improving their education and conditions. These contemporary feelings come from the same place as Nongqawuse's prophecy—people so frustrated that their land has been stolen from them they are willing to do anything (drop out of school, have protests, riot) to get it back.

Hayi, ilishwa!

Amabhulu, azizinja!

One settler, one bullet!

By the match stick, we shall free our nation!

"Oh, the road has been long, indeed. The songs came much, much later, I can tell you that. Before the songs, many others tried to rid our nation of the ones without colour, who had come from across the great sea."

"Makana, the Left-Handed, prophesied outcomes similar to Nongqawuse's. His magic would turn the bullets of the guns of *abelungu* to water."

"At Isandlwana, with spear and shield, Cetywayo's impis defeated the mighty British army and its guns."

"Bulhoek, in Queenstown, is another example of resistance I can cite. Close to two hundred people murdered. Their sin? They wanted back their land and took possession of it, claiming it as their own. When they wouldn't move, even by force, bullets were unleashed on them. But it was all to no avail. All to no avail. To this very day, *abelungu* are still here with us, Mzukulwana. The most renowned liar has not said they are about to disappear."

Related Characters: Tatomkhulu (speaker), Mandisa

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Mandisa's grandfather, Tatomkhulu comes to stay with her and her family. He teaches her about Xhosa history, specifically the story of Nongqawuse. He explains how since Europeans came to South Africa and began to take over land that had formerly belonged to the black South Africans, and the indigenous people were so angry and so desperate to reclaim their land that they burned their fields and killed their cows because Nongqawuse, a prophetess, told them to.

Tatomkhulu explains that many of the chants and curses that are currently popular have a root in the colonial history of South Africa. These chants pass down both a sentiment and a history. Phrases like "one settler, one bullet," now used by youths in protests, originated with indigenous Africans, who would literally shoot the white Europeans invading their land. This feeling—that their home has been stolen from them—has persisted since the land was first stolen centuries ago. Tatomkhulu then recounts others, in addition to Nongqawuse who tried to rid South Africa of white Europeans, emphasizing how many people tried to get white Europeans to return to Europe.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"Mmelwane," Skonana quickly jumped in. "We have come to cry with you ... as is our custom, to grieve with those who grieve."

I didn't know what to say or feel. I had not summoned my neighbours. Usually, the keening of mourners calls neighbours to the house that death has visited. I had not called my neighbours — I had not announced the death. Yes, there has been a death. But is it I who may keen? Is it I whom people should help grieve?

"We have come to be with you in this time," Yolisa's voice said.

And we talked, my neighbours and I. It was like the opening of a boil. Thereafter, I was not so afraid of my neighbours' eyes. I did not immediately see condemnation in the eyes that beheld mine. When some stay away, I do not tell myself they are embarrassed or avoiding me. And even if they do, I know there are some among my friends and neighbours who feel for me — who understand my pain.

It is people such as these who give me strength. And hope. I hear there are churches and other groups working with young people and grownups. Helping. So that violence may stop, Or at least be less than it is right now. That is a good thing. We need to help each other ... all of us, but especially the children. Otherwise they grow up to be a problem for everyone. And then everybody suffers. I pray there may be help even for young people like Mxolisi. That they may change and come back better people.

Related Characters: Skonana, Mandisa (speaker), Mxolisi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

The night that The Girl is murdered, police come to Mandisa's house, searching for Mxolisi. The next day, Reverend Mananga comes to her house and takes Mandisa to Mxolisi, who admits to killing the Girl. Although not shown explicitly, Mxolisi likely turns himself into the police, and is taken to jail. Meanwhile, Mandisa is forced to deal with the societal fallout. As Mxolisi's mother, many people in Guguletu hold her responsible for his crimes. They assume she raised him badly, or else encouraged his violence. This isn't true, but Mandisa feels like a social pariah nonetheless.

This passage illustrates one of the few examples of a community coming together to show support for one of its own. Mandisa feels like an outcast, but her neighbors coming to her door, and grieving with her (although Mxolisi hasn't actually died, his future has certainly been killed). By offering to grieve with their neighbor, Mandisa's community shows that they do accept her, and they do not blame her. This gives her strength and hope, and the ability to continue on with her life now that she knows that she isn't universally perceived as the failed mother of a murder.

My Sister-Mother, we are bound in this sorrow. You, as I, have not chosen this coat that you wear. It is heavy on our shoulders, I should know. It is heavy, only God knows how. We were not asked whether we wanted it or not. We did not choose, we are the chosen.

But you, remember this, let it console you some, you never have to ask yourself: What did I not do for this child? You can carry your head sky high. You have no shame, no reason for shame. Only the loss. Irretrievable loss. Be consoled, however. Be consoled, for with your loss comes no shame. No deep sense of personal failure. Only glory. Unwanted and unasked for, I know. But let this be your source of strength, your fountain of hope, the light that illumines the depth of your despair.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Mxolisi, The Mother, The Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

The bond between parents and children is revisited again and again in *Mother to Mother*. Here, Mandisa addresses The Mother. Both women's children have been involved in tragedy: Mxolisi, Mandisa's son, murdered The Girl, The Mother's daughter. Although Mandisa herself did not commit the crime, and The Mother was not killed, both

women are deeply affected by the murder. Each deals with a unique sorrow, which comes from each woman's bond with her child. However, the women have no control over their sorrow, as Mandisa notes "we did not choose, we are chosen," selected by the circumstances in which their children became involved. However, although both full of sorrow, Mandisa argues that while The Mother is free to grieve, Mandisa must deal with both sorrow and shame. Forever linked to Mxolisi, she feels guilt on his behalf for his crime, and for herself, worried that she failed as a mother, which is why he committed his murder.

Chapter 12 Quotes

And my son? What had he to live for?

My son. His tomorrows were his yesterday. Nothing. Stretching long, lean, mean, and empty. A glaring void. Nothing would come of the morrow. For him. Nothing at all. Long before the ground split when he pee'd on it, that knowledge was firmly planted in his soul ... it was intimately his.

He had already seen his tomorrows; in the defeated stoop of his father's shoulders. In the tired eyes of that father's friends. In the huddled, ragged men who daily wait for chance at some job whose whereabouts they do not know ... wait at the corners of roads leading nowhere ... wait for a van to draw up, a shout, a beckoning hand that could mean a day's job for an hour's wage, if that. He had seen his tomorrows — in the hungry, gnarled hands outstretched toward the long-dead brazier, bodies shivering in the unsmiling, setting sun of a winter's day. Long have the men been waiting: all day. But chance has not come that way today. Chance rarely came that way. Any day. Chance has been busy in that other world ... the white world. Where it dwelt, at home among those other beings, who might or might not come with offers of a day's employ. Where it made its abode — in posh suburbs and beautiful homes and thriving businesses ... forever forsaking the men looking for a day's work that might give them an hour's wage. The men from the dry, dusty, wind-flattened, withering shacks they call home. Would always, always call home. No escape.

Such stark sign-posts to his tomorrow. Hope still-born in his heart. As in the hearts of all like him. The million-million lumpen, the lost generation. My son. My son!

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Mxolisi, The Mother, The Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

In this address in the novel's final chapter, Mandisa laments that Mxolisi's future was already bleak, before he ever committed murder, and before he ever went to jail. Mxolisi had essentially dropped out of school, and Mandisa knows from experience, and Mxolisi knew from observation, that a lack of education would severely restrict his future. Mandisa believes Mxolisi looked into the future and saw "a glaring void." Therefore, he was willing to involve himself in political protests and in more violent mobs and even commit crimes, knowing that he had no real future to jeopardize. Mxolisi also recognized that black men in apartheid era South Africa had few opportunities available to them. As Mandisa notes, Mxolisi's father and his father's friends were all worn out by hard labor before they reached middle age. Mxolisi knew this was his future, too, and understood that the kind of random chance that could change his life for the better was generally reserved for white South Africans, who had so many opportunities already.

That unforgiving moment. My son. Blood pounding in his ears. King! If for a day. If for a paltry five minutes ... a miserable but searing second.

AMANDLA! NGAWETHU! POWER! IT 1S OURS!

AMANDLA! NGAWETHU! POWER! IT IS OURS!

[...] Transported, the crowd responded; not dwelling on the significance of the word, deaf and blind to the seeds from which it sprang, the pitiful powerlessness that had brewed this very moment

And the song in my son's ears. A song he had heard since he could walk. Even before he could walk. Song of hate, of despair, of rage. Song of impotent loathing.

AMABHULU, AZIZINJA!

AMABHULU, AZIZINJA!

BOERS, THEY ARE DOGS!

BOERS, THEY ARE DOGS!

[...] The crowd cheers my son on. One settler! One bullet! We had been cheering him on since the day he was born. Before he was born. Long before.

Related Characters: The Girl, Mxolisi, Mandisa (speaker), Tatomkhulu

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Mandisa recounts the imagined murder of The Girl by Mxolisi. The murder is sound-tracked by the chants, whose histories Mandisa has explained throughout the novel. Mxolisi is driven to murder The Girl both by the circumstances of his life, and the circumstances of that particular day —bad schools caused him to drop out and become both political and violent, and roaming the streets on this particular day allowed him to get into a situation where he would be able to be violent. However, Mandisa argues that Mxolisi was also driven by centuries-old forces, which operate through the old songs and chants given new lives by youth protesters and activists. The idea that Boers, or white people, are "dogs," is not new, and the cry "power! It is ours!" is similarly ingrained in black South African culture, and has been since white settlers began to colonize the country centuries prior. Thus, Mandisa argues that Mxolisi was driven to murder The Girl by the circumstances of his own life, but also by half a millennia of colonial violence, which created a deep rage in black South Africans who (rightly) felt their land had been stolen from them, and would do anything to reclaim it.

This quote also echoes a quote from Tatomkhulu, Mandisa's grandfather, who told her the story of the prophetess Nongqawuse, and how the Xhosa people hated the white colonists so much they killed their own cows and burned their own fields in hopes of driving the settlers away. Tatomkhulu says, "The storm in the heart of a person is more dangerous than howling winds and raging waves. You can run from those and seek shelter elsewhere, perhaps escape them altogether. How does one run away from the heart, one's own or that of another?" Here, Mxolisi has a storm in his heart that he cannot escape, a storm he was born with, and which was stoked his entire life by his elders, by his political leaders, and by his friends.

> Nongqawuse saw it in that long, long-ago dream: A great raging whirlwind would come. It would drive *abelungu* to the sea. Nongqawuse had but voiced the unconscious collective wish of the nation: rid ourselves of the scourge.
>
> She was not robbed. She was not raped. There was no quarrel. Only the eruption of a slow, simmering, seething rage. Bitterness burst and spilled her tender blood on the green autumn grass of a far-away land. Irredeemable blood. Irretrievable loss.
>
> One boy. Lost. Hopelessly lost.
>
> One girl, far away from home.
>
> The enactment of the deep, dark, private yearnings of a subjugated race. The consummation of inevitable senseless catastrophe.
>
> [...] My son was only an agent, executing the long-simmering dark desires of his race. Burning hatred for the oppressor possessed his being. It saw through his eyes; walked with his feet and wielded the knife that tore mercilessly into her flesh. The resentment of three hundred years plugged his ears; deaf to her pitiful entreaties.
>
> My son, the blind but sharpened arrow of the wrath of his race.
>
> Your daughter, the sacrifice of hers. Blindly chosen. Flung towards her sad fate by fortune's cruellest slings.
>
> But for the chance of a day, the difference of one sun's rise, she would be alive today. My son, perhaps not a murderer. Perhaps, not yet.

Related Characters: Mandisa (speaker), Tatomkhulu, The Girl, Mxolisi

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

In the final paragraphs of the novel, Mandisa imagines what Mxolisi's murder of The Girl was like, and compares the release of his pent-up rage to the prophet Nongqawuse's promised cleansing storm. Nongqawuse spoke to the fed-up Xhosa people and promised that if they killed their cattle and burned their fields, a storm would come and wash away the white colonizers who were stealing their land. Now, over a century later, Mandisa understands that while Mxolisi's actions and decisions were his own, they were also part of an "unconscious collective wish" to kill European colonizers. Through him, centuries of rage rose up, and Mxolisi less a boy than a weapon, acting on a collective desire.

This quote echoes Tatomkhulu, Mandisa's grandfather, who first told her about Nongqawuse, and argued, "The storm in the heart of a person is more dangerous than howling winds and raging waves. You can run from those and seek shelter elsewhere, perhaps escape them altogether. How does one run away from the heart, one's own or that of another?" In Mxolisi's heart is his own storm, one that is the result of centuries of colonial violence and decades of apartheid, that have affected both him and his family. Mandisa understands that Mxolisi killing The Girl, who had no hand in his oppression, solved nothing, but she also understands that it was a centuries-old conflict tragically carried out in the present as an attempt to solve the problems of the past.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: MANDISA'S LAMENT

Mandisa begins with an address to the Mother of the Girl. She acknowledges her son, Mxolisi, killed the Mother's daughter. Mandisa explains that, since the murder, her community has been blaming her for her son's actions, but she argues that she has never had any control over him.

Right away, the novel introduces the idea that family can be burdensome. Mandisa's community sees children as extensions of their parents, and thus Mxolisi's crime is essentially Mandisa's, too, which is a line of reasoning that Mandisa finds unfair.

Mandisa continues that she isn't shocked Mxolisi killed the Girl. Nothing about her son shocks her anymore, she explains, ever since his accidental conception, which "unreasonably and totally destroy[ed] the me that I was […] the me I would have become." Additionally, she was well aware that Mxolisi, or one of his friends, could easily kill someone at any time.

Mandisa depicts her son as a force of nature that is so powerful and strong-willed, even his conception was out of Mandisa's control. The story will later reveal that Mandisa got pregnant despite carefully avoiding penetrative sex, and thus goes on to believe that her son took her virginity in a way. She gestures to that here by explaining how Mxolisi's accidental conception "unreasonably and totally destroy[ed]" her and her bright future. By depicting her son as this powerful, imposing force, Mandisa suggests that she couldn't possibly control him, and thus she shouldn't be blamed for his actions.

Mandisa asks the Mother why the Girl was in Guguletu, where it is unsafe for white people. She believes that the Girl was naïve in her commitment to helping others—that "people like your daughter […] so believe in their goodness, know they have hurt no one, are, indeed, helping, they never think anyone would want to hurt them." Mandisa suspects that if Mxolisi had killed one of the black women who were accompanying the Girl, there would have been no public outcry, no police involvement, and he likely would've walked free.

Mother to Mother *is based on the real-life murder of a young white woman named Amy Biehl—a kindhearted, altruistic Fulbright scholar who was in South Africa to help residents get ready for their first-ever democratic elections—in the impoverished black township of Guguletu. The novel never expressly states that the Girl and Amy Biehl are one and the same, but the way that Mandisa pieces together the Girl's life and murder largely echoes Biehl's life—and its sudden end.*

Mandisa argues that the Girl "has paid for the sins of the fathers and mothers who did not do their share of seeing that" Mxolisi lived a good life. Now that he's in jail, he has access to amenities he never had as a free man. She wonders, why is Mxolisi "living a better life, if chained?"

Mandisa once again argues that she shouldn't be responsible for Mxolisi's crime. Instead, she points to "the fathers and mothers who did not do their share" of ensuring that Mxolisi could live a good and meaningful life. Mandisa is likely referring to white settlers here, suggesting that colonizers (who eventually became governors, then other politicians, then law enforcement officers) are like cruel, adoptive "fathers and mothers" of South Africa who care little for their "children," only providing them with basic necessities within the confines of a government-funded prison.

Mandisa ends her address with a plea to God. She says she is "a mother, with a mother's heart," and she is overwhelmed with shame, and the hurt of the Mother. She asks God to forgive Mxolisi for his sin.

Mandisa and the Mother are both bound by loss and grief, and Mandisa attempts to connect with the Mother over their shared sorrow. Mandisa's emotional appeal in this passage speaks to the novel's interest in the way that storytelling and language—here in the form of a personal letter—can bring people together through shared experiences and histories.

CHAPTER 2: MOWBRAY – WEDNESDAY 25 AUGUST 1993

Mandisa imagines the Girl's last morning alive. The Girl wakes up; answers a phone call; takes a shower; and has cereal, coffee, and a slice of toast for breakfast. She gets dressed, gets in her car, and drives to the university at 7:55 a.m.

Mandisa begins retroactively piecing together the story of the Girl's life. In describing the Girl's normal, mundane morning, Mandisa implies that South Africa is so unstable that violence can bubble up out of seemingly nowhere, punctuating an otherwise normal day with bloodshed, loss, and grief.

At the exact same time, miles away in Guguletu, Mandisa leaves her home. Before she leaves, she wakes her children. The younger two, Siziwe and Lunga, meet her in the kitchen for coffee and bread. Mxolisi, her oldest son, eventually joins them, complaining there isn't enough food to eat, but his mother insists there's bread and fruit, even if they can't have protein like eggs or fish.

The fact that the family doesn't have access to eggs or fish begins to paint a fuller picture of their poverty. This also hints at the poverty that affects black South Africans more generally under apartheid, a social and political system of institutionalized racism that the South African government adopted in 1948 and maintained until 1994, the year after the real-life murder of Amy Biehl and the fictional murder of the Girl.

Mandisa prepares to leave, reminding her children of chores they should do and what food they need to save for later. She acknowledges she doesn't actually expect them to follow her rules, and doesn't even remember them herself come evening, but she feels its her duty as a mother "to have authority over my children."

Although Mandisa claimed at the beginning of the novel that Mxolisi's actions should not be her fault, her slightly younger self is adamant that she must "have authority over [her] children." Before Mxolisi murders the Girl, Mandisa appears to bend to the community's expectations and traditions surrounding parenthood. However, it's clear that Mandisa is merely performing the part of the authoritative parent, as she knows that her children won't actually follow her rules.

Although it is a school day, Mandisa knows her children will not be going to school. For Mandisa, this is "burdensome knowledge" that "weighs [her] spirit down," but she cannot do anything about it.

Mandisa seems increasingly helpless when it comes to guiding her children, as she can't get them to go to school. The government can't (or won't) either; under apartheid, education is compulsory for white children, but not for black children. As Mandisa will later reveal in greater detail, knowing that her children aren't going to school is particularly "burdensome" because she deeply values education but couldn't finish out her own schooling due to her unplanned pregnancy. She also knows that it is one of the few ways in which a black South African can escape poverty, so it "weighs [her] spirit down" to know that her children won't have that chance at a better life.

Two days earlier, COSAS ordered school children to join Operation Barcelona ostensibly in support of striking teachers. This involves children skipping school to "burn cars and [...] drive reactionary elements out of town." Although the students are calling for the government to improve their education, Mandisa remarks "these big-mouthed children don't know anything," and cautions that if they're not careful they'll end up like their parents, domestic laborers for wealthy white people.

The novel pays careful attention to the political and social fabric of South Africa leading to Mxolisi's murder of the Girl, not to justify the crime but to explain how it came to pass. Here, in charting how certain well-intentioned political movements festered and erupted into pure violence, the novel also charts the increasing radicalization of Mxolisi's generation. This passage also reminds readers that Mxolisi's generation is still young and ignorant; although they have an abundance of pent-up energy and anger against the government and their circumstances, they are still just "big-mouthed children [who] don't know anything."

Mandisa wonders if it was a mistake sending Mxolisi to be circumcised that winter when he came of age. She had hoped it would help him get his life together, but instead he's "lazier than ever." That morning, as the Girl says her goodbyes at her university, Mxolisi joins a group of friends moving with a purpose through the neighborhood, picking up its members on the way to St. Mary Magdalene church.

Mandisa once again singles Mxolisi out as the problem child in her brood. She's willing to try anything to help him get on the right path—including sending him to be circumcised when he came of age, hoping, it seems, that the procedure would turn him into a man. Once again, though, Mxolisi is stubborn and headstrong, unable to be controlled or shepherded toward a different path.

At university, the Girl sits with a group of friends including three black African women from Guguletu. Everyone is upset the Girl is leaving, and she herself doesn't want to say goodbye quite yet, so she offers to take three of her friends home. They appreciate the gesture but worry about a white woman driving into Guguletu in the late afternoon. Still, the Girl insists and gathers her three friends, plus a young man who lives near her in Mowbray, and begins to drive.

Although the novel never explicitly says that the Girl is Amy Biehl, this passage mirrors her story thus far. Amy was a Fulbright scholar with a heart for helping people, as seen both by her very presence in South Africa (she was there to help the residents prepare for their first-ever democratic elections) and her willingness to put herself in danger in order to do something nice for her friends. This connects back to Mandisa's letter to the Mother at the beginning of the novel, when she noted that "people like [the Girl] so believe in their goodness" that "they never think anyone would want to hurt them." Thus, Mandisa depicts the Girl as innocent and altruistic but also naïve and idealistic.

Back in Guguletu Mxolisi tries to convince the minister at St Mary Magdalene, Reverend Mananga, to let him and his group of friends meet in the church. Someone calls the minister a "Reactionary!" from the crowd when he resists, and Mananga quickly caves, telling Mxolisi the group can meet at the church the next morning.

The interaction between Mxolisi's posse and Reverend Mananga is tense. The group's refusal to take no for an answer suggests that they see people as either with them or against them; in refusing to give them space to meet, the Reverend was immediately dubbed a "Reactionary" (someone who opposes political change). Not wanting to make enemies of the group, the Reverend quickly folds. His feeble attempt at standing up against the radicalized young people also suggests that they are a dangerous force to be reckoned with.

The group leaves, chanting and splitting up as they weave through the township. Mxolisi's group then encounters a burning car. They watch it burn and joke about the fate of the driver, who has either fled or been burned alive. They wonder if the truck was delivering Tuberculosis medicine, and speculate the "boers are scared we'll give it to them. Since our mothers work in their houses," and that is why medicine can be delivered easily but not quality education. The sound of police sirens scatters the group. They continue through the township, meet up with their other half, which has salvaged metal from a van, and then split up again, returning home.

In joking about the fate of the driver of the burning car, Mxolisi and his friends reveal themselves to be callous and desensitized to violence. Plus, the fact that they come across a burning car at all emphasizes how violence is commonplace in their township. Although the novel implicitly criticizes Mxolisi and his friends for their hardened hearts, it also points out that they have every reason to be angry; here, the boys discuss that the only way they get basic necessities (such as life-saving medicine) is if it is convenient or beneficial for white people (boers).

Mxolisi and his friends pass the police station, which everyone treats cautiously, as they don't know "what mood the pigs might be in." Even so, "there is always the possibility of sporting with them." The group continues to split as people move towards their own homes.

Mxolisi and his gang are clearly disdainful of the police, who are likely white and corrupt. This passage also suggests that the white law enforcement is unreliable and volatile, as they serve the township based on their fluctuating "mood[s]." Desensitized to violence and simmering with anger, the boys also consider "sporting," or playing, with the police, meaning that they see violence against their white oppressors as a darkly entertaining pastime.

Meanwhile, the Girl begins to drive her four friends. Everyone is silent, as they know today is "a marked day […] A day that spells closure." The Girl and her friends begin to sing "We have overcome" as they drive; however the song fizzles after only a few rounds.

While everyone in the car likely expects to get "closure" in the sense of saying a final goodbye to one another after college, the novel foreshadows an even more final goodbye that the Girl must make to her friends.

Meanwhile, Mxolisi and his group of friends are almost home, but they're distracted by a crowd swarming a small car, "chanting and screaming, fists stabbing air." Though Mxolisi and his friends are heading the other way, "[b]ack they run, the magnet too powerful for their stomachs, hungry for excitement."

This passage is important because it points out that Mxolisi was not first to the scene—a riot was already forming around the Girl's car, and Mxolisi and his friends are merely drawn into the fray.

CHAPTER 3: 5.15 P.M. – WEDNESDAY 25 AUGUST 1993

Mandisa is working at the home of her employer, Mrs. Nelson. Mrs. Nelson claims she can't pronounce Mandisa or any other native names because of the clicks, and calls her "Mandy" instead. Mandisa notes today is Mrs. Nelson's "day-off," even though she doesn't really work in the first place. Unlike Mandisa, who uses her day off to catch up on chores at home, Mrs. Nelson spends her day off going to the gym, shopping, and having lunch with her friends, and always comes home complaining that she is "exhausted." However, Mandisa knows her own life is harder than that of her mlungu woman (white employer). Mandisa is doing "real and exhausting work," and on her day off she "work[s] the hardest and longest of all week."

Mandisa compares her life to that of her white employer, highlighting the stark contrast between the two women. The white Mrs. Nelson, riding on the coattails of white privilege, can afford to hire Mandisa, take a day off of work, and, it's heavily implied, not work at all on the other days, either. Mandisa's schedule is an inversion of Mrs. Nelson's: instead of resting for six days and having one "exhaust[ing]" day, Mandisa works for six days and has one day off. Even then, her day is not spent lunching and shopping but trying to cram a week's worth of housekeeping and parenting into a single day.

Mrs. Nelson cuts Mandisa's day short, although she has not finished working, and drives her partway home. Mrs. Nelson has broken her very predictable routine, and so Mandisa knows something is very wrong. Mandisa gets in the car, and observes Mrs. Nelson's serious face. She suspects something has happened in Guguletu, or one of the other black townships. Mrs. Nelson does not drive Mandisa home to Guguletu, as no white people are allowed there, but instead drops her off at a nearby bus station.

Mrs. Nelson's behavior suddenly turns compassionate and serious, which strikes Mandisa as odd. This conversely implies that Mrs. Nelson doesn't usually treat Mandisa warmly, gesturing to the broader dynamics between black and white people under apartheid. Overall, Mrs. Nelson seems like a frivolous woman—after all, she complains of "exhaust[ion] after a long day of trivial activities to her overworked, impoverished employee—but here the novel points out that she's not as naïve as the Girl and understands that crossing into the black township of Guguletu would not be wise.

The bus station is chaotic. Mandisa asks her fellow commuters what has happened, but no one knows. Mandisa assumes it's another youth riot and is upset by this prospect. She feels children have become "power crazed" and tyrannical, putting "absurd demands" on their parents like boycotting work, school, alcohol, and red meat. Mandisa is fed up with "this nonsense."

This passage enfolds two of the novel's key themes. In criticizing the way the youth have become radicalized and "power crazed," Mandisa points to the festering racial tensions in South Africa, which seem to only be getting worse rather than better. She also criticizes the youth for weighing their parents down with "absurd demands," which speaks to the way that family can be burdensome.

Mandisa makes her way onto a bus, densely crowded with bodies and packages and grocery bags. The bus driver yells that Guguletu is "completely surrounded" by police. Mandisa reflects on how there has been trouble in Guguletu since its creation by the government. She considers the irony of the name, which means "Our Pride," although residents call it Gugulabo, or "Their Pride."

The two slightly different names for the township highlight black South African's anger and frustration at the government, as well as the way that language can connect people to their shared experience or history. The name "Our Pride" suggests a unified and harmonious city (or, more broadly, a country) that all citizens are proud to call their own, but this is far from reality. Black South Africans feel like strangers in their own land, and thus call the town "Their Pride," indicating that white people still run the country and treat black residents as pawns to be moved around and pushed off to the side—and that the white people are proud of it.

Mandisa remembers being dumped in Guguletu with her family as a child. She was raised in Blouvlei, but then, like tens of thousands of others, she was relocated from her former home into this enormous city made up of tiny houses, which she describes as "squatting structures. Ugly. Impersonal. Cold…"

The housing project in Guguletu functions as a symbol of the government under apartheid; like the buildings, the government is "[u]gly," "[i]mpersonal," and "[c]old," and cares little for the residents it is supposed to nurture and protect.

The government underestimated the number of Africans they were relocating, and thus had not built enough houses. Mandisa bitterly reflects on how her family was actually worse off after their relocation: they are "still living in shacks," but while they once enjoyed "well-knit communities," they are now intermixed with strangers. Meanwhile the government blamed the Africans, arguing "there were just too many Natives […] How was that its fault?"

Not only are the houses themselves inadequate, but there aren't even enough of them. As the housing project can be read as a symbol for the South African government, this passage emphasizes that the government is inadequate and unreliable. "[W]ell-knit communities" appear to be the balm against such injustice, but the government doesn't even give black South Africans that comfort, stirring up established communities and substituting friends with strangers.


School was also an issue in Guguletu. Blouvlei had one school and Guguletu had a dozen, but children and parents who assumed they would go to the school where their old teachers worked were mistaken. Like their students, teachers were scattered, and the Department of Education was predictably disorganized. On opening day, many schools were full by the time Mandisa and her brother Khaya arrived, but they were allowed in by their former teachers, because they were good students.

Education is scarce in the Guguletu that Mandisa knows as a child. It's only by being good students in the past that Mandisa and her brother are afforded spots in the already overflowing school. Here, education leads to more education, which will possibly allow Mandisa and Khaya to break out of the shackles of poverty. This explains the adult Mandisa's earlier lament about how "burdensome" it is for her to know that her children aren't going to school like they're supposed to.


Still, as lucky as she was to be in school with teachers she knew, Mandisa was shocked by the school's size, and the realization that her classmates were mostly strangers. Mama refused to listen to Mandisa's complaints, even as Mandisa wished she was one of the children who had not secured a place in a school, and had the year off. However, as an adult, Mandisa now realizes some of those children would never return to school.

The novel introduces Mama, Mandisa's mother, who is depicted as a firm, no-nonsense figure in Mandisa's life. In charting Mama and the young Mandisa's relationship, the novel draws attention to some of the behaviors that the adult Mandisa models for her children, like trying to force them to go to school.

Mandisa relates her own troubles with education to current issues in Guguletu, where there are still not enough teachers or schools. Additionally, she recognizes that mothers are working, or drunk, or dead ("We die young, these days"), and are thus unable to force their children to go to school.

Mandisa illustrates how the problems in Guguletu are like a domino effect: because of institutionalized racism, black South Africans are kept in poverty and forced to work long hours for little pay. This arrangement is extremely grating, and many people turn to drink. Whether parents are drinking, working, or dead, they simply can't be engaged in their children's lives and be around enough to ensure their children are going to school. Plus, institutionalized racism means that schools in black townships are sparse, underfunded, and understaffed, which makes education not only less appealing but also less impactful.


Mandisa still misses Blouvlei, which, although made up of shacks, was "no pretense," unlike Guguletu, which pretends to be a "civilized" "housing development" but is actually "harsh and uncaring." The difference, in her mind, is that living in Blouvlei was a choice—the shacks were built by the families inside of them, and the community was tight-knit. She feels the dehumanizing houses in Guguletu "could not but kill the soul of those who inhabited them," and "loosen[ed] the ties among those who dwelled in them."

Once again, the housing developments symbolize the South African government under apartheid. The housing in Guguletu pretends to be civilized but is actually "harsh and uncaring," just like the government itself, which couches its inhumane racism in laws and policies. Even though people are packed in tighter than ever before, such confined spaces actually "loosen the ties" among residents. This suggests that a community isn't just a group of people who are thrown together, but, as the novel argues elsewhere, a group of people who support and guide one another.


Back on the bus in the novel's present, Mandisa listens to her fellow commuters speculate about what's going on in Guguletu. Someone says schoolchildren have beaten up university students, which doesn't make sense to Mandisa, who assumes the university students are black. A young man claims he really saw what happened, saying a car was "stoned, overturned, and set alight." As people ask the man for more specific information on where the crime occurred, Mandisa realizes it was close to her home. She worries about her children, and prays to God to keep them, especially Mxolisi, safe. She then feels guilty for favoring him, but understands it is to make up for indirect "bewilderment," "anger," and "rejection" she felt for him in his early years.

Mandisa has previously singled out Mxolisi as the biggest troublemaker out of all her children, but here she suggests that he's also closest to her heart. Earlier, the novel revealed that Mxolisi's birth was unplanned, which may be why Mandisa felt "bewilderment," "anger," and "rejection" toward him. In other words, Mandisa alternately loves, despises, and worries about her firstborn son more than any of her children, and seems to feel very bound up in his actions.

The bus driver kicks off his passengers earlier than usual, telling them it's their own fault for having troublesome children. Mandisa feels lucky that the bus has stopped close to her house.

The bus driver voices a belief that is widely held in the community: that parents are responsible for their children's actions and choices.

As Mandisa walks home, she continues to worry about her children, especially her daughter, Siziwe. The street is swarming with people, and she struggles to push through the crowd. Someone elbows her, and she loses a shoe in the chaos. Still, she makes it through, and is happy to see Siziwe.

Mandisa gets stuck in an impassioned crowd just like Mxolisi did earlier, but unlike her son, who was drawn toward the riot, Mandisa is desperate to get out of it. Though they're both frustrated, angry, and downtrodden, Mandisa seems more intent on quietly enduring her circumstances, while the young and radicalized Mxolisi continues to look for outlets to show his anger.

CHAPTER 4: 7.30 P.M.

Mandisa arrives at home, and asks Siziwe where Mxolisi and Lunga are. Mandisa realizes that Siziwe, a girl, is more vulnerable than her sons, but now that Mandisa knows her daughter is safe, she is concerned for her boys. Still, she admits to herself that she is the most worried about Mxolisi. She doesn't know why their bond is so strong, but she knows she feels differently about him than she does about her other children.

Although she acknowledges that her daughter is more vulnerable than her sons in the midst of a riot, Mandisa quickly snaps back to being disproportionately focused on her firstborn son and seems less concerned about her other son, Lunga, who has been largely absent from the narrative.

Lunga is home, but Mxolisi is still missing. Mandisa is upset that Siziwe is not more concerned by her brother's absence. Mandisa acknowledges that her younger children accuse her of favoring Mxolisi.

This passage reveals that Mandisa isn't far off when she says that she feels differently about Mxolisi than she does about her other children; even Lunga and Siziwe sense Mandisa's favoritism and seem to resent both Mandisa and Mxolisi for it. Meanwhile, Mandisa seems to think that her other two kids have an obligation, as siblings, to care about their brother.

At 7:45 p.m., Mandisa's neighbor, Skonana knocks on the door. Skonana is nosy and wants to know what is happening with Mandisa, but Mandisa hopes to get information from her neighbor. Skonana reveals that she's heard a white woman was killed in Guguletu earlier in the day. Mandisa knows that "Guguletu is a violent place," but violence against a white woman will have dangerous repercussions for the black community. Mandisa understands that the police "are not our friends," and their involvement will only lead to more trouble and "pull this township apart."

Against the backdrop of political instability and an unreliable government, the community provides people with a necessary sense of stability. Even though the township is already riddled with violence, Mandisa knows that they are at least currently left to their own devices, as the police and government care little if black South Africans kill other black South Africans. Now that a white woman is the victim of violence, however, the township is bound to receive more attention from the police, which is not a good thing.

Mandisa wonders aloud what is wrong with people, that they commit violence against their neighbors, and now against a white woman. Skonana reveals the crime was committed by "schoolchildren"; she is "gloating" because she is childless and therefore blameless. Annoyed, Mandisa says goodbye, but curious about what happened, opens her door again and reengages her neighbor in conversation. Skonana tells Mandisa the crime happened on their street, and was committed with a knife.

The rumored violence against a white woman is getting closer and closer to home for Mandisa—first she found out that something happened in her township, then that it was near her house, and now that it took place on her very street. On another note, Skonana's "gloating" ties in to the idea that parents are responsible for their children's actions; as she has no children, she doesn't have to shoulder the worry and grief that a mother like Mandisa does.

CHAPTER 5

Skonana can see that Mandisa is distressed, and offers her some tea. Mandisa appreciates the offer but, feeling "weepy," declines and returns inside. Mandisa begins to address the Mother again, wondering why the Girl was in Guguletu at all, why anyone would come there. Mandisa begins to tell the story of how she ended up in the township, as if "borne by a whirlwind […] of the government's making," an "upheaval" so intense that "three decades later, my people are still reeling from it."

Mandisa now begins to tell the story of how the nation's racist apartheid regime relocated her family to the township of Guguletu. Because apartheid has been in effect since 1948, Mandisa explains that "three decades later, my people are still reeling from it." Although Mandisa is referring to apartheid, this passage also points to colonialism's legacy in South Africa, as its trappings (like race inequality) are still present three centuries *later.*

Mandisa began her life in Blouvlei. She recounts her memories the Friday she first heard rumors of relocation: young Mandisa comes home from school, and her mother, Mama, sends her on errands, as she does most afternoons. Mama sends Mandisa across the street to buy vetkoek from a nearby vendor. Mandisa is supposed to come back before Mama's kettle boils, but dawdles in the shop eating a vetkoek, and is late. Mama comments but doesn't punish her.

Just as Mrs. Nelson acted with uncharacteristic compassion by driving Mandisa halfway home on the day the Girl was murdered, Mama is also moved to compassion (or at least deterred from punishment) in a time when bigger, more serious issues are swirling about.

Mandisa completes the rest of her Friday chores. Mama bottles and sells ginger beer—the family business—and Mandisa helps collect the empty bottles when men come by to drink and talk after work. Mandisa overhears one man, Tat'uSikhwebu, say he's heard the government is planning on relocating all black South Africans in Cape Town. Mandisa dismisses this as a rumor, as Tat'uSikhwebu is known to be unreliable, but later hears Tata talk to Mama about it, and sees the rumor circulate around the neighborhood.

Like the murder of the Girl, the relocation starts out as rumor. However, young Mandisa knows things must truly be amiss when even her mother and father are worried enough to discuss it. This suggests that Mandisa looks to her parents for stability and guidance, and that, more broadly, her family is a positive force in her life at this time.

Mandisa wonders how the government could even move the residents of Blouvlei. There are millions of people in the township, which has served as a home to its inhabitants for generations. An elder comments, "The afterbirths of our children are deep in this ground," as are "the bleached bones of our long dead." Mandisa is reassured by this assertion that Blouvlei will remain her home.

The idea that the government could relocate such a huge group of people suggests that, under the apartheid regime, the government sees black South Africans as pawns that can be picked up and moved out of sight. In other words, the government doesn't consider black South Africans to be real people who are rooted to their community and land.

On a Sunday, months later, Mandisa and Khaya are playing on a hill nearby her home with their friends, when an airplane appears overhead. It spews pieces of paper, which the children and their parents first mistake for some kind of weapon. Instead, they are flyers full of typos, which translated announce, "ALL BLOUVLEI WILL BE RELOCATED [...] NEXT MONTH."

The residents of Blouvlei are informed of their relocation in the most unemotional, detached way possible. Not wanting to go among black South Africans, it seems, the white government instead uses an airplane to merely pass over the township and deliver the news through impersonal pieces of paper.

Mandisa is suddenly hit with a "bleak sadness," realizing she'll soon lose the only home she's ever known. She returns home with papers and shares them with Mama and Tata. Mandisa's parents, who have always praised her and Khaya, are too preoccupied to praise her this day, a sign of the seriousness of the situation.

Mandisa's mother is both strict and supportive, which the novel suggests is characteristic of families when they are at their best. It is through the people around her that Mandisa gauges how she should react to the situation.

A bell sounds, announcing a town meeting, and the adults leave their homes to gather and (presumably) discuss the flyers. Mandisa is happy to get extra time to play, as her parents stay at the meeting past sunset. When they eventually return, they are frustrated. The meeting was full of endless questions, and very few answers. The meetings continue for days and weeks. Representatives are sent to the government, but are rejected. Even white employers are asked to help, but nothing will change the mind of the government and its officials. The only setback is that the relocation occurs in September, instead of the promised July.

The white government cares so little for its black citizens that it doesn't even bother to answer their questions or provide them with adequate information. The people in Mandisa's community try to appeal to their white employers for help, hoping that they can serve as a go-between, but the government is both unflinching and unfeeling.

Early in the morning on September 1st, Mandisa and her family wake up to their house burning down. Police cars, bulldozers, and military vehicles surround the township, and white men are destroying homes, forcing the residents to relocate. Families try to salvage what they can from their homes, pulling the structures down themselves to save building materials.

The government and law enforcement don't just forcibly pluck Mandisa and her neighbors from their homes—they also cruelly destroy those homes. This scene reads like the frontlines of a battle, a violent riot, or an instance of cold-blooded terrorism, but it's actually how the government deals with a large, disenfranchised segment of its population.

Mama and Tata begin the march to their new home, with the materials they've salvaged from their old home on their backs. Arriving in Guguletu, Mandisa observes, "everybody changed." The new houses of the settlement, "brand-new brick [...] with their glass windows, concrete floors, bare walls and hungry rooms" created new material needs. Some [p]eople believed they'd been bettered, and strove hard to live up to that perception." As the men, who typically worked, had the same wages as before, women started going to work to augment the family's income, leaving children home alone to fend for themselves.

In forcing people to abandon their homes and communities, the government creates additional strain by constructing housing developments that are far different than what the people of Blouvlei (and beyond) are accustomed to, which essentially forces families to buy new home goods like curtains for the glass windows and rugs for the concrete floors. This has an ambiguous psychological effect on the community, as some people feel that this change "better[s]" them, while others, like Mandisa, feel dehumanized.

Back in the present, in 1993, neither Mxolisi, nor Mandisa's husband, Dwadwa, have returned home. Once again, Mandisa wonders what is wrong with Mxolisi, and why he refuses to listen to her. Mandisa remembers how Mxolisi used to be open with her, and would share his secrets. She wonders why he stopped. Mandisa does laundry to distract herself.

Mandisa continues to view Mxolisi as unique from her other children. She's even more worried about Mxolisi than she is about her husband, cementing Mxolisi as the most important person in her life. Even though they aren't as close anymore—something that weighs on Mandisa heavily—she seems to see her son as an extension of herself.

Eventually Dwadwa returns with spleen for dinner. He reports that there are police vans around the train station and also along their street, although luckily the police have stayed inside their cars. Mandisa cooks up the meat Dwadwa brought home. She continues to worry about Mxolisi, who, although he loves meat, fails to appear even when she serves dinner. She feels "unsettled," and can barely eat.

While in theory police are supposed to be public servants who help and protect citizens, the residents of Guguletu fear and resent them, seeing the law enforcement as an extension of the racist government under apartheid. Thus, it's a relief to Mandisa that the police are at least staying inside their cars, even though they're on high alert. Mandisa's worry about Mxolisi's safety and possible involvement in the crime intensifies now that her other family members are all accounted for.

Mandisa gets ready for bed. She reflects on the violence that has been occurring in her neighborhood for years. Still, this past violence was different than today's murder of a white woman, which was committed "for no reason at all. Killed, in fact, while doing good…"

Mandisa isolates two reasons why today's violence is different. First, the Girl was white; as white people rarely venture into Guguletu, much of the violence in the township happens among black residents. Violence against a white person is bound to attract the government and law enforcement's wrath, thus endangering black South Africans even more under the racist apartheid regime. Secondly, based on the story Mandisa has begun constructing about the Girl, Mandisa suspects that the Girl was killed "for no reason" and that she was murdered "while doing good." In other words, the violence was senseless and the victim was not only innocent but an ally.

That night, in bed, Dwadwa asks Mandisa where Mxolisi is. When she says she doesn't know, he warns her that he will "bring you big trouble one day." Mandisa doesn't like that Mxolisi is always out either, but defends him to her husband, arguing, "all children are like that, these days." Dwadwa responds that her answer is not one of "a wise mother," and that even if Mxolisi is no longer a young boy, it is still Mandisa's responsibility to mother him.

Even Dwadwa espouses the idea that parents are responsible for their children. Interestingly, he seems to take little to no responsibility himself for Mxolisi's actions; as the story is about to reveal, Dwadwa is Mxolisi's stepfather, so it's possible he feels that it's not his right to try to control Mxolisi.

Mandisa reflects on how Dwadwa, although only Siziwe's biological father, is kind to all of her children. Still, she is unable to apologize to him for lashing out. Instead, she lays awake worrying about Mxolisi.

Even in the midst of a fight with her husband—whom the novel firmly positions as a good man and a positive force in Mandisa's life—Mandisa is still hung up on her son. Her unshakable worry, coupled with Dwadwa's moralizing, suggests that Mandisa does see Mxolisi as her responsibility at this point.

Mandisa remembers being in school after she was relocated to Guguletu. The classes were so big, she didn't learn the names of the other students in it. When inspectors came to check on the children's learning, the teacher used her hands to indicate the right answer to the questions so the children would seem well learned.

The corruption in South Africa under the apartheid regime also seeps into the schools. Mandisa has already pointed out that the schools of her youth (and the ones her children attend—or are supposed to attend) lack adequate resources. This passage shows the impact of that, as there are too few teachers and too many students for any real learning to take place.

Mandisa explains that schools have gotten worse since her own childhood. Mxolisi is twenty but still in the classes he should've completed at age eleven or twelve. With "boycotts, strikes, and indifference" Mandisa knows her "children have paid the price."

This moment points back to Mandisa's earlier lament that no matter what she does or says, she simply can't get her children to go to school. Mxolisi being so far behind seems to be a testament to this, though it also shows that schools for black South Africans aren't equipped to help students succeed.

Mandisa briefly addresses the Mother, wondering if the Girl went to school. If she did, did she not understand that Guguletu "was not safe for the likes of her"?

Here, Mandisa draws clear boundaries between white spaces and black spaces in apartheid-era South Africa; the divide is so strict that trying to cross into the other territory can prove fatal. Mandisa is certainly not arguing that this is the way things should be, but simply that this is the way things are. As in many parts of the novel, Mandisa seems passively resigned to the corruption that surrounds her, making her a foil for the altruistic Girl and the politically charged Mxolisi.

In bed, Mandisa reflects upon the "havoc our children" are creating in society. To her, it seems children have decided that their parents are stupid, and that it is now the children's job to lead the revolution. They reported to adult leaders who told the children to "make the country ungovernable." At first, Mandisa admits, parents cheered on their children as they stoned white people's cars.

Even though she seems to go back and forth on whether or not parents should be responsible for their children's actions, Mandisa examines in this passage the way that parents have a hand in the way their children turn out. In this case, parents were initially excited to see their children engaging in acts of political dissent but didn't yet realize that such violent behavior would spiral out of control.

Mandisa remembers singing a song about black South Africans murdering a nun in school, but the song took pity on the nun. Now, she explains, children sing "AmaBhulu, azizinja," or "whites are dogs," an idiom learned from their parents who would say it as they returned from work, where they had served white people.

"AmaBhulu, azizinja" is one of the many songs and chants peppered throughout the novel. Translated to "whites are dogs," the chant was passed down from generation to generation. Thus, in using the phrase, the younger generation draws on their parents' experiences and connects to a shared history of frustration and oppression.

Mandisa's children's generation got increasingly out of hand. After stoning white people's cars, they burned down their own schools, an action the adults disliked but understood. However, then children began burning unoccupied buildings, black people's cars, and black people's houses. At first, adults justified that perhaps the children recognized some secret guilt in their neighbors, or saw that they were collaborating with the apartheid government, calling these potential traitors "Iimpimpi." Parents continued to praise their children, and increasingly feared them and their power. However, Mandisa recognizes the children "descended into barbarism," losing their humanity.

In charting how Mxolisi's generation got so out of hand, Mandisa reveals how difficult it can be to control or subdue children once they begin slipping away. This ties into Mandisa's earlier thoughts about how Mxolisi used to share everything with her, and then one day she suddenly realized that she no longer knew her son. The younger generation's violence quickly snowballs, and the parents are left helpless.

For Mandisa, the final straw was when children murdered a black man from Guguletu by draping an old tire around his neck and setting it on fire, an action that came to be known as necklacing. Few leaders condemned the murder, even though, to Mandisa's knowledge, the man was innocent. More people were publicly executed, and when questioned, the children said they were "fighting the apartheid government," and explained, "a war was going on."

The children are clearly frustrated and fired up, which Mandisa implies is understandable, but their explanations of their crime betray their naivety. They make vague statements—that they are "fighting the apartheid government" because "a war [is] going on"—and try to justify all the violence they commit, even against innocent black South Africans, through those catchall explanations.

CHAPTER 6: 4 A.M. – THURSDAY 26 AUGUST 1993

Mandisa jolts awake early in the morning. She still feels tired, having slept nervously and fitfully. She wonders what woke her up, and realizes it was the sound of a car door being quietly shut. She wonders if Mxolisi has arrived by car. She comforts herself by asserting her son "is not a bad boy," just a student caught up in politics. She reasons that two weeks ago he saved a girl from an attempted rape, proving he's not a bad person.

Mandisa tries to use anecdotal evidence to prove to herself that her son "is not a bad boy," but doesn't seem fully convinced. Her thoughts reveal that there is a blurry line between being "a bad boy" and a politically active one in apartheid-era South Africa, as political action feels necessarily tied up in violence in the face of a cruel and corrupt government.

Mandisa stands in silence for a moment, before she is startled by banding on the windows, walls, and doors. Her house has been surrounded by police officers. Dwadwa jumps out of bed and pulls on a pair of pants. Siziwe runs into her parents' room and hides in their bed. Mandisa comforts her, as the police announce themselves and demand the family "open up." Mandisa worries about Mxolisi again, but knows the police wouldn't come to announce that something bad happened to him.

The fact that the police wouldn't come to personally deliver bad news further paints the police force as callous and cruel—they care little about what happens to the people they're supposed to serve and protect and only prioritize an in-person meeting when they're trying to intimidate people in the community, as they do here to Mandisa's family.

Dwadwa goes to open the door, but the police break it down before they have a chance. The police accuse the family of taking too long to open the door because they are hiding something, and retaliate by breaking apart the furniture in the house. Even as the police destroy Mandisa's home, she is relieved they are really are law enforcement, and not some anonymous mob. Still, she wonders why they're here. The police don't help black South Africans in Guguletu, and have even been responsible for several deaths.

The police prove to be small-minded and sadistic, as they are clearly anxious to get Mandisa's family in trouble for something. They settle on the idea that the family must be hiding something since they took so long to open the door—even though everyone was asleep and thus foggy and bewildered—and use that excuse to inflict further violence by trashing their house.

Police pull Mandisa from the bedroom by her collar, dragging along the floor to the kitchen, where a man questions her, shouting "where is he?" over and over, finally clarifying he's looking for her son. When she asks which one, the police officer has to ask a black policeman, who tells Mandisa they're looking for Mxolisi. Mandisa truthfully explains she doesn't know where Mxolisi is, and the white police officer slaps her.

This passage reveals that the police force isn't made up of only white people. However, given Mxolisi's gang's earlier description of the police as "pigs," it seems like the community sees the police officers as the despicable hands and feet of the government, regardless of their race. The white police officers treat Mandisa terribly, knowing that they will face no repercussions for their actions.

The police continue to dismantle the house. They destroy the hokkie where Mxolisi and Lunga slept, look in the rafters, in closets, and under beds. As they leave, although they know Lunga is not Mxolisi, they beat him anyway, joking that "you must be your brother's keeper." Finally, the police leave. However, Mandisa knows that even though the police have left, she and her family will never be the same again, and are now in "the eye of a raging storm."

In referring to Lunga as his "brother's keeper," the police officers suggest that Lunga is responsible for Mxolisi and thus deserves to be beaten up since he doesn't know where his brother is—yet another excuse to enact more violence. The phrase comes from the biblical Book of Genesis; after murdering his brother, Abel, Cain tells God that he's not his "brother's keeper," thus trying to evade responsibility for not taking care of him. This is an interesting offshoot to the novel's more central question of whether or not parents should be held accountable for their children's decisions.

CHAPTER 7

Mandisa briefly address the Mother, explaining that Mxolisi has caused her so much trouble in her life, but he can no longer surprise her, given his surprise conception. She then begins to tell the story of her first pregnancy. Mandisa was only fifteen—still a child—in 1973 when her son was born.

Mandisa's teen pregnancy, unplanned and unexpected, points to the way that family can be burdensome. At the young age of fifteen, Mandisa has to come to terms with what will be expected of her as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law, which means a whole host of new responsibilities.

The story begins: in 1972, Mandisa is a star student, and Mama hopes that both Mandisa and Khaya can use "education to free [themselves] from the slavery" that she and Tata experience as "uneducated labourers."

As black South Africans, Mandisa and her family are kept in poverty and have few means for advancement. The one resource that is available to them is education (even though their schools are second-rate), which is why Mama clings to it as her children's only chance at a better life.

Mandisa's bad luck begins when she gets her period for the first time in 1971, which brings with it Mama's constant fear that she will get pregnant. Then, Mandisa's best friend, Nono, begins dating Mandisa's brother, Khaya. Mandisa cuts off their friendship, upset that Nono initially kept this romance a secret, as she would pretend to visit Mandisa while really visiting her boyfriend.

Though Mandisa and Mama have had a fairly warm and close relationship up until this point, this dynamic changes as Mandisa goes through puberty. On the brink of teenagerhood, Mandisa now faces new expectations from her mother: namely, not getting pregnant.

Soon after cutting things off with Nono, Mandisa runs into an old school friend, Stella, while getting groceries for Mama. Stella has grown since Mandisa last saw her—she wears a bra now and smokes cigarettes. Stella shares gossip with Mandisa, telling her that a girl they knew from Blouvlei is pregnant, and another has been married off to an old man. Mandisa decides to try and strike up a friendship with Stella, but ironically it helps her rekindle her relationship with Nono, as she can't help but share Stella's gossip with Nono.

Hearing gossip from Stella prepares Mandisa for what her life could be like now that she is on the cusp of womanhood. This passage foreshadows the fate that's in store for Mandisa; though she won't be married off to an old man, she'll certainly be married off, and despite Mama's mounting anxiety about Mandisa's virginity, the young girl will indeed get pregnant.

A new boy begins at Mandisa's school. His name is China, and he and Mandisa begin to date. Mandisa keeps it secret from Mama, who has warned her to never let a boy touch her, lest she get pregnant. Mandisa heeds Mama's warnings, and for months doesn't touch any boys, including Khaya. Finally, Nono explains what Mama means, and what kind of touching can realistically lead to pregnancy.

Mandisa's staunch avoidance of boys shows that she feels obligated to do what Mama says, even if she doesn't fully understand what's being asked of her.

Mama is obsessed with Mandisa's virginity. She lengthens Mandisa's skirts and dresses to make her more modest, and begins doing vaginal examinations to make sure Mandisa is still a virgin, or, in her terms, "whole" and "unspoilt." Mama also knows if Mandisa became pregnant it would embarrass the whole extended family, and bring shame on Mama, who is active in the local church. Mama insists it is the duty of mothers to "ensure the health of their daughters."

This passage reveals why Mama is so worried about Mandisa getting pregnant—it has nothing to do with Mandisa's well-being, and everything to do with Mama's own reputation as a respected member of the community. Mama sees her patrolling as a "duty" she has as a mother, and she implies that it's Mandisa's "duty" as a daughter to be obedient.

That March, Ribba, a girl only a few years older than Mandisa, dies during a botched abortion. Mama increases her examinations of Mandisa, more afraid for her daughter than ever.

With the news of an abortion gone wrong in the community, Mama does seem to care somewhat about Mandisa's safety. However, it's possible that Mama's worries also stem from wondering what the community would think of her if they found out that her daughter had an abortion. The botched abortion also provides some historical context; abortion wasn't legalized until 1996 in South Africa (this passage is set in 1972), so anyone who wants or needs one must undergo dangerous illegal procedures.

Mandisa and China begin to become physically intimate, but they never have penetrative sex, and therefore hope to avoid the risk of pregnancy. Mandisa fears Mama, and China fears his father and respects Mandisa's wishes.

Even as Mandisa begins growing into her sexuality and meets a boy whom she really likes, she is still careful to follow Mama's main rule: no penetrative sex. Mandisa's conscientiousness suggests that she sees her mother as having her best interests at heart, thus fulfilling the obligation stated earlier that mothers must "ensure the health of their daughters."

Mama begins to suspect Khaya and Nono are dating, and begins to verbally abuse Nono, and pick on her for her appearance and her perceived promiscuity. She becomes even more upset when, that June, Nono's mother comes over to inform Mama that Nono is pregnant, and Khaya is the father. Mama blames Nono, arguing "it is the girl's responsibility […] to see that boundaries are not crossed," and forbids Mandisa from speaking to her friend.

The immense pressure Mama puts on Mandisa to not get pregnant, and the sharp words she pelts at Nono, suggest that she believes it's a woman's obligation to be morally upright and guide the men in their life toward the right path. She even explicitly says as much, declaring "it is the girl's responsibility."

Mandisa is careful never to lay with China "in the manner of a wife with her husband" because her mother says "good girl[s]" don't behave that way, and Mandisa desperately wants to be a "good girl."

Mandisa continues to subscribe to her mother's outlook and rules in an attempt to fulfill her obligations as a daughter and meet her family's expectations that she will behave like a "good girl."

Eventually, Mandisa begins to refuse Mama's physical virginity checks. They have a stand off that lasts a week, at the end of which Mama tells Mandisa to pack her things, because she is moving to Gungululu to live with her grandmother. Mandisa begs her mother not to send her away to the far off desert village, but it's too late, and soon her mother delivers her to Makhulu, a woman whom Mandisa has never even met.

Mama and Mandisa's increasingly strained relationship reaches a fever pitch when Mandisa begins boldly going against the grain of what her family expects of her. The fact that Mandisa finds Mama's virginity checks so invasive highlights the potentially negative aspects of family expectations. However, Mandisa's refusal literally pulls the family apart, which suggests that these obligations and expectations were keeping the family together.

In September of 1972, Mandisa lays in bed in the early morning darkness. She misses China, who is back is Cape Town, while Mandisa now lives in Gungululu. She's lived here for the past three months, and genuinely believes that, if not for her love for China, she would've died. However, her grandmother, Makhulu should also be given credit: Makhulu cooks Mandisa's favorite foods to make sure she eats, and is kind and gentle. Still, Mandisa feels abandoned and banished, her relationship with Mama forever changed.

Even though Mandisa was the one who began to refuse her mother's vaginal checks—thus setting in motion a dispute that led to Mandisa's banishment to Gungululu—she still seems to find the situation unjust. While Mama expected complete obedience from her daughter, Mandisa expected, it seems, to be treated with unconditional love. Neither doubted that they had an obligation to one another as mother and daughter, but how they defined those obligations was drastically different.

Mandisa has three months left in Gungululu. After, she'll either go to high school in Cape Town or boarding school. She hopes she'll get to go to boarding school, although it is more expensive, and worries that God will not answer her prayers.

Mandisa has high hopes for her education, which suggests that she's absorbed her mother's teachings that pursuing an education is the only way a black South African can escape poverty and find a better life under apartheid.

One afternoon after school, Mandisa picks up the mail. She hopes to hear from China, but finds a letter for Makhulu instead. Mandisa's grandmother cannot read, and so Mandisa reads the note to her. It is from Auntie Funiwe, Mama's sister, and Makhulu's daughter. Funiwe writes that she is going to come visit after the schools close in the fall. She says she is coming to deliver a baby. Makhulu is confused, as her daughter is not a teacher, and therefore uninterested in school holidays, and has never expressed interest in motherhood. Still, Mandisa rereads the letter and eventually Makhulu seems content that she understands what it says.

Auntie Funiwe's letter is bewildering for Mandisa and Makhulu alike, as they can't make sense of why Auntie Funiwe would be having a baby (she is Mama's sister, and thus is likely close to middle age) or why should would care about aligning her visit with the school holidays. Taken together, these two details suggest that perhaps Auntie Funiwe thinks Mandisa *is pregnant and is coming to assist her during her break from school.*

At the end of the school term, Mandisa attends a school ceremony in which students are called out according to their class rank. She is not first, and worries for a moment that she will be last, but then is rewarded with second place. She's happy for herself, but also that she can bring the good news back to Makhulu and China.

Even though Mama was the one who instilled in Mandisa the importance of an education, Mandisa wants to share her success with her grandmother and her boyfriend—not her mother. It increasingly seems that the expectations Mama had for Mandisa (like undergoing Mama's uncomfortable vaginal checks and avoiding boys at all costs) tore the family apart.

Funiwe arrives late one night and Mandisa doesn't meet her until the morning. Mandisa is nervous and makes little direct eye contact with her aunt as she brings her coffee, but she can sense Funiwe staring at her. Funiwe, with fresh eyes, can see what Makhulu had failed to notice, and Mandisa eavesdrops from outside as Funiwe asks Makhulu if Mandisa is pregnant. Mandisa realizes she hasn't had her period in the three months she's been in Gungululu.

It seems that Auntie Funiwe's instincts were right, as Mandisa is, indeed, pregnant. Mama was strict with Mandisa about how she interacted with boys—so strict, in fact, that Mandisa avoiding touching boys in even the most benign of ways. The novel implies that Mama was so strict about preserving her daughter's innocence that she kept her dangerously ignorant of the realities of sex.

Funiwe and Makhulu call Mandisa inside and begin to question her. She explains she had a boyfriend, China, back in Cape Town, but never had penetrative sex with him—he had "always played outside, between the thighs. Makhulu verifies that Mandisa has not had a boyfriend in Gungululu, and that when she arrived she was, according to Mama's inspections, still a virgin. The two women send for a midwife from the village. She examines Mandisa, and confirms that she's technically still a virgin, but she is definitely pregnant, exclaiming, "She has been jumped into!"

Mandisa's shock at being three months pregnant without even knowing how it happened once again points to her naivete and suggests that her mother failed her "duty" to "ensure the health of [her] daughter" through scare tactics and a lack of information about intimacy, sex, and pregnancy. The midwife affirms that Mandisa is telling the truth—she hasn't had penetrative sex, as the novel implies that her hymen is unbroken—but nonetheless Mandisa is pregnant, and is suddenly thrust into the role of mother-to-be.

Makhulu and Funiwe call Mama, who arrives two days later. Sobbing, she wonders "what will the church people [will] say" and complains about the shame Mandisa brought to the family. Funiwe tries to explain that Mandisa has brought no shame, and that the whole situation is an unfortunate accident. She also urges Mama to "support and protect" Mandisa.

In standing up for Mandisa, Funiwe reveals that she believes that Mandisa is still a "good girl" and shouldn't be blamed for her unplanned pregnancy. Funiwe also speaks to the nature of family obligation, suggesting that families should "support and protect" one another even in the midst of unfortunate circumstances. Up until this point, though, Mama's actions have shown that she's not on Mandisa's side unconditionally.

Mandisa, meanwhile, is totally numb. Mama's reaction has "drained the last ounce of feeling" from her. "Fear. Shame. [and] Anger" all canceled each other out. Like Mama, Mandisa feels her technical virginity doesn't matter. She wants to die. Meanwhile, despite Funiwe and Makhulu's urging, Mama refuses to see her daughter as "an innocent victim and therefore someone worthy of her sympathy." Mandisa feels her life is over, the future she'd planned "bulldozed, extinguished, pulverized."

By refusing to "support and protect" Mandisa, as Funiwe has just urged her to do, Mama only pulls the family further apart. Although Mandisa's life will change regardless of whether or not Mama "supports and protects" her, Mandisa's deep despair at having her future "bulldozed, extinguished, [and] pulverized" would likely not be so acute if she knew she had her mother's loyalty and help through this scary time.

CHAPTER 8

Mandisa addresses the Mother. She explains that three children call her mother, but ever since Mxolisi killed the Girl, she's been called various other names—"Mother of the beast. Mother of the serpent," and even "Satan's mother." From the beginning Mxolisi caused pain, and brought "shame" and "bitter tears."

In the wake of the Girl's murder, the community takes out their anger and horror on Mandisa, suggesting yet again that children are extensions of their parents; what the child does wrong, the parent is responsible for. Leading up to the murder, Mandisa seems to mostly accept that this is the case. Now that it's clear that Mxolisi was, in fact, involved in the murder of the Girl, Mandisa is beginning to realize how unfair it is to saddle a parent with all of the mistakes their children make.

When Mama returns to Cape Town from Gungululu, she takes Mandisa with her. On the long drive back Mama is mostly silent, but Mandisa can sense her anger, disappointment, and pain. Back in Cape Town, Mama puts Mandisa under house arrest, forcing her to use the toilet only at night, and taking time off of work to monitor her daughter. Mama worries about the neighbors gossiping, and the effect gossip will have on her own reputation. Tata will not acknowledge his daughter, nor does he ask about her. Mandisa does her best to stay out of her father's way, distracting herself by thinking about China, and wondering when he'll come see her.

Mama continues to isolate Mandisa as punishment for not meeting her expectations. The punishments are all-consuming, as even Mandisa's bathroom breaks are heavily regulated. This passage highlights the price of failing to meet familial expectations in Mandisa's community, but it also emphasizes that family life, defined as it is by expectations and obligations, can be like a sort of inescapable prison.

Eventually, Mandisa asks Mama about seeing China, arguing, "this has happened to him as much as it has happened to me." Mama disagrees, arguing that nothing has happened to China. Eventually, Mama returns to work. That afternoon Mandisa gives a note to some school children passing by, and asks them to deliver it to China so he'll come and see her. However, this was unnecessary, because as soon as the school children leave, China comes in through the back door to see her.

Mama places the burden of the unplanned pregnancy squarely on Mandisa's shoulders, thus abdicating China of all responsibility. Mama's comments are undoubtedly sexist, but she also points to the way that a pregnancy affects a woman more acutely than a man, since the woman has to carry the baby. In claiming that nothing has happened to China, Mama also suggests that women have more familial responsibilities than men do, and that Mandisa will simply need to accept that.

China doesn't greet Mandisa. Instead, he stands still his face "a mask carved from the hardest wood." Mandisa tries to explain what happened, but she can see China getting angrier and angrier. He believes she had sex with someone else, and refuses to acknowledge the possibility he is the father. He yells at Mandisa and she collapses to the floor. He doesn't help her, instead, he watches her as she struggles to her feet. He tells her he's going to boarding school next year. He has a scholarship, and plans to use it.

Throughout her banishment to her grandmother's house and her pregnancy, Mandisa has been thinking of China as if he were the knight in shining armor who would make her life better—she even contemplated moving to East London just to be closer to him, which would be a "better arrangement." Here, China falls short of Mandisa's expectations in a big way; like Mama, China resorts to anger and refuses to listen to Mandisa's side of the story.

Mandisa is shocked. She cannot believe China thinks she "wanted to leave school, have a baby, become his wife." She, too, had plans for her future and her education. For the first time she sees China can be "vain," "self-centered," and "weak." Mandisa takes an angry step towards him and he jumps back in fear, quickly leaving the house and jumping over the back fence. She calls after him that he should never "set foot in this house again." Already devastated by her pregnancy, China's reaction is another heavy blow.

Family is central to the novel, especially in the context of familial obligations and expectations. Having failed to meet her family's expectation that she be a "good girl," Mandisa finds herself without any support from her immediate family; losing China, who can be seen as a kind of chosen family member, leaves Mandisa with nothing and no one.

Eventually, when Mandisa is six months pregnant, her family takes her to China's house. Her uncles walk behind her, and greet a cluster of China's male relatives, who will represent him. China's people wonder why Mandisa's family has waited so long to talk to them, and dispute the claim that she is "still whole." On the walk back, Mandisa's family is happy at least that they have "not been dealt the most terrible blow," that is, China's family did not explicitly deny China's responsibility in Mandisa's pregnancy.

Along with being interested in the way that obligations and expectations manifest themselves in the context of a family unit, the novel also focuses on how traditions play out in families and wider communities. This passage marks the beginning of a slew of childbirth- and wedding-related traditions that Mandisa will find herself expected to follow.

Mandisa is mostly upset she wasn't able to see China, and wonders if, given more time to process the pregnancy, he'll come around and accept her and the baby. She doesn't see him again until she is eight months pregnant. They meet in the priest's office, as Father Savage insists that China, a Christian, "can only do what is right"—that is, marry Mandisa. China has to "change his status" before he marries, and goes to the bush to get circumcised. However, before she can get married, Mandisa gives birth.

As China prepares to take on the role of husband and father, he must show that he has officially come of age and become a man by getting circumcised.

Mandisa reports that Mxolisi's birth, like his conception, occurred "without my say-so, without any invitation or encouragement." So full of anger throughout her pregnancy, the actual birth is so painful Mandisa finds herself hating her baby. However, as soon as he is born, and she breastfeeds him for the first time, she forgives him. Mandisa wonders if "forgive" is the right word: she knows that technically, Mxolisi has done nothing intentionally wrong.

Mxolisi's birth begins to flesh out why he and Mandisa have such a unique relationship and why Mandisa thinks of him as being markedly different from her other children. In this passage, Mandisa is forced to come to terms with the fact that Mxolisi is about to change her life dramatically—which she resents—but also feels a rush of love for the baby.

Mandisa initially names Mxolisi "Hlumelo," which means sprout or sprig, the start of something new. Mandisa hopes good things will come, and at first, they do. One day, Tata acknowledges Mandisa's son and, a few weeks later, he calls Mandisa his daughter again.

In naming her newborn son "Hlumelo," Mandisa uses language to encourage a break from the past, as she hopes that there are new, good things awaiting her and her son in the future. Throughout the novel, language is usually a way to connect people to a shared past or experience, which already sets the stage for the ways in which Mxolisi will prove discordant and difficult.

By late February, when Mxolisi is two months old, Mandisa no longer wants to marry China. She had wanted to get married before she gave birth, so she wouldn't be an unwed mother and "bring disgrace upon the family," but marrying China won't help her now.

With her pregnancy and now with her marriage, Mandisa is completely going against the social grain of the community, dodging expectations and traditions alike. Doing so only brings shame to the family, however, again highlighting how important traditions and obligations are not just to Mandisa's family but to the community at large.

Mandisa is angry that China (and his people) seemed uninterested in marrying her or taking responsibility for her pregnancy. Mandisa wants to return to school, and she worries her marriage will be like "*Asikokuzibophelela nenj' enkangeni oko*," or "tying oneself to a dog in a patch of nettles." Mandisa explains this to Mama and Tata. Mama disagrees, but Tata is on her side, and so, for now, Mandisa uses money from her parents to enroll in evening Adult Education classes.

Surprisingly, Mandisa has won some support from her father (recall that when news of her pregnancy first broke, her father refused to acknowledge her has his daughter—an attitude he maintained until after Mxolisi's birth). Mama is against the idea of Mandisa going to school, it seems, because that's not what traditional mothers do. Since Mandisa has already broken so many traditions and expectations, Mama seems desperate to make Mandisa finally submit to being a certain type of woman.

Unfortunately, Tata, swayed by his brothers and extended family, changes his mind. China's family is ready to accept Mandisa as China's wife, and so, three months after having her baby, Mandisa gets married. There isn't a ceremony; instead their marriage is a "mutual agreement between respective families," with each side accepting the other as in-laws.

Tata experiences a swift change of heart when faced with pressure from the rest of his family, which suggests that he's eager to align himself with the expectations that the rest of the family has for him as a father.

Mandisa is forced to move into China's family's home. She takes a few personal items, but leaves behind relics of her girlhood. As Mandisa leaves, Mama asks about Mxolisi, and Mandisa realizes her mother has both accepted her grandson and begun to love him.

Mama begins to accept—and even love—Mxolisi once Mandisa fulfils the expectation of marrying the boy's father, as well as the social tradition of moving in with his family.

Mandisa realizes that her life is about to change again. Mama had slept with Mxolisi, and carried him on her back when they went to the post-natal clinic together. For the first time Mandisa is carrying her own baby and will sleep with him. She considers how, if not for Mxolisi, she would "still be in school." Now, instead she is "forced into being a wife, forever abandoning [her] dreams, hopes, aspirations. For ever."

Mandisa conflates motherhood with "abandoning [her] dreams, hopes, [and] aspirations" indefinitely. This obligation is why she comes to alternately resent and love Mxolisi so much—he was the one who "forced [her] into being a wife" and a mother at just fifteen years old.

Mandisa arrives at China's home, where he lives with his extended family. A young man ushers Mandisa inside and leaves her with a group of women who are chanting and singing loudly. The women lead her to a small bedroom. Mandisa describes the rest of the evening as a "blur." She cries most of the night, which is expected of most new brides, and feels as though her bones are full of "resentment and anger and hurt and fear." All of this emotion numbs her.

The first night in China's family home is overstimulating for Mandisa; everyone is a stranger, there is loud chanting and singing going on, and her emotions are so deep and painful that she eventually feels numb. Interestingly, the novel points out that this terrifying experience is expected of new brides. However, Mandisa doesn't seem to glean comfort or support from knowing that the story of her first night echoes many others'.

Mandisa's new sisters-in-law change her into new clothing and present her to her in-laws as a wife and not the girl they'd previously met. Mandisa is then subjected to a traditional ritual in which her in-laws rename her. Mandisa is allowed to reject names until she finds one acceptable, but knows the family can also stop suggesting new ones, and stick her with something unpleasant. China's aunt suggests "Nohehake," which contains "Hehake," "an exclamation of surprise at some [...] unimaginable monstrosity." Although offensive, Mandisa accepts the "mockery of a name."

On her first night in China's family home, Mandisa is essentially transformed into a new person; she's given new dwellings, clothing, and even a new name. The name China's family chooses for Mandisa reveals that they see her as an "unimaginable monstrosity" that appeared out of nowhere and altered the course of China's life. In a way, this is also how Mandisa thinks of Mxolisi; while she both loves and resents him, he was certainly an "unimaginable" surprise.

Mandisa's in-laws also insist on renaming Mxolisi, who, at this point, is still named Hlumelo. This is unconventional, but China's relatives insist that Mandisa didn't have the right to name the baby. Traditionally, grandparents name children, but since Mandisa was alone at the hospital, she did it herself. China's aunt firmly suggests the name "Mxolisi." Mandisa associates the name with a schoolmate she disliked, and though she is on the verge of tears, she doesn't protest. China's father says that his family hopes that through marriage and raising Mxolisi, the two families will grow together. After all the "debate and argument" the two families have engaged in, Mxolisi can "heal the wounds and bring us all some peace."

China's father speaks to the way that customs are what make family units strong and unite. He notes how Mxolisi—if Mandisa consents to follow the family's custom and rename him as such—can serve as a kind of truce between two feuding families. Even though Mandisa clearly doesn't want to rename her child (and has been just renamed herself, with an openly offensive name), she bends to her new family's wishes, prioritizing "peace" over further disagreement. The tradition that grandparents are supposed to name a new child connects to the novel's broader argument that language connects people to a shared history. In choosing the baby's name, the baby's relatives officially welcome him into their fold, claiming him as one of their own.

That evening, China complains about Mandisa's "miserly dowry." Mandisa lashes out, and the couple sleeps turned away from each other. Mandisa explains that this became the pattern of "argument and counter argument [that] formed" the "back-bone of our marriage." Still, Mandisa is a "good *makotis*," taking coffee to China's father and other relatives, and waking up early and staying up late to help run the household.

In an effort to continue to preserve the newfound "peace" between her and her new family, Mandisa throws herself into the role of the "good makotis," *or new bride. This role encompasses a great deal of obligations and responsibilities, as she is expected to be a dutiful helper and servant as she adjusts into the family.*

Mama comes by to see Mandisa, and notices that she's been getting thinner and thinner. Both she and Tata are worried about their daughter, and tell her she can come home if she needs to.

Now that Mandisa has satisfied the traditions that a young woman is expected to conform to, Mama finally seems free to worry about other things, like Mandisa's emotional well-being.

China gets a job at a Cold Meat Storage facility. He works long hours, but sleeps well at home. Mandisa is jealous; she struggles to sleep and feels deeply bitter. Although she and China had been so attracted to each other when sex was forbidden, now their relationship is "dead," all desire gone.

The early days of China and Mandisa's marriage highlight how traditions and familial obligations can be burdensome and stifling; when they weren't bound to one another in any sort of obligation, China and Mandisa loved and desired each other. Now that they are essentially forced to love and desire one another—or at least act like a family and have children—both former lovers feel increasingly resentful of and isolated from one another.

One morning China and Mandisa have an especially bad fight. Mandisa tries to wake China up for work, but he criticizes her for trying to help. He tells her it's "too late" for her help, as he's "not yet twenty and already out of school, doing a job [he] hate[s]." He is like "the dog in the patch of nettles." Mandisa wonders how this is her fault, and China tells her she could've gotten an abortion. Horrified, Mandisa spends the morning thinking of Ribba, her classmate who died during a backyard abortion.

China's sharp comment that Mandisa should have gotten an abortion is horrifying for Mandisa because abortions are illegal and dangerous; as Mama and Mandisa discussed earlier in the novel, and Mandisa remembers here, Ribba died tragically during a botched abortion. Thus, China's comment betrays that he cares little about Mandisa's health or well-being—and wishes their son, and perhaps even Mandisa herself, dead. China feels no obligation to his wife or child, and given that the families in the community hinge on expectations, obligations, and traditions, this spells further trouble for the pair's marriage.

As frustrated as China is with his life, Mandisa is just as fed-up. She's in a period called ukuhota, where she's meant to serve her in-laws. Normally, this period lasts until the wife has a baby, but since she already has a baby, she hopes it will end soon. Each day, Mandisa does chores from early morning to late night, caring for her in-laws and Mxolisi. China gets paid for the job that he hates, but Mandisa labors for free.

As a new bride, Mandisa is expected to fulfil a very specific and demanding set of expectations, which require her to prostrate herself before the family and serve them as if she were a servant rather than a member of their clan. Mandisa does what's expected of her—albeit begrudgingly—which shows that she's made some progress in terms of keeping the peace by upholding traditions and customs.

After a year, Mandisa hopes her servitude might be up, and she'll be able to restart her education. She asks China's father, who offers excuses mostly that Mxolisi is too young (even though Mama could care for him). Mandisa continues to wait. She admits that a part of her hates her son, or at least what he's done to her life. She feels that he is "always cheating me of something I desperately wanted."

This passage begins to flesh out the idea that Mandisa resents Mxolisi for specifically getting in the way of her education. Because Mandisa strongly believes that education is the only path to a better life, and her son interferes with this, Mandisa sees Mxolisi as the root cause of all *her struggles. He is the reason why she can't have a better life—and perhaps never will.*

After another year, Mandisa asks China's father if she can return to school. This time, he says they don't have enough money. Even though Tata offered to pay, her father-in-law refuses to accept his charity, citing his family's pride.

Mandisa's in-laws are unsupportive of her dreams, as pursuing an education lies outside of her duties as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law.

That year, just after Mxolisi turns two, China disappears. He leaves for work one day and never returns. China's father blames Mandisa for his son's disappearance, and goes to search for him, but China cannot be found. He checks China's work, the police station, and the hospital, but China never appears. Twenty years later, Mandisa has still never seen him again. She wonders if their relationship could've been better under different circumstances—if he found out about her pregnancy earlier, for example—but she'll never know.

Throughout the novel, China has acted like he has no obligation to Mandisa or Mxolisi, and here he makes that perfectly clear by abandoning them. Families in Mandisa's community are centered around obligations and expectations—these things are the glue that keep families strong and united—so it makes sense that Mandisa and China's marriage would crumble without them.

China's father, distraught, stops going to work. Without his and China's income, the family desperately needs money, and so Mandisa goes to work as a domestic servant. She is still expected to do her domestic duties around the house but after six months is fed up, and so rents a hokkie for herself and Mxolisi, a home she describes as a "*hokkie* of my own."

In renting a hokkie, or shack, "of [her] own," Mandisa again goes against tradition, leaving behind China's family in the process. Mandisa constantly grapples with the need to satisfy her family's expectations of her; in trying to be a good daughter-in-law but ultimately skirting that role after many months of thankless work, Mandisa seems to be making a choice of who her family really is. Her true obligation is to be a good mother to Mxolisi, not a good daughter-in-law to a family that no longer contains her husband.

Mxolisi grows quickly. He has a large vocabulary, runs before he walks, and is generally a "marvel." Mandisa and Mxolisi do everything together, and Mama and Tata love him. Still, Mandisa knows Mxolisi misses China and China's father.

Mandisa's choice is not without regret—her acknowledgement that Mxolisi misses his father and grandfather shows that Mandisa is well aware that family is the backbone of life in her community.

Although he was a precocious child who learned to speak early, Mxolisi stops speaking for several years at four years old. He is playing at the big house whose yard houses Mandisa's hokkie. He often plays with the teenage boys, Zazi and Mzamo, who live in the house. One day, Zazi and Mzamo run into the house terrified, and their father quickly hides them in a wardrobe. The police charge into the house, but can't find the children. As they leave, Mxolisi calls out, and points to the wardrobe where the boys are hiding. The boys try to escape but the police shoot them instantly. Traumatized by witnessing the death of his two friends, Mxolisi stops speaking for two years.

In recounting this moment, Mandisa shows how violence was woven into the fabric of Mxolisi's childhood. Through her detailed explanations of her son's upbringing and the state of things in Guguletu under apartheid, Mandisa attempts to show the Mother of the Girl—and the reader—that the crime her son committed is far more complex than it seems. In telling Mxolisi's life story as well as her own, Mandisa places the murder of the Girl—as well as that of Zazi and Mzamo—against a larger history of oppression and pain.


After Zazi and Mzamo's deaths, Mxolisi is like a "walking zombie," although he never cries. Mandisa worries for him, and eventually gets Mama and Mama's mlungu woman to help her. They recommend a hospital where doctors, nurses, and social workers examine Mxolisi, and explain that there's nothing physically wrong with him, although his heart is broken and he needs time to heal. Mandisa understands it might take a long time. She's always seen him as a stubborn child, from the moment he "decided he would be born."

In Mother to Mother, *language is important because it unites people and reminds them of their shared histories and experiences. By this logic, lack of language does the exact opposite; in becoming mute for two years, Mxolisi isolates himself from his mother and the wider world.*

One day Nono visits Mandisa in her hokkie. Nono has returned to school and is busy, but has made time for her old friend. They discuss the year they both became pregnant, and talk about Ribba. Nono confesses she was jealous of Ribba; although Ribba had died, Nono found the anger she faced almost unbearable. Mandisa asks Nono what the hardest part for her was. For Nono, it was "fear of discovery" and "shame." For Mandisa, it was the shock of pregnancy.

Nono, Mandisa's childhood friend who took up with Mandisa's brother, reappears in the narrative. Both women share stories of the backlash they faced upon getting pregnant out of wedlock. Although these stories are ones of pain and suffering, they allow the women to empathize with one another because of their shared experience.

China's father suggests bringing Mxolisi to a sangoma, an indigenous healer. Mandisa, Mxolisi, and China's father all go together. The sangoma has an assistant bring her a glass of water, which she makes change color. Mxolisi gasps, the most noise he's made in two years. The sangoma then makes the water boil with her hands. Finally, she addresses Mxolisi. She tells him that he holds himself, and is held by others, responsible. She then looks to Mandisa and tells her "you must free your son," and that children "know when we hate them." She finishes by saying Mxolisi has already "seen great evil," and needs "all the love and understanding he can get."

This passage feels vaguely reminiscent of when Aunt Funiwe and Makhulu implored Mama to "support and protect" Mandisa despite the shocking news of her unplanned pregnancy. While Mama believed Mandisa failed her by getting pregnant out of wedlock, Mandisa feels that Mxolisi failed her by simply being born. Although Mama did not choose to "support and protect" her daughter for many years, Mandisa now has the opportunity to act with "love and understanding" when dealing with her son.

A few weeks later, Nono comes to visit Mandisa and asks when Mandisa is planning to have another baby. Mandisa jokes that China is not around, and she'd need his help. Nono offers to find Mandisa a partner, but as they talk Mandisa realizes why she's been uninterested in having sex, and why she's been so resentful of Mxolisi. Mxolisi has, in a way, taken her own virginity. Just as some women always fondly remember the partner who took their virginity, she resents her son for it. She admits that sometimes "when he cried [...] instead of feeling sorry for him, I felt sorry for myself." She understands Mxolisi didn't intend to "ruin" her, but she finds herself hating him.

Mandisa continues to piece together her complex resentment for her son. Recall that when Mandisa became pregnant, a local midwife confirmed that Mandisa was technically a virgin—meaning that her hymen was unbroken, thus proving Mandisa's claim that she never had penetrative sex. This means that it was Mxolisi's birth that broke her hymen and, in Mandisa's mind, stole her virginity. Even though Mandisa constantly dodges and resents traditions, she laments not being able to partake in the traditional way of conceiving a child.

Nono is pregnant again, and she and Khaya finally get married. Mxolisi is the ring bearer. At the wedding, Mandisa meets Lungile, who offers to walk her home. She doesn't need help, but remembers Nono and the sangoma and allows him to walk her home anyway. She sleeps with him that night, and many nights after. Nine months later, she gives birth to a second son, Lunga.

Even though many of her struggles stem from having a child out of wedlock—which went against her family and the community's expectations for her as a young unmarried woman—Mandisa repeats the same behavior here.

Lungile and Mxolisi get along well, often spending one-on-one time together. Still, Mandisa enjoys "Our private moments" with her son. When Mxolisi could talk, he would often whisper to her when he didn't want other people to hear, and now, even though he doesn't speak, he still communicates with little signs.

Mxolisi is beginning to regain language by communicating with hand signs; as the novel argues that language binds people together, Mxolisi's increasing use of language corresponds with his growing connection with Lungile and Mandisa.

Soon after Lunga is born, Mxolisi stops whispering for a while. He also begins to wet his bed. Mandisa recalls, "I scolded, I shamed, I ridiculed," none of which helps. Eventually, Lungile threatens Mxolisi with a folktale, that if he wet his bed again he'd be forced to eat a mouse to cure him. Mxolisi does not stop wetting the bed, and Lungile and Mandisa force him to eat a cooked mouse, which does stop his bedwetting.

Lungile uses language—in this case, a folktale—to threaten Mxolisi rather than connect with him in a positive way.

Finally, for the first time in two years, Mxolisi speaks. He asks "*Uph' owam utata*? […] Where is my own father?" Shocked, Mandisa doesn't answer, and Mxolisi asks again. However, when he doesn't receive an answer, he never inquires after China again. Even after Mxolisi begins to speak again, Mandisa worries about the "terrible guilt" he carries for the deaths of Mzamo and Zazi, whom he has never cried for or asked about. To this day, he will not tattle on another person. Still, in the moment he asked for his father, Mandisa saw "the knowledge in his wounded eyes."

The novel largely positions language as a medium that draws people together and connects them to a shared history, so it's fitting that Mxolisi asks about his father when the boy finally regains his capacity for language. In not answering his question—that is, in not using language—Mandisa isolates Mxolisi from his past and perhaps from her, too.

Soon, Mxolisi begins school. He's the top of his class, though suffers a setback when a teacher canes him for not having paid school fees. Mxolisi refuses to return to school, but Mandisa coaxes him back. However, Lungile eventually leaves them, and Mandisa has to watch her two sons by herself. With less oversight, Mxolisi soon stops attending school, and gets a job to help his mother. Mandisa explains to him how much harder his life will be if he stops attending school, and decides to get a better paying job.

The detail about Mxolisi not paying his school fees is a reminder of the family's poverty. As this part of the novel foregrounds Mandisa's family life, it's crucial to remember what's going on in the background: institutionalized racism, enacted and perpetuated by a callous government, which keeps black South Africans from lifting themselves out of destitution.

Mxolisi initially returns to school, but in high school he grows increasingly radicalized and even becomes a political student leader. He learns chants, like "LIBERATION NOW, EDUCATION LATER," and "ONE SETTLER, ONE BULLET." The more politically active Mxolisi becomes, the less time he spends at home and at school.

Even though Mandisa knows that pursuing an education is one of the only ways a black South African can find a better life, Mxolisi finds politics far more pressing. The rallying cry "one settler, one bullet" is a call to kill white settlers. During this time, the PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) defined a settler as a white person who was oppressing black South Africans—in other words, not all white South Africans were considered settlers at this point. However, some interpreted the phrase without nuance, using it as a way to justify violence against any and all white people.


Eventually, Mandisa gets married to a man named Dwadwa, with whom she has her third child, a daughter named Siziwe. Mandisa appreciates that Dwadwa is "solid, steadfast, [and] predictable."

As Mxolisi grows distant and radicalized, and systematic oppression under apartheid rages on, Dwadwa provides an important sense of stability for Mandisa.


Mandisa is often stopped in Guguletu by strangers who call her "Mother of Mxolisi," and tell her she should be proud of her son because of his political activism. Mandisa thinks back to the morning when two strangers came to her home, a man and a woman, and thanked her for raising Mxolisi, who had saved their daughter from an attempted rape. The girl's parents believed Mxolisi had a good heart, stopping a crime no one else thought to stop. Now, since Mxolisi has murdered the Girl, Mandisa laments that the same people who praised her for raising Mxolisi now blame her.

That people call Mandisa "Mother of Mxolisi" rather than "Mandisa" enfolds two of the novel's key themes. First, it emphasizes the community's belief that children are extensions of their parents (or perhaps vice versa). This can be a good thing, as when Mandisa is showered with gratitude and praise for her son's noble action of stopping a rape, but it can also be a terrible burden, as Mandisa has been coming to terms with throughout the novel. Secondly, the phrase "Mother of Mxolisi" is a reminder of language's capacity to connect people—here, Mandisa's identity is wrapped up in her son and her status as a mother, connecting mother and son so tightly that they're practically intertwined.

CHAPTER 9: 6 A.M. – THURSDAY 26 AUGUST

Back in the present, Mandisa has thousands of questions after the police leave, as they told her nothing about their raid. However, she's afraid she already knows the answers—the police are looking for Mxolisi because of his involvement in the death of the Girl.

This passage returns to the police raid that took place several chapters ago, in which the police abused Mandisa but provided no information about what was going on. Mandisa is afraid of asking the police any questions and engaging with them further, especially because she already intuits that son must have been involved in the murder.

Skonana comes by looking for gossip, but Dwadwa asks her to leave. As she goes, offended, she says she came over because wanted to tell them "what people on the street are saying." Mandisa is curious, but doesn't call out. Instead, she takes her frustration out on Dwadwa, and then begins worrying more about Mxolisi.

Once again, the details of tragedy begin as rumor. Like when young Mandisa and her family were forcibly relocated—which they found out about first through the rumor mill and then through impersonal sheets of paper dropped from an airplane—neither the government nor law enforcement bothers to communicate personally with Mandisa.

Mandisa is happy to examine Lunga and see his injuries are only superficial. Siziwe, however, who was physically uninjured, is emotionally devastated. Mandisa goes to care for her daughter as Dwadwa cares for their son. She is interrupted by another neighbor, Qwati, whom Dwadwa also quickly kicks out.

Finally left to their own devices, the family becomes suddenly insular—kicking out anyone who is not part of their brood—and cares for one another tenderly, showing how family obligation can sometimes be a good thing.

Mandisa picks up Siziwe from where she is squatting and shaking in the kitchen and carries her to the bedroom. She can neither cry nor speak, but eventually seems to fall asleep. Mandisa gets up but Siziwe wakes up and calls her back, tears finally pouring forth. She admits she saw Mxolisi the previous day; he ran into the house and hid something in the hokkie. Siziwe has a "cagey" look, and won't tell Mandisa any more details.

Siziwe's "cagey" look suggests that she's torn between obligation to her brother and mother; she doesn't want to tattle on her brother, but she doesn't want to keep her mother in the dark. This is yet another example of how familial obligation can be difficult to bear, as in this case Siziwe has conflicting obligations to different family members rather than to the family as a whole.

Dwadwa prepares to go to work, and Lunga asks Mandisa to wake him up in a few hours for school. Although normally an advocate for education, Mandisa feels Lunga is too injured to go.

More conflicting obligations abound—although Mandisa believes it's her responsibility as a parent to force her child to go to school, she realizes that it's also her responsibility to nurture him when he's in pain.

Siziwe and Lunga are relatively safe, and Mandisa finally gives herself a moment to feel "fear and anger." She "feared, and refused to accept" what has happened to Mxolisi. Dwadwa tries to comfort her as he prepares for work, and checks in one last time before he leaves. Mandisa decides to stay home and wait for Mxolisi. Dwadwa wonders what she'll do if her son doesn't return, but Mandisa, angry, responds that he "always comes home," and if he's not home by lunch she'll go look for him.

Once Mandisa has fulfilled her obligations as a mother—calming her children down and nurturing them—Mandisa can then deal with her own emotions. As is consistent with the rest of the novel, family obligations come first. Dwadwa also fulfills his obligation as a husband, making sure his wife feels supported.

Dwadwa doesn't think Mxolisi will return. Dwadwa believes Mxolisi knows the police are after him. Mandisa asks him why he thinks the police are after her son. Dwadwa is shocked—he argues that he's always said Mxolisi "will bring us heavy trouble one day." As he leaves, he warns Mandisa that Mxolisi will come home "dragging […] a thorny bush of a scandal."

The idea that Mxolisi will return home "dragging […] a thorny bush of a scandal" is reminiscent of Mandisa's much earlier suggestion that getting married to China (who wanted nothing to do with her) would be like "tying oneself to a dog in a patch of nettles." Through similar language, Magona draws a connection between Mandisa's "thorny" past of an unplanned pregnancy and forcibly mandated marriage, itself a type of prison, and the "thorny" situation Mxolisi has gotten himself into, which will almost certainly lead to prison of the real sort.

CHAPTER 10

Mandisa explains that there is some knowledge she's had with her for her entire life. She was either born with it, or learned it very young. Her parents often complained about their white bosses, and often drove home the idea that "white people stole our land."

In this chapter, Mandisa begins to examine how language connects people to a shared history in the context of colonialism and oppression. From a young age, Mandisa learns from her parents' complaints and rants that white people are the oppressor, and that she is part of a wider body of oppressed people.

Mandisa learned the history of this phrase when Tatomkhulu, her grandfather, came to visit. After hearing what she'd been learning at school, he decided to help reeducate her. First, he explains the origins of the names Cape of Storm and Cape of Good Hope, which are both names for the Cape Town. Europeans named it Cape of Storms because the rough sea destroyed ships, but when they decided to settle there, the land became a hopeful place, hence the Cape of Good Hope.

Mandisa's grandfather sees it as his duty to educate Mandisa about the current political climate under apartheid. However, instead of starting his story in 1948, at the beginning of apartheid, he reaches back three centuries, starting with colonialism. In doing so, Tatomkhulu points out colonialism's legacy, suggesting that it is still present and pernicious three hundred years later.

Another day, Tatomkhulu tells Mandisa **the story of Nongqawuse**. Mandisa learned in school that she was "a false prophet who told people to kill all their cattle" with the promise of new cattle; the people did as she said, "because they were superstitious and ignorant." Upset, Tatomkhulu tells Mandisa the real story.

The schools for black South Africans are funded by the white government, and thus the government has control over what the children learn about their own histories. Mandisa's misinterpretation of the story of Nongqawuse shows that the government dramatically altered the legend to further degrade black South Africans and make fun of their sacred narratives and culture.

Tatomkhulu explains the people were not "superstitious and ignorant"; instead, they had a deep hatred for the white people who had invaded their homeland. "No sacrifice [was] too great, to wash away the curse" of the settlers, and since then people have only become more hateful.

Tatomkhulu prefaces his story with a connection between the oppression their ancestors felt under colonialism and the oppression they feel now under apartheid, which maintains the trappings of colonialism. He uses a story to connect Mandisa to a long-standing history of oppression that she shares with her ancestors.

Tatomkhulu continues, underscoring the love that the UmXhosa people had for their cattle, and how great their hatred would have to be to kill their livelihood. Cattle provide meat, milk, and fertilizer, and they also act as currency to be traded as dowries, or payments. However, resentment was so deep, in the 1850s people felt they had no other choice. People killed their cows and burned their fields, but three days later, when **Nongqawuse** promised a storm would come to replace their cattle and sweep the white settlers away, nothing happened. Instead, the UmXhosa people, now starving, were forced to work in white-owned mines and sell their lands to be able to eat.

The UmXhosa people snap under the pressure of colonialism and do something that may seem unwise to an outsider: destroy their only source of food and currency, leaving them even more vulnerable than before. In some ways, this mirrors Mxolisi's murder of the Girl; like his ancestors, Mxolisi cracks under the pressure of a lifetime of violence and oppression and lashes out in desperation. Like the UmXhosa people killing their livestock, Mxolisi's killing of the Girl only makes him more vulnerable in the face of a harsh government.

Tatomkhulu explains that songs like "*Hayi, ilishwa!* Amabhulu, azizinja! One settler, one bullet! By the match stick, we shall free our nation!" came later, but for centuries prophets like **Nongqawuse** have been calling for violent or divine ways to save their nation from white settlers. Through these stories, Tatomkhulu explains how, "what had seemed stupid decisions, and acts that had seemed indefensible became not only understandable but highly honorable."

By rehashing Tatomkhulu's story of the prophetess Nongqawuse, Mandisa implicitly argues that Mxolisi's murder of the Girl is the bubbling up of three decades of oppression under the government's racist apartheid regime and three centuries of oppression under colonialism and its legacy.

Back in the present, Mandisa wakes up in the afternoon from a long nap. Siziwe is already awake, and tells Mandisa that Mxolisi still hasn't returned. She reports that boys came by in a car to talk to Lunga. This disturbs Mandisa, as no one in her family knows anyone with a car, and no one in her neighborhood owns a car. Siziwe overheard some of Lunga's conversation with the boys, and tells her mother she thinks Mxolisi had something to do with the Girl who was murdered.

The detail about the car is another reminder of the family and community's poverty under apartheid, in which black South Africans are disenfranchised and impoverished, forced to work long hours at low wages.

Mandisa forces herself to eat with Siziwe, but is interrupted by the sound of a car outside—a surprising sound in Guguletu. A man exits and knocks on the door. Mandisa invites the man in, who introduces himself as Reverend Mananga. He tells her to pass on a message to Mxolisi, that he's found a meeting place for him. However, as he speaks, he writes a note, which he hands to Mandisa as he leaves. It tells her to take a taxi to Khayelitsha, and get off at the last stop. Mandisa immediately prepares to go. She assumes the Reverend is leading her to her son.

In this passage, Reverend Mananga uses written language (knowing that spoken language may not be confidential) to connect Mandisa with her son again.

Mandisa boards a taxi towards Khayelitsha. A woman sits next to her, and gives her a note, telling Mandisa to get off the taxi one stop after the woman. Mandisa follows this instruction. At the taxi stop, Reverend Mananga pulls up in his car, and tells her to wait for a woman driving a red car. This woman arrives, and invites Mandisa into her car. She drives Mandisa to a safe house, where a woman ushers her inside. Mandisa waits alone in a room for half an hour, until Mxolisi enters the room. They look at each other for a moment, and then begin to hug and cry.

Several people are involved in the process of guiding Mandisa toward her son, which ties in with the novel's interest in family and community as sources of guidance and support. This passage is also important because readers finally meet Mxolisi in the novel's present narrative, rather than in the context of Mandisa's thoughts and memories.

Mxolisi tells Mandisa he's being blamed for the murder of the Girl. He insists he was "just one of a hundred people who threw stones at the car." Mandisa questions him, as she knows the Girl died from knife wounds. Mxolisi retorts, "many people stabbed her." Mandisa wants to know if her son stabbed the Girl; he refuses to answer at first, and then insists he didn't, sobbing. Mandisa holds her son in his arms as he cries, eventually asking him again, why people are blaming him if he is not guilty.

In the real-life murder of Amy Biehl, which this novel is based on, four men were charged for her death. In Mother to Mother, *it seems that other people were responsible for the Girl's death, but that the responsibility ultimately rests on Mxolisi's shoulders alone. In changing this detail, Magona streamlines the narrative but also puts all the weight of grief on one mother.*

Mxolisi continues to insist he was not the only one present at the Girl's murder. Mandisa becomes increasingly upset, asking him if he understands that the Girl is dead forever. Mandisa is terrified for her son and for herself. She understands Mxolisi will be arrested and charged with murder. She calls Mxolisi a fool, explaining that his "knife has her blood, it doesn't matter if you stabbed her in the thumb."

The idea that a parent is fully responsible for their child reappears here. Mandisa explicitly notes that she is afraid for her own safety, which is a reminder that the wider community in Guguletu also believes parents must be held accountable for their children's actions. Mandisa knows, then, that the community will punish her along with Mxolisi.

Mandisa wonders, "who was consoling whom?" Both she and Mxolisi cry and comfort one other. Eventually, they pull apart, and Mandisa can see "pain and terror" in her son's eyes.

Mandisa and Mxolisi are both grieving and comforting one another equally, which implies that Mandisa feels her son's crime might as well be her own.

CHAPTER 11

Mandisa addresses the Mother. She wonders what she should do for Mxolisi: "Deliver him to the police? Get him a lawyer?" She wonders if supporting her son will mean she cannot mourn the Girl, and wonders if she and the Mother are enemies.

As a mother, Mandisa feels that it's her duty to protect her son and reprimand him when he's misbehaved, but she can't do both in this instance. She also feels that it's her duty as a mother to grieve alongside other mothers, revealing that she's pulled in several conflicting directions.

Mandisa wonders if the Girl could have stayed in her home country, and done good there, instead of coming to South Africa. She had a bright future ahead of her. Meanwhile, Mandisa wonders if Mxolisi had anything "to live for," even before his crime.

Mandisa points out the disparity of opportunity across racial lines; the Girl, who was white, would have enjoyed a wealth of opportunities in her home country (wherever that may be) based on her race, while Mxolisi's status as a black man in South Africa automatically ensures he has nothing "to live for."

Mandisa points out how the same people who now criticize Mxolisi at one point praised him for being a Young Lion, and taught him chants like "one settler, one bullet!" She compares Mxolisi to a dog set out to attack an enemy, so that only the dog, not its handlers, are at risk.

In this passage, Mandisa reveals that the same people who radicalized Mxolisi and built him up are the ones who are now tearing him down. With this, Mandisa suggests that those people are cowards who tried to sidestep their obligations as leaders, mentors, peers, and activists by turning Mxolisi into a sacrifice and saving themselves.


Mandisa is filled with "shame" at Mxolisi's crime, and "anger" at the adults who have been pushing him towards it. She tells the Mother that any leaders who reach out with consolations are, "[s]urely as my son […] your daughter's murderers," if not even "guiltier. They knew, or should have known, better. They were adults."

While much of the novel examines the idea of whether or not parents should be held fully responsible for their children's actions, Mandisa widens that scope by arguing that all adults in the community—especially those who were encouraging Mxolisi's behavior—should be held responsible for his crime.

Mandisa address the Mother, whom she knows is also suffering. Mandisa herself is living a sorrowful, joyless life. She wonders how the police really know who killed the Girl, "which hand delivered the telling stab, the fatal blow?" She wonders why Mxolisi was singled out. She wonders why Mxolisi did this, and prays to God for help.

In her letter to the Mother, Mandisa attempts to forge a connection between the two women based on their shared grief and sorrow. Both women are bound by loss—although Mxolisi didn't die, his future certainly did, and the punishment he's bound to receive from the brutal and racist government suggests that he may as well be dead.


Some time later, Skonana and Qwati visit Mandisa's house. Frustrated that her nosey neighbors have come to visit, she opens the door anyway. They have two other women with them. They announce they've come to cry with Mandisa, "as is our custom, to grieve with those who grieve." Mandisa invites them in, and, for the first time, she begins to see less "condemnation" in the eyes of her neighbors, and understands that some, if not all, "understand my pain."

Against the backdrop of political instability, an unreliable government, and a tragic crime, customs provide a necessary sense of stability for Mandisa and her community. In opening the door for her neighbors, Mandisa begins to share a piece of herself and her story—something the novel consistently shows as a way to bring people together and connect them to a shared history. Here, the neighbors take on Mandisa's grief as their own, seeing Mxolisi's crime as part of their shared experience as a community.

Mandisa appreciates the help of her neighbors, who give her strength. She believes people need to help each other, but children especially, so they don't grow up to be a "problem." She wonders if even Mxolisi can be helped, if he can "change and come back [a] better" person.

The neighbors' custom of "griev[ing] with those who grieve" gives Mandisa strength because it makes her feel connected and rooted in the community in a time when her family is being torn apart. This passage shows communities at their best—using traditions and customs to unite people and give them a sense of stability.

Mandisa addresses the Mother again. She calls the Girl "the imperfect atonement of her race," and Mxolisi "the perfect host of the demons of his." Together, the two mothers are "bound in this sorrow," but Mandisa must carry shame, and "personal failure." She hopes the Mother can find strength from the "glory" associated with her tragedy.

Just as Mandisa gains strength and comfort from grieving alongside her neighbors, she reaches out to the Mother of the Girl via this letter in the hopes that they can strengthen and comfort one another, too.

CHAPTER 12

Mandisa wonders what Mxolisi had to live for. Even before his crime, his future was "a glaring void." He could see the men of his father's generation, defeated, working for low wages with "no escape" in sight.

Mandisa's choice to wait to recount the crime until the very end of the novel suggests that she has been building up the courage to piece together how her son became a murderer—something that weighs particularly heavily on her in a community that believes parents should be held responsible for their children's actions. In this passage, she points to what is really responsible for the way her son turned out: institutionalized racism, which ensures that black South Africans remain impoverished, disenfranchised, and downtrodden, with no hope for a better life.

Mandisa imagines the afternoon of Wednesday, August 25, the moment Mxolisi killed the Girl: Mxolisi and his group of friends are walking through the neighborhood. He breaks off with a handful of other young people. Mxolisi is almost home, when someone spots the Girl in her car, idling at the same intersection. Immediately, upon seeing a white person in Guguletu, people begin chanting "ONE SETTLER! ONE BULLET!" A crowd begins to gather and pick up the chant. Mxolisi's group, down the street, hears the commotion and runs towards it.

Even though Mxolisi's murder of the girl is the central event in Mother to Mother, *Mandisa doesn't actually recount it until the very end of the novel. By holding off until this moment, Mandisa makes the murder seem all the more dramatic and tragic. The fact that she has been building up the suspense and tension until this moment also echoes the crime itself; after centuries of oppression under colonialism and decades of oppression under apartheid, the crime appears like a sudden bursting forth of anger and frustration. The chant "one settler, one bullet!" reminds the rioters of their shared history of pain and oppression, inciting them to action.*

The Girl tries to drive away, but her car is stuck in a line of other cars. Bodies surround the car, and begin to rock it, at first gently, and then people begin to throw rocks, breaking through the windows and windshield. The Girl and her four passengers decide to leave the car and run for freedom. One of the Girl's friends yells that "she's just a university student," but Mxolisi and the others "know nothing of universities."

Like in the novel, the real-life Girl, Amy Biehl, was attacked while in the car and was stabbed repeatedly and fatally. The phrase "she's just a university student" also points to Amy's status as a Fulbright scholar who was in South Africa to help prepare for the first democratic election. Under a brutal government that sees the world as black and white (literally), Mxolisi and his gang do too, and immediately conflate this white woman with the white oppressor. Thus it doesn't matter if she's innocent or an ally to the community, because Mxolisi and his gang's worldview doesn't have room for this kind of nuance—they "know nothing of universities." This line is also a reminder that black South Africans are afforded a second-rate education under apartheid.

Mxolisi is "King! If for a day." People begin to chant "AMANDLA! NGAWETHU! POWER! IT IS OURS!" As well as "AMABHULU, AZIZINJA! BOERS, THEY ARE DOGS," a song Mxolisi has heard his whole life. The crowd cheers Mxolisi on—in fact, society has "been cheering him on since the day he was born. Before he was born. Long before."

This passage encompasses all three of the novel's major themes. First, Mandisa suggests that the legacy of colonialism and apartheid is devastating and inescapable—even before birth, Mxolisi couldn't escape it. Secondly, Mandisa points out how the entire community failed in their obligation to keep Mxolisi on a more productive path, instead instilling him with bloodthirstiness and passion. Lastly, Mandisa draws on the chant that has punctuated the novel most frequently—"AmaBhulu, azizinja!"—to remind readers that chants such as this one have been passed down from generation to generation, thus making people like Mxolisi feel that his fight against the government is also his ancestors' fight.

Mandisa knows **Nongqawuse** saw the "whirlwind" over a century ago, and "voiced the unconscious collective wish of the nation: rid ourselves of the scourge." The Girl's murder, then, is an "eruption" of "rage," and "bitterness," "the enactment of the deep, dark, private yearnings of a subjugated race." Mandisa believes Mxolisi was "only an agent" of his race, a "blind but sharpened arrow," aimed at the Girl, "the sacrifice" of her race.

In drawing on the backstory of her life and her son's life, the current political climate and the past one, Mandisa seeks to clarify and explain her son's crime rather than justify it. In her letters to the Mother and her rehashing of the Nongqawuse myth, Mandisa illustrates the ragged emotional and political landscape that her people—and her son—grew up in and implies that anyone with Mxolisi's life experiences would have turned out just as angry, hardened, and politically radicalized, like a "sharpened arrow" itching to be launched at the oppressor.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Sanders-Schneider, Ivy. "*Mother to Mother.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Apr 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Sanders-Schneider, Ivy. "*Mother to Mother.*" LitCharts LLC, April 23, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/mother-to-mother.

To cite any of the quotes from *Mother to Mother* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Magona, Sindiwe. Mother to Mother. Beacon Press. 1998.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Magona, Sindiwe. Mother to Mother. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. 1998.