

**Yamkela TYWAKADI**

### **My Body and My Writing**

I was raised by my grandmother, the most loving woman I have ever met. She loved us equally – us being her grandchildren she was raising while our parents were in Johannesburg working or looking for work. My grandmother would say, “*Akukho nkwenkwe, akukho ntombazana kulo wam umzi. Kukho abantu*”—“There is no boy or girl in my house. There are children.” To this day, all my male cousins do not have a problem with cleaning, cooking and doing laundry for themselves while a huge population of men in my country (or Africa, or the world as a whole) wait on women to serve them.

As much as my grandmother raised us equally, there was one area where she failed dismally. And that was her teachings on how we expressed our bodies in the spaces we were occupying.

When I was the age of 13, I was informed that I would need to go and do virginity testing, which was a ritual that was done in my village annually. The oldest matriarchs of the village would gather at the king's homestead and all the girls who had turned 13 would line up outside the hut where the matriarchs were and, one by one, go in to open their thighs as wide as they could so that these old women could check if they were still “intact.” If you were found to be a virgin, you would be told to stay away from boys, to not open up your thighs for boys, in fact, you could actually fall pregnant by just talking to a boy. If you were found not to be a virgin anymore, you would be rejected by the village because you had allowed a boy to get into your father's “kraal” without paying a dowry for you. You would then be forced to tell who you slept with. The matriarchs would take you to the boy's family; the whole village would come out and watch you as you walked down the streets to the boy's house. If the boy agreed that he slept with you, he would be forced to pay for damages, for damaging you. You were damaged goods. Not him. You!

This is the kind of environment I grew up in. The sad thing about it all is that no one dared the boys to take down their pants and examine their penises to check if they were still virgins. No one dared tell them to stay away from girls. No one humiliated them in public for not being virgins. Boys were boys and allowed to live freely in their bodies. Moreover, boys could choose any girl they wanted, abduct her

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Carlos Gamerro (Argentina), Julie Kedzie (USA), Ben Sohob (Indonesia), Yamkela Tywakadi (South Africa)  
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and force her into marriage without her consent. The only expectation from the community was that he send dowry to the girl's parents.

You see, my grandmother's teachings about my body – or rather the lack thereof– resulted in me believing every word she taught me. I grew up in a village with no electricity or running water, so we had no TV to watch and learn and unlearn things our elders taught us. I am glad that I later got to unlearn what my grandmother taught me and liberated my body from her chains.

My struggles and anger about how the society expects women to carry themselves inevitably found their way into my writing. I have found the pages of my books to be venting spaces for me. In 2016, I published a novel in IsiXhosa titled *Ndibuyisele Esizalweni*. I wrote this novel for the people back in my village. I did not want to gain any money from the book, it was an activism tool for me, to force my village to face themselves and see the damages they had caused to girls and women. I wrote this novel because I was angry and still am. I am angry at the society that keeps telling women to obey men, cook for them, clean after them, tend to their feelings and forgive them when they cheat because “boys will always be boys.” I write because it is my way of rebelling against the society that does not value me. I write because I miss my aunt who was raped, hacked up, and dumped into a river (her remains have never been found). I write because I miss my friends who were abducted for marriage at a very young age and they never got to pass through university doors. I write because of the pain I felt as a child seeing the men in my family abusing their wives. I write because I have a daughter. I write because every day, as I open my eyes and prepare to face the world, I know that it will not receive me on the sole basis of me being a human being—it will receive me on the basis of being a woman.

There is war on our bodies as women. Our bodies have become crime scenes.

*for*  
*Uyinene Mrwetyana, Karabo Mokoena, Natasha Conabeer,*  
*Ntombizodwa Toto-Madikizela, Reeva Steenkamp, Leigh-Andre Jegels*  
*and thousands of African women*