

SADSA Presenters topics and Bio Term 3 2019

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Topic- Memoirs of a township academic

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Dr Maphela is a lecturer in the School of Economics at the University of Johannesburg. She is also a Sangoma and has a passion for African spirituality, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, African healing processes and Black Consciousness.

– “I am familiar with pain, I am familiar with waiting, am familiar with being the last in the queue. I am familiar with being abandoned, am familiar with betrayal, am familiar with not telling myself the truth, am familiar with noisy spaces in my soul and yet am familiar with hope, am familiar with Universe’s Grace. I shall continue familiarizing myself with tomorrow’s sunrise and sunset, as it is all that has been constant in my life (Maphela 2008, Psychologies).

Township academic is a multi-dimensional subject. The challenges are many. It touches on challenges which can fill up a small library. The story of a woman born in Soweto and raised in the Eastern Cape. It touches on poverty, being raised by a great grandmother, then the grandmother, growing up with an absentee mother, going to school two days per week at best and one week per term at worst. Getting a slice of bread before going to school was like manna from heaven. Putting on an under ware for the first time around the age of 13 or 14 years. Seeing the parents of other children carrying a bag of oranges was mouth-watering, because it never happened in my family. The story line is about real life struggles of a black woman, who had a vision of being a caregiver and a provider to her great granny and grandmother. Being an unwanted child to the bearer, the grandmothers stepped in as I was their first great-grandchild and grandchild. Where there was no hope at all, at some point the pregnancy was supposed to be terminated, but the Universe had other plans, the former plan therefore did not work out. For the longest time, I had wondered why that termination did not get to be taken care of. Because life has been unbearable for as long I can remember. I recall as a child feeling so out of place everywhere I went. From the Eastern Cape, I was an outcast, up until today. Even now, I am regarded as an academic outcast. In the rural areas, if a child does not have a father or a mother around, being taken care of by a great granny, naturally, that child becomes an outcast. During traditional ceremonies, there is something beautiful that happens, around sunset in the Xhosa culture, the family gathers in the kraal to listen to the elders appeasing the ancestors, then after slaughtering the animal, every family member is asked to sip from the calabash of traditional beer. All the children of a particular clan name line up with pride. I was also proud to line up, but I would be removed, as no one knew where

I came from. My great-grandmother was the only one who felt the pain, I did not understand, it did not hurt much, except that I wanted so much to belong to my family, so I thought. It was in this setting I went to school for only three months in a year, Jan, September and October. Great-grandmother was very ill for me to leave her alone. I would meet other kids from school on my way to fetch fire-wood, water or cow's dung to keep the house clean and warm. By the way, I did not miss school at all. But when I went back, I would manage to catch up. The old lady decided that her time was near, she had to bring me back to Soweto to my grandmother to take over. I again resumed school in the middle of the year, speaking Xhosa "A" in the township of Soweto. Naturally I was an outcast. I had to find new ways of integration again. Eventually I settled with granny. She was young and a bit angry, as I had a mother, who could not recall at all that she once gave birth to a girl child. So I became a curse, anyone who felt sorry after seeing my report, they would give me, maybe a pair of shoes, maybe a used underwear, maybe sanitary pads, maybe a place to sleep. So I figured out that over and above doing well at school, I might as well learn to clean houses and do laundry like a hired helper, so that I could be accepted. That worked for a while. The teenage years set in, then I became an outcast again. Interesting enough, the person that influenced the family members that were trying to accommodate me, was my mother. She told the family that, it was the reason she never wanted me because, she knew when she was carrying me that I was going to be a problem, slut, child bearing female, and death. So why should people even begin to love me as I was a waste of time (outcast). After a gap year I decided to visit a university out of boredom, it was in August. Was given a booklet and application forms. After having chosen psychology and sociology, was told that I would do well in commerce. It sounded nice, and the following year I started varsity. As usual my grandmother had to borrow registration fees from our neighbours for me to get to university. Needless to say that I did well, the whole year and there was no money to pay the fees. I sourced for funding by knocking at some shops to get donations. One man did not even want to know who I was, he just wrote the full amount of the fees and I was shocked and numb. Could not pay the fees the following day, as I believed that I was not even worth the paper the check was written on. I finished undergrad in 4 years, as in between I had to hold piece jobs. Haphazardly the academic was born. Little did I know that even with a degree the road ahead was even tougher and more brutal than my past.

Key Words: Xhosa; traditional beer; family outcast; township outcast; academic outcast