
KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN SPEZIAL

Textanalyse und Interpretation zu

Sindiwe Magona

MOTHER TO MOTHER

Patrick Charles

Analyse | Interpretation in englischer Sprache



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1. AT A GLANCE – THE MOST IMPORTANT POINTS

This study guide to Sindiwe Magona's novel *Mother to Mother* is designed to provide an easy-to-use overview of the structure, context, themes and characters of the novel. Here is a quick rundown of the most important points.

Part 2 takes a brief look at **Sindiwe Magona and her career**.

- ⇒ p. 9 → Magona was **born in 1943** in the village of Gungululu in South Africa. She has written a multi-volume autobiography, novels, short stories, poetry and biographies.
- ⇒ p. 11 → *Mother to Mother* is a semi-autobiographical fictionalised account of the **murder of a white american girl** (Amy Biehl) and describes the era and aftermath of apartheid in South Africa.

Part 3 offers analyses and interpretations of the novel.

Mother to Mother – Origins and sources:

- ⇒ p. 31 The novel is set in places where Magona lived and during a time when she was also living there. It draws heavily on her own life and experience, and looks at the lives of Xhosa people in the townships of South Africa.

Summaries:

- ⇒ p. 37 The narrator is a mother of three called Mandisa. Her eldest son Mxolisi has been involved with a group of student protesters in the township of Guguletu, near Cape Town. In August 1993 he gets caught up in a mob which assaults and kills a white girl in a car.
The novel is in the form of Mandisa's address directly to the dead girl's mother. She tells the story of her life and how she had

Mxolisi when she was just 15. Her story covers her childhood in the slums of Blouvlei, the government-ordered forced resettlement of the people from there to the township of Guguletu near Cape Town, where families and communities were torn apart, and her struggles to raise her children. Throughout her life she and her children have been witness to and victims of racist oppression and brutality from the police. She moves back and forth in time as she tells her story, explaining how things happened the way they did.

Structure:

The novel is about the origins of events and their consequences, so it moves back and forth in time to illustrate how Mxolisi came to be the troubled, disobedient and violent young man he is in 1993. It also includes descriptions of specific episodes in South African history, as well as stories from Xhosa history and the origins of the hatred and racism in the country. ⇒ p. 55

Characters:

Mandisa and her son Mxolisi are central to everything that happens and everything the novel is about.

Mandisa

⇒ p. 63

- the narrator, mother of three children
- she became accidentally pregnant when she was 14

Mxolisi

⇒ p. 66

- Mandisa's eldest son, who kills the white girl

Lunga and Siziwe

⇒ p. 71

- Mandisa's second son and her daughter

⇒ p. 72

China, Lungile & Dwadwa

→ Mandisa's three husbands and the fathers of her children

⇒ p. 74

Mandisa's extended family (Mama, Tata, Khaya, et al.)

⇒ p. 77

Other characters like China's family, Mandisa's friends and neighbours or the white girl and her mother**Themes:**

⇒ p. 84

The themes we will look at in this study guide are issues of identity and inequality; violence and oppression; communities, families and traditions; and grief, guilt, hope and despair. There is a larger theme behind all of these which organises the structure of the narrative, and that is an investigation of the past.

Style and language:

⇒ p. 114

The style of the novel moves between a clear and direct address (from “me” to “you”) and a richer, poetic style. The language is an interesting combination of unusual English diction and structures and a mixture of the various languages people of Mandisa's status would speak – English, Afrikaans and Xhosa.

Interpretations:

⇒ p. 119

Mother to Mother can be interpreted and read as both an informative, semi-autobiographical fictionalised account of the killing of Amy Biehl and as a look at bigger historical issues and symbolism.

2.1 Biography

2. SINDIWE MAGONA: LIFE & WORKS

2.1 Biography

YEAR	PLACE	EVENT	AGE
1943	Gungululu (village in what is now called the Eastern Cape, formerly Transkei), South Africa	27 August: Sindiwe Magona is born, eldest of eight children	
1962	Gugulethu	She works for years as a junior school teacher.	19
1966	Gugulethu	Already the mother of two children, Magona is now pregnant with a third when her husband leaves the family.	23
1981	Gugulethu	Completes a graduate degree (her third academic degree) from Columbia University (USA) via post.	38
1980s–2000s	New York, USA	Magona moves with her family to New York to work at the United Nations.	Late 30s–60
1993	New York	Awarded an Honorary Degree in Humane Letters by Hartwick College in Oneonta (New York State, USA).	50
Up to 1994	New York	Works for the UN, presenting anti-apartheid radio programmes.	51
1990	Cape Town, South Africa	Publication of the first part of her autobiography <i>To My Children's Children</i> .	47
1998	Cape Town	<i>Mother to Mother</i> was published.	55
2003	New York/Cape Town	Magona has been working for the UN's Public Information Department before retiring in 2003 and moving back to South Africa.	60



Sindiwe Magona
(*1943)
© picture alliance/
Scanpix TT NEWS
AGENCY

2.2 Contemporary Background

2.2 Contemporary Background

- *Mother to Mother* is set in the Western Cape province of South Africa and covers a period from the early 1970s up until 1993.
- The book describes the era and aftermath of apartheid in South Africa and is the real world backdrop to the murder of Amy Biehl in August 1993.

SUMMARY

Mother to Mother is set in the **Western Cape province** of South Africa and covers a period from **the early 1970s up until 1993**. The story is largely situated in a black township near Cape Town called **Guguletu**. Other locations include the squatters' settlement of Blouville, where Mandisa grew up, and her ancestral village Gugululu, where her grandmother still lives. All the African characters in the novel belong to the Xhosa people, and we see many examples of tribal customs and traditions.

The book describes the era and aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, a period of extreme **racial oppression, state neglect, police brutality and political turmoil and violence**. This is the real world backdrop to **the murder of Amy Biehl in August 1993** (see p. 32); the novel is a fictionalised account of the killing.

Apartheid system
in South Africa

Geography

Guguletu

The majority of the book – and the entirety of its present-day time frame, in 1993 – is set in the township of Guguletu, which is 15 kilometres outside Cape Town, in the Western Cape province of South Africa. Today Guguletu has a population of over 98,000, and **more**

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

SUMMARY

Sindiwe Magona has written a two-volume autobiography (the first part of which was her first published work), a biography of Archbishop Ndungane, as well as short story collections, poetry and novels. She has also written more than 100 books for children – we won't be looking at these in this study guide, however.

Novels

The novels

PUBLICATION DATE	TITLE
1998	<i>Mother to Mother</i>
2006	<i>The Best Meal Ever</i>
2008	<i>Beauty's Gift</i>

Mother to Mother was Magona's first published novel, and it remains her most famous and successful work. *The Best Meal Ever* is set in a South African township and is about a girl having to look after her younger siblings. *Beauty's Gift* is a novel about a group of women and how they deal with the HIV/AIDS-related death of one of their circle of friends.

Short stories

Short story collections

PUBLICATION DATE	TITLE
1991	<i>Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night</i>
1996	<i>Push-push! And Other Stories</i>

3. ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATIONS

3.1 Origins and Sources

Mother to Mother is a fictionalised account of the murder in August 1993 of American student Amy Biehl in the South African township of Gugulethu (Guguletu in the novel, also known as Guguleto). It draws heavily on author Sindiwe Magona's own life: she was born in Gugululu, lived in Guguletu, worked as a maid in white family's homes, and lived through the apartheid era and its aftermath.

SUMMARY

Guguletu

Mandisa describes the township (see pp. 27–34, for example) as she experienced it, having been forced to move there with her family when she was 10, and talks about the mistakes that had been made in how it was set up – mistakes that range from the evil to the incompetent.

The name Guguletu is a shortened form of the Xhosa phrase “igugu lethu”, which means “our pride” – a name which acquires a particularly **bitter irony**, both historically and in the fictional context of the novel. The township was established in the 1960s and was infamous for its high levels of unrest and crime. As presented in the novel, it is a crowded place with high unemployment, a lot of poverty and social neglect, and an intimidating, militarised police presence. Mandisa describes a **depressing environment** with little support for young people, who are left to wander the streets feeling frustrated and neglected. As well as being the site of the actual murder of Amy Biehl in 1993, Guguletu is a microcosm of

“Our pride”

3.1 Origins and Sources

South Africa's racial and social troubles, and for this reason it is one of the most significant original inspirations for the novel. With its extraordinarily high levels of violent crime and racially segregated, socially troubled population, the township provides a grimly ideal setting for the author's intentions, as outlined in her preface, to look at what lessons can be learned from a tragedy like the murder of Amy Biehl, and to more closely examine the failures of a society which is corrupted by injustice and brutality.

The author Sindiwe Magona grew up in Guguletu, and she would have seen and experienced the apartheid era in its entirety. Her familiarity with the township is evident in her strong evocation of its history and chaotic life.

The murder of Amy Biehl

Athol Fugard says he was sickened last summer when he learned of **the murder of Amy Elizabeth Biehl**, the white Fulbright scholar from Newport Beach who was pulled from her car and stabbed by a mob screaming anti-white slogans in the black township of Guguletu, South Africa.

"Her death was horrible, awful," he said, recalling that the idealistic, 26-year-old Biehl had been studying the role of women during South Africa's current political changes.

"The slogan that crowd was chanting—'One settler! One bullet!'—is one of the bitter fruits of apartheid. It's not just the young men who are chanting it, you know, but the young women as well."

3.2 Summaries

3.2 Summaries

The narrative is divided into chapters of differing lengths. Unusually, the chapters are not uniformly labelled. Some are numbered, some are identified by very specific dates and times, and then chapter one, for example, has a more poetic title. The chapters with no title other than their sequential number are primarily but not exclusively concerned with the past – with Mandisa's memories of childhood and her youth and the background of her family, her original home in Blouville and her new life in the township of Guguletu, and the social and political disturbances and developments in South Africa.

The specifically dated chapters cover the events of 1993 surrounding the death of the white girl in Guguletu. Some chapters are subdivided with specific times of day (for example, chapters 4 and 5).

SUMMARY

1 - Mandisa's Lament (p. 1)

Mandisa addresses the mother of the white American girl her son has killed. She is not surprised her son (whom she describes as a monster) has killed someone. She is angry at the girl for having been in the wrong part of town (Guguletu), and angry at the government in South Africa for only feeding and caring for her son now that he is in jail but for having left him hungry and wild before. She begs God to forgive her son.

Letter to the mother of the dead American girl

3.3 Structure

3.3 Structure

Mother to Mother is written from the first-person perspective. It is unusual in that the text directly addresses a second person as “you”, referring to the mother of the murdered white girl. It is told from a point in time after the events of 1993, and the combination of memories and hindsight with the history, causes and consequences of social and political developments in South Africa makes it a very contemplative, introverted narrative. Large sections of the text concern Mandisa’s introspection and memories.

SUMMARY

Despite containing action, drama and moments of violence, the three major structural frames – the mother to mother appeal; the layers of memories and history; and the introspection and soul-searching of the narrator as she examines herself, her life, and the world that shaped her son – make the tone and feel of the novel more complex. To say that it lacks the fast, forward-pushing drive of an exciting thriller does not mean that the novel is boring or lacks energy. Rather, the narrator’s sensitivity to the layers of memories and history means that the novel reaches outwards into the spaces around it, into the history of the country and the deep roots of the hatred and racial injustice in South Africa, to look more closely at **the context and environment which led to the killing of Amy Biehl**.

Mandisa as
narrator

As the author states in her preface, her narrator, Mandisa, is drawing “a portrait of her son and of his world” (p. vi). As a portrait in the form of a novel, *Mother to Mother* has a fitting structure, one which looks deep into its subject and the history and space around it, rather than rushing from start to finish.

3.4 Characters

3.4 Characters

SUMMARY

The story is about an African boy, an American girl and their respective mothers. Mandisa narrates the story and her focus is very much on Mxolisi and the world around him: in telling the story of her life and her family, Mandisa is telling the story of how and why she thinks the American girl died. She and her son are the most important characters: He is at the centre of the plot, and she is telling the story.

Mandisa and her
son Mxolisi

Two of the most important characters in *Mother to Mother* are not even present – the murdered white girl, who only appears in Mandisa's imagination, and the girl's mother, to whom the narrative is addressed. The central figures however are Mandisa, who tells the story in a first person narrative, and her eldest son Mxolisi, around whom the plot – and Mandisa's life – revolves.

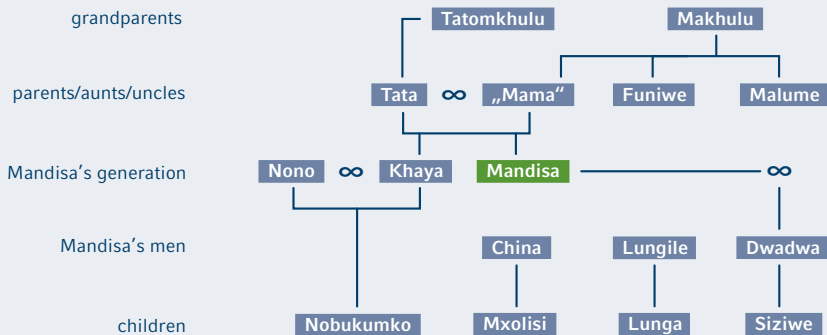
One important factor here concerning the characters and their constellations is **the Xhosa family and clan system**. Mandisa is part of a family unit, until she has a child and becomes part of a new family unit, and each unit of family is part of a larger clan structure – in her case, the Chizama – which can include hundreds of other families, spread out across the country, and is itself part of a larger tribe, the Xhosa.

The Xhosa

Xhosa clan system – The Xhosa people are subdivided into clans or tribes. Some of these tribes are descended from intermarriages with white and/or Asian settlers and even cast-aways who landed on the South African coasts in the Middle

3.4 Characters

MANDISA'S FAMILY TREE



3.5 Themes

3.5 Themes

SUMMARY

The primary, interconnected themes of *Mother to Mother* we will look at here are issues of

- identity and inequality (most importantly when it comes to race and gender)
- violence and oppression
- positive and negative aspects of communities, families and traditions
- grief, guilt, hope and despair.

These themes are all important within the larger narrative theme of an investigation of the past – what happened (the murder of the white girl) and why (the environment which produced Mxolisi)? This theme is a structural device which defines the form of the narrative. It is at the root of all the themes the novel tackles, and goes further back, beyond Mandisa's own story, to the history of white settlers in South Africa and the fundamental crime of colonialism, which led to the apartheid state.

IDENTITY & INEQUALITY –

Who am I, and who am I allowed to be?

Racial identity

The apartheid state in South Africa was explicitly **organised around identity** – specifically racial identity. And as we see in Mandisa's recollections of her own life, her culture (the Xhosa clan) also has a great deal to say about identity, in this case, specifically **gender identity** – the duties and responsibilities of a daughter, wife and mother, and the limited freedoms of women in a strictly patriarchal culture.

3.6 Style and Language

3.6 Style and Language

SUMMARY

The novel is framed as a direct address from Mandisa to the dead girl's mother, and the style of the narrative reflects this: it is direct, less formal, and very introspective and emotional. Because it is a first person narrative there can be no question of objectivity or reflective distance: Mandisa is speaking what's in her heart and mind. As far as the use of language goes, two important aspects are the use of Xhosa combined with English, and word usage and sentence structures which are occasionally surprising and strange for Western readers of English.

A subjective and emotional narrative voice

Mandisa's voice

The style and language of the novel are both defined by the content. Mandisa's voice, as **the first person narrator**, is sad, hurt, and introspective, as she tries to explain to herself and to the dead girl's mother how it could have come to the murder. She is digging into her own past and into the past of her country to talk about painful and chaotic feelings and events. She is not reporting in a dispassionate way, even when talking about the country's history and political disturbances: she is talking about how she feels about these things, how she experienced them.

Chapter 1: to the
girl's mother

This is clear from the opening of the novel. The **first chapter**, which is the direct address to the dead girl's mother – “My son killed your daughter” (p. 1) – is immediately **direct and naked**.

The opening of **the following chapter** is the first of Mandisa's attempts to imagine what the white girl's life was like on the last day she was alive, and this is also written in a very emotional, un-

3.7 Approaches to Interpretation

3.7 Approaches to Interpretation

Mother to Mother can be read and interpreted as an almost-autobiographical book focussed on real events, and at the same time it can be interpreted on a symbolic level, with Mxolisi and the white girl representing much larger issues than their specific lives and actions.

SUMMARY

Mother to Mother is open to a couple of apparently opposed interpretations. On the one hand it is an autobiographically-rooted story concerning real events in real places, and on the other hand, it suggests symbolic meanings which go far beyond the concrete realities of township life.

What unites these differing approaches is the sense of continuity, history and the connectedness of things. Real world events and individuals are never isolated in time and space. They are small parts of a much larger whole. Sindiwe Magona sees her characters as being individual elements in a much larger, ongoing story: the story of the Xhosa tribes, of the colonised and oppressed native peoples of South Africa as a part of the history of the country. **Mandisa and Mxolisi are not isolated characters** acting out their parts on an empty stage, whose thoughts and actions have relevance only to themselves. They are moving parts of a continuously evolving tradition, and as such they are the natural development of what has come before them and are in constant **dialogue with their history** and the history of their people and country. At the end of the novel this idea becomes much clearer.

Embedded in a
historical context

This book is not a work of non-fiction and it is not a journalistic account of the killing of Amy Biehl, but it is **inspired by and**

Informative

4. CRITICAL RECEPTION

SUMMARY

Mother to Mother was universally acclaimed and remains the most famous of Magona's works.

The novel was published in 1998, five years after the killing of Amy Biehl, of which it is a fictionalised account. Twenty years later it is still widely read and available all around the world. It was successfully adapted for the stage in 2009 in the form of a monologue (Mandisa speaking). The critical reaction at the time was overwhelmingly positive. Here are some examples of reviewers' reactions to the novel.¹⁶

"Magona has succeeded in her grand ambition to write a story of healing and confrontation. She has written a graceful, terrible story; it is an eloquent indictment of Apartheid and a passionate lament over the loss of Amy Biehl's life."
(Angela Salas *The Boston Book Review*)

"As a lament for the terrible legacy of apartheid, the novel is surely a tour de force. As a story of individuals attempting to deal with choices made and perhaps regretted, it is a moving work of fiction. (Lee Milazzo *Dallas Morning News*)

"Gripping. . . . Points to a redemptive hope for those who can come together for healing, even when they have been bound together by sorrow. The writer's own courage in writing this

16 Reviews taken from: <http://sindiwemagona.wixsite.com/website/mother-to-mother>

novel is evidence of an increasingly powerful literary voice for [her] nation. (Heather Hewett *The Washington Post Book World*)

What these and other positive reviews make clear is that most people reacted to two features of the novel: the eyewitness account (even if in fiction) of life under apartheid, and the powerful emotional content of the book. As outlined in the chapter in this book on interpretations, it is these two structures which give the book its power: on the one hand, a concrete, informative account of aspects of life under apartheid, making use of real events and places, and on the other hand a narrative with more emotional and symbolic intent which points to the larger human issues beyond the specifics of time and place.

See Chapter 3.7

5. MATERIALS

This chapter contains a brief history of South Africa, a biography of Amy Biehl and some notes on terms which are useful when interpreting and discussing the book.

A brief overview of the history of South Africa

YEAR ¹⁷	EVENT
Ca. 500 BC	The original inhabitants of South Africa, the Han people, begin to form larger organised tribes and start keeping livestock.
Ca. 250 AD	The Bantu peoples from further north in Africa migrate south. They bring with them skills and knowledge in farming and working with metal, as well as new languages.
1488, 1497	The first European explorers, Bartolomeu Dias and Vasco de Gama, sail around the tip of Africa.
1652	The Dutch East India Company establishes a settlement, the Dutch Cape Colony.
1795	The British occupy the Cape, driving out the Dutch after a battle.
1802	The Dutch take back control of the Cape following a peace agreement with the British.
1806, 1814	After another battle, the British take back control of the Cape. In 1814 the Dutch formally acknowledge that the Cape belongs to the British.
1816, 1828	Shaka Zulu forms the Zulu Kingdom, a powerful force in the country. After he is assassinated by his brothers in 1828 the Zulu Kingdom falls apart.

17 BCE = Before Christian Era, CE = Christian Era

6. SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Die Zahl der Sternchen bezeichnet das Anforderungsniveau der jeweiligen Aufgabe.

Task 1: **

In an interview in 2012 with the newspaper *The Scotsman*,²¹ Sindiwe Magona talks about how as a girl she had been friends with the mother of one of the boys convicted of murdering Amy Biehl. She says: "I was conscious that although the grief of the bereaved parents is terrible, the grief of the killer's parents is almost worse, because of the terrible questions they must ask themselves – what did I do, or not do, that my child should have become this thing?" Do you agree with this perspective? It is also very much a part of the novel. Do you find it convincing?

Model answer:

This opinion may seem to be controversial at first, but Magona argues convincingly in *Mother to Mother* that the guilt felt by the parents of a killer could be harder to bear than the grief felt by the parents of someone who has been killed. Mandisa says that the other mother feels no shame, because she did everything right. She raised her daughter to be honest and helpful and charitable. She was a friendly and confident young woman who went to another

21 <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/theatre/interview-sindiwe-magona-writer-and-author-of-mother-to-mother-1-2453210>

country to help less fortunate people. The grief she then feels at the death of her daughter could be described as “pure” – unlike Mandisa’s grief over her son’s actions. Mandisa has to struggle with a lot of guilt and shame: guilt because she worries that she may in some way have been responsible for making him Mxolisi the way he is, and shame because she knows that people around her will blame her for having raised a monster.

The grieving parents of a murdered child can be expected to receive support from those around them, but the parents of a killer can at best hope to be ignored and shunned. More likely, they will spend the rest of their lives being accused of having been responsible for the actions of their child.

These ideas are looked at in *Mother to Mother* when Mandisa directly addresses the other mother. Mandisa at no point suggests that her grief is bigger or worse or more important than the other mother’s. She merely tries to explain how the factor of guilt can make her grief more complicated.

Task 2: **

***Mother to Mother* is written in the form of what may be a letter to the mother of the white girl who was murdered. Why do you think the author chose this particular form for her novel?**

Model answer:

Epistolary novel

The story of *Mother to Mother* could have been told in any number of ways, but the form Sindiwe Magona has chosen is unusual because it is so personal.

The style and language is very diverse, and the sections (in italics) in which she directly addresses the other mother (“you”) certainly