Acting Like a White Woman: Cynthia Jele's Black South African Chick Lit Novel *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word* (2010) as *New Weltliteratur*

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Chick lit purportedly originated in the mid-1990s with works such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (both 1996). Initially defined as a new subgenre of romance, chick lit also departed from some well-established conventions of the romance genre, such as the single-minded focus on the search for true love and the one-man-per-woman ratio. Instead, the often ironic and humorous novels typically focus on more emancipated, metropolitan heroines—heterosexual, affluent, and (notably) white—who face the everyday challenges of their careers and the search for Mr. Right along with their friends. Early reactions to chick lit were often extreme, either attracting "the unquestioning adoration of fans" or "the unmitigated disdain of critics" (Ferriss and Young 1). The rejection or omission of the genre by critics and literary scholars ensured that chick lit and world literature are hardly ever associated with one another to this day—except, perhaps, with some degree of irony, as in Rachel Donadio's article in the *New York Times*, "The Chick-Lit Pandemic" (2006).

In the context of both increasing indictments of a sexist book industry and the COVID-19 pandemic, Donadio's disease metaphor has not aged particularly well. Pointing to the genre's 'minor' reputation and 'major' circulation, the metaphor is also unfortunate because it suggests that chick lit has been transferred from the white Western 'centres,' mainly the US and the UK, to the 'peripheries,' where "an international commuter train of women has been gathering speed close behind. From

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL MARCH 2023 MARS RCLC
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Mumbai to Milan, Gdansk to Jakarta […].” This notion of chick lit as a successful export product is reminiscent of Franco Moretti's infamous "law of literary evolution." The pattern he describes in relation to the modern novel—that "in cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system," it "first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials" (58)—has also dominated chick lit research until recently.[1] When Donadio concludes her article with a quote from Helen Fielding that "the really interesting thing […] would be to see chick lit coming out of Africa," she is effectively marking the African continent, along with the Arab world mentioned shortly thereafter, as the tail end of chick lit evolution. Headlines such as "Where's the African Chick-Lit?" (Abrams) or "Is there a chick-lit gap in African literature?" (Owino) seemed to reinforce that notion almost ten years later. Rather than simply confirming an existing 'deficit,' however, these articles put it in perspective by pointing out that chick lit novels are offered in large numbers on the streets of African metropolises and that the genre is also explored "in monthly magazines and weekly newspaper pullouts" (Owino).

Considering that only a fraction of the literary production from Africa reaches the Global North, ignorance of African chick lit is not surprising. 'Western' readers and critics often have very specific expectations of African literature, which is assumed to be explicitly political and to revolve around slavery, colonialism, poverty, and war—usually in the form of novels or memoirs. This points to "a dominant white reader's gaze that desires to consume black suffering" and that results in Black African writers "being unfairly pressured toward a single story" (Samatar). Moreover, chick lit had a bad reputation in Africa for supposedly being "superficial or materialistic" and for focusing on "stories of white women with western white woman problems" (Rouse). The fact that only a few months after the publication of Donadio's article on the chick lit pandemic, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "The Thing Around Your Neck" appeared in a volume titled *This Is Not Chick Lit* suggests that African authors may deliberately distance themselves from the genre. The NGO *Femrite–Uganda Women Writers' Association*, for example, also refrained from promoting their 'romantic' women's fiction as chick lit. Other publishers, however, did embrace the label. Some of them, such as South African Kwela Books (*Sapphire Press*) and the MME Media Group (*Nollybooks*) or Kenyan publisher StoryMoja (*DrumBeats*), launched their own chick lit imprints. These formulaic novels were largely discontinued after a short time: *Sapphire Press* did so after three years in 2013, and *Nollybooks* and *DrumBeats* after only one year in 2010 and 2013, respectively (Folie 328-39). Nonetheless, individual authors achieved greater prominence and circulation with their "Home-grown chick lit" (Klemperer). Several South Africans, such as Fiona Snyckers, Zukiswa Wanner, and Cynthia Jele, "have embraced chick-lit as a form of writing that allows them to reflect on the lives of middle-class women, thereby infusing it with local content" (Spencer, "Having it All?" 82).

After winning the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2011, Black South African

author Cynthia Jele's *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word* (2010) became "the most renowned chick-lit novel in South Africa" (Frenkel 181). It was not only explicitly marketed as chick lit but also adapted for the cinema and subsequently reissued. *Happiness*'s successful inscription in a 'global' popular genre and cross-media dissemination helped make it one of those "literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin" and thus world literature, if we follow David Damrosch's broad definition rather than a more linear centre-periphery approach (*What Is World Literature?* 4). This article explores the question of what Jele's novel might reveal about the institutionalization of a minor genre in world literature, which has a reputation for being both elitist and "a white male affair in large part" (Damrosch, "What Is World Literature?" 10). As Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D'haen write in their introduction to *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, "world literature has been studied too little in terms of more popular writings, even though bestselling genre fiction fully illustrates what Marx and Engels enticingly describe as world literature's 'intercourse in every direction'" (9). Today, there is still a deficit in terms of 'feminine' genre fiction such as romance and chick lit, which, like crime fiction, conveys "knowledge about the transnational flow of literature in the globalized mediascape of contemporary popular culture" (9) and shares "important features with elite works of world literature, especially the characteristic of combining universal themes with local settings" (11).

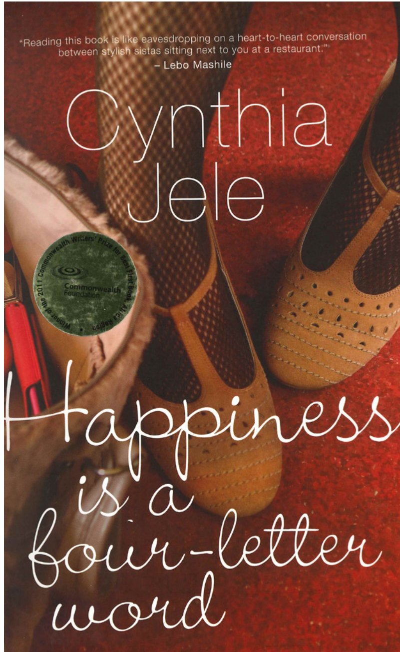
Accordingly, in this article, *world literature* refers not only to the 'major' circulation, popularity, and economic pull of chick lit but also to the 'glocal' themes and style of Jele's novel. *Happiness* corresponds closely to what Elke Sturm-Trigonakis, in an attempt to define 'minority' or 'intercultural literatures' more strongly in terms of their literariness, subsumes under the term "new *Weltliteratur*": hybrid contemporary texts, considered 'minor' parts of the respective national-monocultural (and, I would add, often masculine) canons and characterized by "multilingualism on the expression plane on the one hand and phenomena of globalization and regionalism on the content plane on the other" (13). After discussing some of *Happiness*'s paratexts, its circulation, and relation to an often obscured Black genre genealogy, I turn to a close reading with a particular focus on its multilingualism and complex intersections of gender and race. I argue that by interspersing the English dialogue with phrases from other languages and by critically examining the ideal of white femininity in post-apartheid South Africa, Jele skillfully weaves 'the minor' into 'the major.' She does so both at the levels of language—for example, South African languages such as Sotho and Zulu within the supposedly homogeneous English literary language; and subject matter—for example, local themes such as affirmative action policies in South Africa alongside the supposedly universal chick lit formula of 'having it all.'

Paratexts, Circulation, and a Black Genre Genealogy

Cynthia Jele's debut novel, *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word*, revolves around four Black, professionally successful women: accountant and aspiring junior partner Nandi, human rights lawyer Princess, teacher Tumi, and shoe boutique owner and orphanage director Zaza. The third-person point of view alternately follows these four main characters, who are all around 30 years old and live in different heterosexual relationships. In accordance with genre conventions, the focus is on the private and professional development of the protagonists, who belong to an affluent cosmopolitan milieu. This includes living in high security complexes in posh Johannesburg suburbs, meeting for after-work drinks in trendy bars, visiting art exhibitions, and showing off brand-name clothing. However, besides these urban lifestyles, which are similar within a certain social class in many countries, African traditions and languages also play an important role for the Zulu and Sotho protagonists. Examples include the female practice of ululation (Jele 9, 15), the payment of the bride price "lobola" (30, 71), or the fine or compensation "inhlawulo" (200), which Tumi's husband has to pay to Nomkhosi, who expects a child from him out of wedlock. The protagonists' transculturality and their social mobility are also illustrated by flashbacks to their youth, which Princess and Zaza in particular spent in an environment that differed greatly from the upscale standard of living they came to enjoy in adulthood. Their experiences of violence and alcoholism in their families, while not ostensible themes of the novel, offer an additional layer to better understanding the protagonists' choice of careers. Besides "living the promised life" (167), all four women have to deal with serious issues ranging from abortion and high HIV/AIDS numbers to child abuse, infertility, infidelity, substance abuse, violence in relationships, and xenophobia. The many dialogues provide a 'chick-litty' colloquial style and lightness, but at the same time also a rich and often multilingual multiperspectivity that constantly puts individual perceptions to the test.

The publisher, Kwela Books, glossed over most of the novel's bleaker aspects as well as its stylistic subtleties. On their website, *Happiness* is compared to *Sex and the City* and advertised as "[p]erfect for lovers of chick lit" (Kwela Books). The South African newspaper *TimesLIVE* described it as "chick-lit with a contemporary Joburg feel" (qtd. in Jele n.p.), explicitly linking the global genre with its local context. Consistent with chick lit aesthetics, the title of the first edition was rendered in a sloping and script-like typeface; the cover image featured women's feet in stilettos next to an open handbag, displaying 'feminine' accessories like lip gloss and eye shadow (see figure 1a). Literature blogger James Murua commented on the cover design as follows: "when the subject matter is about hip urban youngish women the book cover must have a picture of shoes. Women won't bother picking up the book to read the content on the back cover, just have some snappy shoes and the books will fly off the

cover." His subsequent remark that he could hardly wait for the new South African edition of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) indicates, on the one hand, an awareness that chick lit is, above all, a marketing phenomenon, subject to the trends of different markets. On the other hand, Murua's comment demonstrates a differentiated view of the genre genealogy—he mentions both Fielding's novel and that of African American author Terry McMillan, which is an important, yet often neglected Black precursor to the genre (Guerrero; Hurt, "The White Terry McMillan"; Mißler 15, 154).



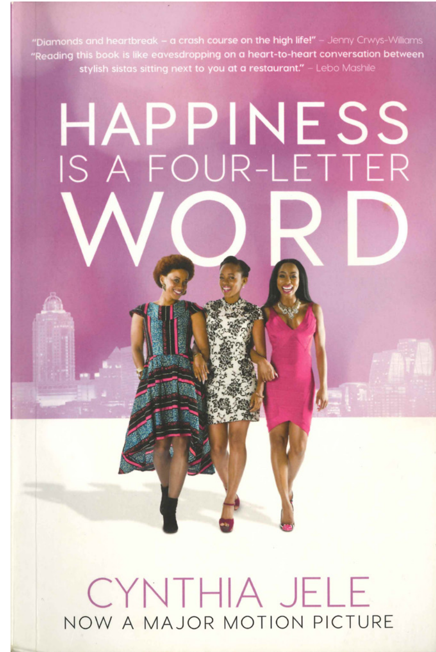


Figure 1: Cover of Cynthia Jele's *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word*, first edition 2010 (a) and movie tie-in 2016 (b)

Another more contemporary and local genre reference is suggested by the combination of an image of shoes and a laudatory comment by Lebo(gang) Mashile at the top of the cover (see figure 1a). Mashile is one of the best-known Black feminist artists in post-apartheid South Africa. Her decidedly feminist column "In Her Shoes" appeared from 2007 to 2010 in *True Love*, South Africa's oldest and most popular illustrated women's magazine, whose "specific portrait of idealized post-apartheid femininity" (Gqola 125) could be described as postfeminist or neoliberal feminist—two adjectives that are also regularly used to characterize chick lit (Harzewski; Hurt, "Conclusion"). The cover of *Happiness* can thus be interpreted in at least two ways: as a simple and uninspired imitation of Western chick lit conventions, or as a localized

feminist take on them.

In light of the novel's content, the cover takes on yet another, more sombre meaning. The moment when Tumi's "eyes involuntarily land[ed] on her handbag lying on the floor," the sight of which brings "a pang to her stomach" (Jele 37), immediately follows the confession by her husband's mistress, Nomkhosi, that she is expecting his child—a confession that is all the more painful for Tumi because the couple has been trying unsuccessfully to have a baby for years. Readers know of exactly one item that is in Tumi's handbag: Nomkhosi's ultrasound. In the novel, the handbag is thus closely linked to a marital crisis that begins in the very first chapter—a less than typical start for a chick lit novel, whose heroines are generally expected to be looking for their Mr. Right rather than finding out he was Mr. Wrong all along.[2]

These alternative and, from a genre standpoint, almost subversive interpretive possibilities are lost in the new cover of the 2016 edition, which shows the actresses of the film adaptation, Renate Stuurman (left, as Princess), Mmabatho Montsho (centre, as Nandi), and Khanyi Mbau (right, as Zaza), against a pinkish sky and the Johannesburg skyline (see figure 1b). All those familiar with the novel will also immediately notice that one of the four protagonists is missing. Tumi, of all people, whose handbag and difficult marriage were alluded to on the cover of the first edition, was written out of the film. This may be explained by the fact that the balanced and mature "mother of the group" (Jele 62) conforms least to chick lit's conventions regarding characters—she is neither as sympathetically clumsy as Bridget nor as glamorous and career-conscious as the protagonists in *Sex and the City* or its Ghanaian equivalent, *An African City*, a web series by Nicole Amarteifio that debuted on *YouTube* in March 2014. However, the movie tie-in cover, in addition to fulfilling the visual aesthetics of the genre even more clearly than its predecessor,[3] indicates the huge success of the novel. Its cinematic adaptation has, after all, led to *Happiness*'s republication. It helped make the story accessible to a wider audience and thus turned it into a work of world literature that circulates beyond its culture of origin (Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* 4).

In 2011, Jele was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Africa region) in the Best First Book category as well as the M-Net Literary Award in the category 'film' for her novel's great potential for adaptation. *Happiness* was subsequently directed by Thabang Moleya and became the first book by a Black South African author to be made into a movie. When released in 2016, it was a major box office success, rivalling popular films such as *Trumbo, 13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi, Fifty Shades of Black*, and *Hail, Caesar!* (NFVF). Although Zukiswa Wanner's novel *The Madams* (2006), which has not yet been adapted into a movie, was described as "South Africa's first black chick-lit blockbuster" (McNulty 13), this characterization is only true for *Happiness*. Produced, shot, and first aired in South Africa, the film has since crossed not only national but also continental borders through its online distribution, including *Amazon* and *YouTube*.[4] Unlike Wanner, who called the label "Black Chick Lit" sexist because there is no comparable one for Black male authors

(Zvomuya), Jele confidently acknowledged chick lit as a great source of inspiration. In an interview before the film's premiere, she was referring in particular to

> [b]ooks with strong female characters like *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding, *Good Grief* by Lolly Winston, various works by Marian Keyes and Jennifer Weiner, and the television series *Sex in* [*sic*] *the City*, which was broadcast between 1998 and 2004. But before all of that there was Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*. (Tshikhudo)

Jele references not only Anglo-American white chick lit and chick flick prototypes, but also the African American genre tradition, represented by *Waiting to Exhale*. In her 1992 bestseller, Terry McMillan broke with the "indelible connection between black women, the domestic sphere, manual service labor, and the underclass" (Guerrero 89) enshrined in US popular culture by focusing on "a distinctly different vision of black womanhood" (90). Set in Arizona, the story is about four African American women in their thirties in search of happiness: successful television producer Savannah, high-powered executive Robin, hair salon owner Gloria, and Bernadine, who put her career on hold to support her husband and raise their children but became more independent after being left for a white woman.

Similar to how McMillan offered a new vision of African American womanhood in the late twentieth century, Jele represents variations of the "new South African woman" (NSAW) (Makombe 111) after the millennium—"a working, urban, upwardly mobile woman" with "smooth skin, straight, shiny hair and 'tastefully' manicured nails, and an arched brow" (Gqola 123). Despite her professional qualifications, sophistication, and cosmopolitanism, the NSAW is defined primarily visually, through her body, and through her relationships with men: an "embodied, consuming, heterosexual subject" who lives in suburbia and aspires to a "reproductive marriage, two cars, and travel outside the continent for business and leisure" (123). Thus, the trope departs from earlier colonial and apartheid conceptions of Black womanhood. While other popular contemporary writers such as Angela Makholwa and Sindiwe Magona focused primarily on gender-based violence and the exploitation of women in the domestic sphere, Jele emphasized "that some women in South Africa have transitioned from the drudgery of domestic exploitation to the public sphere which for a long time, [*sic*] has been a preserve of men" (Makombe 111). Black South African chick lit or "postapartheid romances," of which *Happiness* is a particularly successful example, thus represented "a new departure in South African writing: the arrival in prose form of the mass-produced fantasy for black women" (Warnes 154)—a development that would not have been possible under the apartheid system, "in which legalized racism colluded with patriarchy to position black women as the most subjugated in an already oppressive society" (155).

The "socially created battle between black womanhood and white womanhood over the mantle of beauty and worthiness," which Guerrero (93) identified as a central criterion in distinguishing McMillan's novel *Waiting to Exhale* from white chick lit, also plays an important role in *Happiness*. This is not a surprising constellation con-

sidering the recent history in South Africa, in whose largest city, Johannesburg, most of the novel is set. The fact that apartheid—much like slavery, segregation, and structural racism in *Waiting to Exhale*—only found its way into Jele's novel in the form of a few passing remarks about the hated "coloured label" (Jele 49), Nelson Mandela (140), and the practice of land theft (271) can be attributed to the conventions of the genre, which steers clear of overtly political messages. However, just because chick lit neither feeds on tragic life stories nor aims at being a political pamphlet does not mean it is a completely "'apolitical' genre driven by blind and uncritical consumerism and individualism" (Butler and Desai 2); especially not when written "by women of color who often interweave substantive issues with the genre's tropes" (Quintero, qtd. in Hurt 204). Jele's intention is political in that she uses "the life stories of four women in the novel to explore post-apartheid shifts for a generation now in their thirties who remember life under apartheid" (Frenkel 182). In doing so, she transfers the chick lit genre conventions into "a barometer to try and measure whether the expected prosperity for ordinary middle-class black women has been met after the ending of the apartheid system" (182). While *Happiness* does not explicitly deal with apartheid or racism, it engages intensely with the only seemingly less political attribution of 'acting' or 'becoming' white, which, as I will argue, is also reinforced on the levels of narrative perspective and language. By weaving 'the minor' (local themes and languages) into 'the major' (supposedly universal chick lit themes and the English literary language), both on the levels of content and form, Jele also inscribes her novel in the discourse of inter- or transcultural new world literatures (Sturm-Trigonakis 13).

Multilingualism and the Intersection of Gender and Race

Stephanie Rudwick writes that "[n]otions of ideology, power, and hierarchy need to be considered together with variables such as race and gender in interpreting the language choices of a text," and that, therefore, "[e]ven those who do not think of their writing as explicitly political, move into the realm of politics by using English in particular African or idiosyncratic ways" (120). *Happiness* is interspersed with phrases from South African languages other than English—especially Zulu, but also Afrikaans, Sotho, and various slang expressions often used in several African languages. Jele initially set out to write a book that her friends would read and enjoy "because it talked about 'us'" (Musiitwa). Later in the writing process, she realized she was "reflecting on how [her] generation (those who witness[ed] apartheid firsthand) is really doing" (Musiitwa). Since the novel was intended for a local Black audience, it is understandable that Jele does not translate the non-English phrases and expressions into English. One could argue that her use of an Africanized form of English or a South African English multilingual *lingua franca* (Rudwick 120) is easily under-

stood by many, especially Black cosmopolitan South African readers of a certain generation, although it can be slightly irritating to those who have no knowledge of South African languages other than English. This is evident in untranslated phrases, such as in the first chapter when upon the disappearance of Nandi's fiancé someone asks in Zulu: "Hhayi bo, umkhwenyana wenzani?" ("Well, what is the groom doing?") (Jele 14), or when Princess's boss Vanashree mixes English and Afrikaans as she suspects that a woman accused of murdering her husband "got gatvol about something" ("fed up") (130). The novel's multilingualism lends literal meaning to Lebo Mashile's comment printed on the front cover that "[r]eading this book is like eavesdropping on a heart-to-heart conversation between stylish sistas sitting next to you at a restaurant." After all, it is not uncommon to incorporate expressions in other South African languages and slang among the English-speaking urban (upper) middle class. However, the protagonists' effortless code-switching also contributes to differentiating them from secondary—minor or peripheral—characters who come from a lower class background or from the countryside. For example, Thembi, the "live-in help" and "nanny" (Jele 63) of Zaza's family and her husband's provincial "cousin thrice removed" (64), only has limited proficiency in the multilingual register of her distant urban relatives and employers. She struggles with vocabulary at times and makes grammatical mistakes when she speaks English, which Zaza points out to her at one point (189).[5]

Another striking difference between characters that frequently manifests itself linguistically occurs through their allusions to and evaluations of whiteness or, rather, 'whitishness'—an imitation of certain aspects of whiteness by Black people. Early on in *Happiness*, Tumi finds a distraught young woman, Nomkhosi, at her front door. She addresses her visitor as "ausi" (Jele 28), a term for "woman" found in various African languages, including Afrikaans, and often used "by white people to refer to a black maid or domestic worker" ("A Handy Guide"). Tumi describes Nomkhosi as "striking, not pretty—rather a 'mooi van ver'" (Jele 30), which in Afrikaans means a beauty only from a distance. It hardly seems a coincidence that Jele specifically chose both a racially marked form of address as well as a phrase in Afrikaans, the language of the white colonizer and apartheid system, to portray and, at the same time, undermine and insult the woman who confesses to being pregnant by Tumi's husband. Nomkhosi "was what most black men considered attractive: with a fair complexion, slender, with long, silky hair extensions and patterned acrylic nails—something she, Tumi, found tasteless, tacky" (30). This notion of attractiveness seems closely aligned with the trope of the 'New South African Woman,' which fundamentally expresses upper middle class Black female empowerment. At the same time, however, it is oriented towards a white ideal of femininity. Tumi looks down on that younger generation of South African women in their early twenties who, in her view, unscrupulously emulate such an ideal (107-08). Her reluctance and fears are strongly reminiscent of the way some characters in *Waiting to Exhale* show disdain for white women who threaten to take away their Black sons and (potential) husbands.

Likewise, in *Happiness* the reproach to Black men to 'act white' also implicitly resonates, for example when Thomas, Nandi's fiancé, emphasizes that he has remained "black to the core" (106), although he now lives in the suburbs; or when Tshepo, Tumi's husband—the very one who cheated on her with the 'mooi van ver'—makes fun of his wife's preference for fish: "But where is the meat? […] What are you trying to do, turn us white?" (255). In such situations, the male characters portray whiteness as detached and undesirable, even emasculating.

Unlike Tumi, who condemns young women like Nomkhosi, her friend Nandi blames the men "for flashing their wealth from empowerment deals and whatnot and enticing young women" (108). She alludes to the fact that the government's Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policy—aimed at facilitating broader Black participation in the post-apartheid South African economy[6]—has allowed some Black men to become rich rather quickly. Securing a part of their wealth appears to be a more attractive or realistic option for Black young women than acquiring it themselves. However, in the accounting and auditing firm where Nandi works, the redistributive policies have also benefitted women. Nandi still remembers a time when "the female head count was less than six and middle-aged white males ruled the office, when every woman's name was Tjerrie" (48-49)—a South African slang term (also spelled "cherry" or "cherie") for "girlfriend." This form of address is reminiscent of the English "chick" and suggests a lack of respect for female colleagues. Moreover, being an expression used by white men to refer to Black and coloured female employees, "Tjerrie" also has a colonial and racial connotation.[7] Although that type of personnel policy seems to belong to the past since her company was able to close a BEE deal, Nandi's observation that "[i]t's different now, brothers and sisters are representing at higher levels—well, sort of" (133) suggests that the theoretical goal of gender parity in senior positions has not yet been achieved. Nandi herself, who is up for promotion to junior partner, emphasizes that it is because of her dedication and diligence that she will soon be playing with the "big boys" and not as a result of a "political balancing act, all that right skin colour and gender drivel" (46). The overall impression is that frequently middle-aged white men in top positions have been replaced by middle-aged Black men. While it seems to be perfectly accepted for men to benefit from such deals specifically because of the colour of their skin, women who attain professional positions because of diversity and gender mainstreaming measures have their qualifications questioned.[8]

One character who makes only a brief appearance—Nandi's team secretary Sonja Wort, a woman "in her late thirties, [...], and coloured, a label she deeply despised" (49)—illustrates the lingering (reverse) colourism in South Africa. We learn that Sonja felt elated during a stay in New York City when a Black man insulted her for her "fat black ass": "It had taken twenty hours on the plane, disorienting jet lag and a five-dollar trip on the downtown subway for her to temporarily lose the offensive label that had followed her all her life" (49). This anecdote highlights the difficult in-between position of South Africans considered 'coloured,' who were first not white

enough under apartheid and now do not seem to be Black enough for the *African National Congress* (ANC).[9] The fact that Sonja pursues an alternative career as a self-employed dressmaker may indicate that she has little hope of promotion within the company.

Throughout the novel, Black men are clearly the big BEE profiteers—"the country's club of overnight black millionaires" (153)—and women primarily their wives and mistresses. The characters Bheki and Zaza are an ideal example of this constellation. Bheki, with the help of several BEE deals, had transformed his family's business into an empire. According to his wife Zaza, the Zulu saying "Imali iya emalini" (69, "Money goes to money") is true in his case. Compared to *Waiting to Exhale*, this represents a particularly striking reversal, as there the belief that "money should make money" (McMillan 26) is identified as part of an internalization of white American capitalism. The intertextual reference in *Happiness*, for one, represents a much more deliberate form of appropriation of the concept of capitalism. Since the idiom is not only rendered in Zulu but referred to as a Zulu saying, it also seems to challenge the notion of 'Black innocence,'[10] which goes back to a primitivist conception of the Black African as a "noble savage" who lives "a life in harmony with nature, [is] of simple manners, easy contentment, a placid and cheerful disposition" (Riesz 80). On the other hand, the idiom may also subtly indicate that the translation of white apartheid capitalism into Black post-apartheid capitalism again brings privileges only to a certain affluent, albeit now Black, group of men. Zaza, who is not part of this group, makes secondary use of their privileges. As a young, attractive, and professional woman who is neither particularly educated nor affluent and married to a much older, unremarkable, but highly successful man, she is considered "a trophy wife" (Jele 67).

Nandi describes Zaza as corresponding to an ideal of beauty emulating white femininity: "Tall and rail thin from diet pills and starvation, […] glamorous and self-assured. Her light, flawless complexion glowed [...]. A bona fide femme fatale; women wanted to be like her, men wished she was theirs" (74). Similar to Tumi's code-switching in her description of Nomkhosi, the combination of a Latin phrase ("bona fide") with a French cliché ("femme fatale") hardly seems a meaningless choice here. However, while Tumi code-switches to look down on the tawdry young woman in front of her door, Nandi's description of her friend Zaza, though not uncritical, is also admiring, almost jealous. The "bona fide femme fatale" or "prima donna" (148), as Zaza is described at a later point in the novel, seems to be the real deal, whom the 'mooi van ver' Nomkoshi does a poor job of copying. The incorporation of expressions in Romance languages thus suggests greater prestige but arguably also greater danger. Nomkhosi is described as young, inexperienced, and insecure; Zaza, on the other hand, is firmly entrenched in the imitation, or rather incorporation, of white ideals of beauty—so much so that she seems to be putting her health at risk and, moreover, is a doubtful role model for young women like Nomkhosi.

Like Zaza, the fourth protagonist Princess is considered sexy by many men "from

all walks of life—black, white, rich, poor, big, small" (89). Unlike Zaza, however, men sometimes perceive her as a "family breaker and a tight-ass feminist" (42) because of her work for the Women's Rights Law Clinic. The use of this negative cliché indicates that Princess corresponds to some extent to a conception of feminism that many South Africans, both men and women, evaluate as individualist, Western, and white (Hudson-Weems 22; Motlafi). Although belonging to the same circle of friends, Princess and Zaza are antagonists for large parts of the novel. With her "low-maintenance, ready-to-go look" (43) Princess also visually embodies Zaza's opposite. Not only does she detest dresses, but she also wears her hair in a "chizkop" (11)—township slang for a shaved head—because she believes that in her youth she already tormented herself enough "with those scalp-burning chemicals and unbearably itchy weaves" (11) to imitate a white European hair type. The sometimes contradictory evaluation of Princess—a feminist according to a white, Western model, but also a sexy, community-oriented, natural Black South African woman—illustrates that attributions to a whitish or Black femininity depend heavily on the situation and on who is making them.

Such attributions at the intersection of gender and race are evaluated quite differently yet again outside the protagonists' privileged circle of friends. For example, Zaza's husband's rural cousin, Thembi, who works for them as a maid and nanny, holds all emancipated women who strive for romantic love, family bliss, and a career in low esteem: "I don't understand you modern women. You have everything—rich husbands, beautiful children, big houses, fancy cars—and yet you're never satisfied. You want more" (191). In her eyes, Zaza represents such a modern woman because she pursues a career and possibly also because Thembi suspects her of having an extramarital affair. Thembi uses Zulu, very likely her first or one of her first languages, when she excitedly tells Zaza that their neighbour has chased his unfaithful wife—rightly, in her opinion—out of the house: "Hhayi! Angikaze ngayibona into enje!" (189; "Oh no! I have never seen anything like it!"). Zaza takes this as a warning of how she herself might soon fare if her affair is exposed. When she corrects Thembi's faulty English shortly thereafter, this also represents a rebuke of the socially inferior woman, who had made too bold an implication. The social and personal dynamics between the modern westernized or 'whitish' Zaza and the more traditional Thembi are thus also expressed on a linguistic level.

The association of the postfeminist ideal of 'having it all' (which is a common chick lit trope) with whiteness is particularly evident when Tumi ponders how her mother might react to her daughter throwing out her unfaithful husband:

> You threw a man out of his own house? Modimo, what nonsense is this, my child? Who gave you this idea? I don't care what marital troubles you're going through, but chasing a man out of his own house doesn't solve anything. Whose culture are you practising, huh? Are you a white woman now? (247)

Tumi's mother's proximity to Black South African patriarchal traditions is linguis-

tically emphasized by the exclamation "modimo," which means "god" in Sotho. Interestingly, Tumi, anticipating trouble, uses the same exclamation (28) before opening the door to Nomkhosi, whom she later refers to as a "mooi van ver" (30) and "tikiline" (108), the latter a Zulu slur for a promiscuous woman. She, like the other protagonists, effortlessly switches between both colonial (English, Afrikaans) and indigenous languages (Sotho, Zulu). Afrikaans, Sotho, Zulu, and slang are used repeatedly in emotional situations, including those involving inappropriate behaviour by other Black women—usually against the backdrop of the proper and culturally appropriate behaviour of those women making the criticism. The primary language of the novel, English, does not always seem to be sufficiently effective when it comes to insulting others, expressing surprise and disappointment at misbehaviour, or referring to locally specific relational structures and hierarchies.

While Tumi assumes that her mother might berate her as 'white' for being too emancipated, as quoted above, her friend Princess instead compares her lack of emancipation to the younger generation of 'acting white' South African women like Nomkhosi, whom Tumi had previously described as a "crying shame" (108). Crucial to Princess's judgement is Tumi's decision to give her marriage to the notoriously unfaithful Tshepo another chance—an action that Tumi's mother, on the other hand, would perceive as decidedly South African and Black. As the examples of Thembi and Tumi's mother already indicate, the novel is not only concerned with the multiple entanglements of gender and race but also of class and age as well as with the rural-urban divide.[11]

Conclusion

Due to its international popularity and success alone, Cynthia Jele's novel *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word* can be considered world literature—at least, if we follow a broad, quantitative rather than qualitative definition of world literature that favours the spatial ("dissemination" and "supranational importance") over the temporal dimension ("duration" and "lasting validity") (D'haen 31). The novel's classification as chick lit very likely contributed to its transnational circulation, which was further spurred by the film adaptation. However, while being crucial to the story's broader international, even intercontinental reception, the chick flick also broke with some of the novel's 'glocal' specifics such as its multilingualism and depiction of South Africa's uneven development (Myambo 120). Moreover, not only did the film cut Tumi, one of the four protagonists in the novel, but also "the socially created battle between black womanhood and white womanhood over the mantle of beauty and worthiness" (Guerrero 93), which has been a major trope for Black chick lit since *Waiting to Exhale*. These omissions ironically resulted in the film version, which has the widest reach, abandoning both the story's embeddedness in a Black female genre tradition and its localized and gendered post-apartheid politics.

In *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word*, the intersection of whiteness and womanhood seems to hold different connotations for characters of different generations and classes. The urbane protagonists have prejudices against young women who behave submissively and follow 'white' ideals of beauty; conversely, poorer, less educated, rural, and older Black women like Thembi or Tumi's mother seem to equate any form of emancipated or nonconforming behaviour with an imitation of white women. White femininity apparently represents a relatively flexible stigma used by Black South African women against Black South African women whenever they deviate in any way from a particular image of Black womanhood. In the case of Tumi and Zaza, this leads to the somewhat paradoxical situation that both are associated with negative conceptions of white femininity because of their subordination ('the self-sacrificing and all-forgiving wife' Tumi and 'the trophy wife' Zaza) and their emancipatory or non-conformist behaviour ('the wife who kicks out her husband' Tumi and 'the wife who makes a career and has an affair' Zaza)—depending on who is talking about whom. This can also be read as a critical perspective on the ambivalent trope of the 'New South African Woman' (NSAW), which on the one hand stands for Black female empowerment and positive local role models but on the other hand also comes across as deeply heteronormative, elitist, and—especially in terms of appearance and lifestyle—whitish. The gendered nature of the evaluation of whiteness is also evident in the novel's portrayal of Black men, who, while ostensibly finding light-skinned, slender women with long, straight hair attractive, feel an urge to emphasize, even defend, their own Blackness. Whiteness thus takes on the semblance of something wicked, a 'guilty (dis)pleasure' that the characters are to some extent aware of imitating and desiring—such as through ideals of beauty, romantic preferences, place of residence, career schemes, lifestyle, and diet—while at the same time despising it.

The critical potential of *Happiness*, however, is generated not only by what is said and by whom—that is, by its thematic intersectionality, multiperspectivity, and richness of dialogue—but also by how it is said. The novel, written in English, is interspersed with expressions from other South African languages such as Zulu, Sotho, Afrikaans, and various slang terms. These shifts can be read as manifestations of a South African multilingual franca form that signals a kind of glocalization or juxtaposition of "globalization and regionalism" (Sturm-Trigonakis 13) and allows for insights into postcolonial gendered sensitivities. Negative attributions of femininity—such as expressions in Afrikaans ("mooi van ver", "Tjerrie") or Zulu ("tikiline") but also European or US-American clichés ("trophy wife," "femme fatale," "prima donna," "family breaker and tight-ass feminist")—rather than merely indicating female competition or sexism, also serve to indirectly address the consequences of colonialism, patriarchy, and legalized racism without deviating far from the conventions of the chick lit genre or becoming too explicitly political.

As I have shown in my analysis, apartheid and its aftermath form a subtle but consistently present background against which different conceptions of white and Black

femininity, and, to a lesser extent, also masculinity, are negotiated. These findings confirm for Jele's novel what Lydia Spencer observed with respect to recent Ugandan and South African literature by women, namely that "serious analysis reveals that popular texts are multifaceted, intricate, complex, and they reflect a critique of society" (75). For *Happiness*, this is especially true about the multiple entanglements of gender and race but also of age—such as the lack of understanding and solidarity between women of different generations, class—such as the gap between the middle and lower classes, sometimes within families, and rural or urban lifestyle—such as the skepticism of rural women towards modern urban women, which closely intersect with the coexistence of globalization and regionalism in post-apartheid South Africa. I would argue that, consequently, it is not only or primarily its 'major' circulation that makes the novel, a 'minor' work of inferior quality from the perspective of canon-oriented literary studies, world literature. For comparative literature scholars, Jele's interweaving of the global and the regional at the level of themes, language, and narrative perspective seems even more fruitful. It is also this critical, localized inscription in the global genre of chick lit that makes *Happiness* a very convincing post-apartheid example of what Sturm-Trigonakis calls *New Weltliteratur*.

In conclusion, I suggest reading a high degree of irony not only into the book-cover design's focus on shoes (see figure 1a) with its reference to Mashile's feminist column "In Her Shoes" but also in the novel's title. *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word* undermines rather than straight-forwardly anticipates the promises of local women's magazines like *True Love* ("all a woman needs"[12]) and global genres like chick lit ('having it all'). Love turns out not to be 'all a woman needs' and 'having it all' can mean different things to different women at different times in their lives. A (possible) metacommentary in the novel, when Tumi remarks that she feels "lost in translation" (Jele 210) after her husband's betrayal and subsequent changes in her life (similar turning points come for all protagonists), as well as the voice over at the beginning of the sequel film *Happiness Ever After*, seem to support this reading:

> Is happily ever after real?
> Or just a ruse?
> Do we create it ourselves or wait for it to find us?
> "Go to school," they said.
> "Don't let your body go," they said.
> "Be sexy," they said.
> "And then you'll find a perfect man
> and live happily ever after," they said.
> What if they lied?
> Exactly what is happily ever after?
> Maybe it's just a perfect ending for Cinderella.
> Nothing that deep for the rest of us. (1:38:54-1:37:36)

Notes

1. Examples of chick lit research with a tendency "to flatten the distinction between an Anglo-American version on the one hand and 'the global chick lit' on the other" (Gunne 244) include Chen (esp. 214) and Hegde (esp. 98). A more balanced perspective is to be found in Ponzanesi's (176) analysis of Indian chick lit. In my book *Beyond "Ethnic Chick Lit,"* I also strive for a differentiated analysis of Indonesian, Chinese, Arab (primarily Saudi) and African (primarily South African) chick lit.

2. In South African chick lit, it is far more common for protagonists to be both married and dissatisfied with their relationships (Spencer, "Having it All?" 89).

3. The movie tie-in cover of *Happiness* is notably similar to the posters of *Sex and the City: The Movie*, and also to some promotional pictures of *An African City*.

4. Other streaming services showing the film include *peacock, hoopla, Vudu, tubi, Pluto TV, Plex*, and *IMDb TV*. The sequel, *Happiness Ever After* (directed again by Moleya, but not based on a novel), has been streaming on *Netflix* since 2021.

5. Transposed to the level of reception, this also indicates the limitations of Jele's South African English multilingual *lingua franca*—ultimately a variation of the much-criticized 'global Anglophone' with which world literature is often identified: the novel potentially excludes older, rural, less educated, and lower-class readers who are not completely fluent in English.

6. In order to create "a legislative framework for the promotion of black economic empowerment" ("No. 53 of 2003: Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act, 2003"), the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act was passed in 2003.

7. See also the example sentences in the *Dictionary of South African English*. Three out of seven connect the term "tjerrie" with "chick."

8. A similar situation can be found in Zukiswa Wanner's chick lit novel *The Madams* (3-4), in which the protagonist Nosizwe's employer is more interested in her race than in her qualifications (Spencer, "Having it All?" 85).

9. The Gatvol ("fed up") Capetonian movement, a group of activists who identify as coloured, blame the African National Congress (ANC) government for exacerbating racial inequality. The government would not do enough for coloured people and instead focus on the national majority officially classified as African or Black ("Race in South Africa").

10. On the concept of 'Black innocence' and its rejection by Black American intellectuals such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, see Reid-Pharr.

11. Another category that plays an important role in the novel is nationality and citizenship status. In particular, Jele voices xenophobic prejudice against migrants from Zimbabwe.

12. The tagline is printed on every issue of *True Love*, just below the title.

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