In March 2009, I met with author Sindiwe Magona at her home in Muizenberg in Cape Town, South Africa to discuss her newest novel, Beauty’s Gift. The novel tells the story of five close friends ravaged by the AIDS pandemic. The five women, known as the FFF, or Five Firm Friends, try to cope with the death of Beauty. Prior Beauty’s death, she encourages the women to take care of themselves so that they can all grow old. The women pull together and must take actions in their lives and in their relationships, in order to insure their own health and wellbeing.

Magona is also the author of two autobiographies, To My Children’s Children and Forced to Grow, the novel Mother to Mother, two collections of short stories entitled Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night and Push-Push, and numerous children’s books.

Photo by Kari Miller
How did your decision come about to write the two autobiographies, To My Children’s Children and Forced to Grow?

I didn’t decide to write autobiographies. What I did decide, at some point, with a lot of encouragement from a lot of people, was to write. That was not a decision I took lightly. Growing up I never met anybody who wrote books, and when you don’t have role models its very hard to think you can do something – but I always loved words. So finally, I got convinced that I could write and that I should write. I had no idea about how to go about writing a short story or how to go about writing a novel, but somewhere in my education a teacher must have told me that fiction is something that never happened. Well you try writing a book of fiction, a novel or short story about something that never happened, that’s a book that will not happen. Fiction is about things that happened, I mean you don’t record it as fact, but you take from life. Writers steal. So because each time I wanted to write a play or a short story and I started, somehow I got stumped because I could recognize things that had happened. So I realized I couldn’t write fiction, I had to write non-fiction. So I thought if I wrote about me, then that would be more and maybe something that had happened would come. So I wrote the autobiographies out of sheer desperation. By this time I wanted to write, and I wanted to write for publication, but the fiction just didn’t come. So then I thought, let me write this, and in that vacuum, having cleansed myself of myself, I figured something would come in. I was lucky that the books got published.

What inspired you to write Beauty’s Gift?

I don’t know if the word inspired works there. For me it was more provocation. I was provoked. I am very angry at the way our men are killing our women. It’s mostly men. I am not saying men can’t get infected by a woman, but it’s mostly out of infidelity or out of these multiple partners. AIDS is preventable. We wouldn’t be having these elevated figures of death and new infections… This is not a mystery of how you get AIDS. If you want to play the field, then protect yourself. I am very angry, and I don’t understand what its going to take. This is not a mystery and its not high science. You sleep with somebody, you are going to be exposing yourself to the virus. Even in protecting yourself, its not 100 percent… Why can’t you just sleep with one person? Nobody’s saying don’t have sex. Have sex with one person.

I’m so angry. Look at all of these orphans, and then you are going to come and tell me AIDS is not a black thing? How many white orphans have you seen on TV? We love lying to ourselves. Its not that every bad thing that happens to black people is caused by white people. We must stop it. Sometimes we wrong ourselves, we harm ourselves, we hurt ourselves. Yes, the causes may be historical, but at the same
time we are historical beings, use your brains and use your heart, and stop lying. No white people are pushing anybody to sleep around.

The government is changing now, but the government didn’t help. Despite all of the evidence, you want to cling to one mad doctor who claimed that HIV and AIDS had no connection? I wish and I don’t know why AIDS didn’t come during apartheid, because if it had it would not have plagued us the way it is doing. We would have blamed the white government. If the white government had done us the way the black government did us, we would have said, “they are killing us”. That would have made us really think. You see, when there is somebody you accept as an enemy who does something against you, that’s easy to connect. People had a disconnect. This is their ANC. This is their black government. This is their government that set them free. Killing you? Disconnect.

There is a change with the new minister of health. She is not preaching “beetroot”. She is preaching antiretral virals, as well as diet. Diet is always a good thing, even when you’re healthy.

In Beauty’s Gift, Amanda holds on to her township home, in addition to her house in the suburbs, are you trying to make a statement about holding on to your roots? Well there are things, when you hold ceremonies. How do you see me slaughtering an ox here? Or there are times when you want to have the kind of dances we have. Out here, people have a birthday party for a child and come around 2, by 5 there is no party. People have gone home. So it’s a good thing to have your townhouse, your posh house, or your suburbia house, but if you want to have some family... Both of my parents died here in Cape Town, but their idea was that if you want to have a home, have an ancestral home in the village. There are things that you will want to go and do. So for us who grew up here, the township is not ancestral, but its half-way. Its where I grew up. That’s where, sometimes, I want to be for whatever reason. I’m not one of these people who want to think the township has become a little rough for me. No, I came here, to where I live now, because I like the peace and quiet.

Did you keep a township home? I have a township home. Most people do. Mine is being used by my family. A niece lives there, she pays rent. It’s going to be there for the family. I don’t think I could sell that house. When I die, my children will have the house. When they die, I hope my granddaughter can keep the house, and so on, and it will be part of what the family has. The house I am living in may one day be too expensive, but we will never be without a township house!
In your books you articulate the challenges of being a mother during apartheid, what do you think are some of the challenges of motherhood today?

Children today, especially black children, they are now free so the expectations are that they must go to the best schools, and even if they are in the townships the education system is supposed to be the same. Children today demand a lot, and the parents demand of themselves a lot. People have become a people who are after status and status symbols. There is nothing wrong with status, but we want the symbols without the status. There are people who are not working (which is why we have such a high crime rate), they are working, but they want a car. Or they have a job where they can afford that car, but they want that car. We want things that are beyond our means, because now we no longer have apartheid and we believe the sky is the limit. Well, the sky is the limit if you exert yourself and, with luck, you get what you are looking for. The sky is the limit for those people who are not only born, they are nurtured, and we don’t nurture our young. I dare say that anyone has done any collection of this, but it’s not 50 percent. Its much higher than 50 percent of black women who are single parents, so we’re not going to get much nurturing there.

Children need both parents. We don’t have that. We have single parents. We have women who are parents, with maybe less than one percent of men who are single parents. Men usually walk away, the children are usually always tied to the woman.

What is that attributed to, because historically the separation was attributed to the pass laws and the men’s migration to the mines. What is that attributed to today?

Today you just have a generation of men who don’t have role models, whose parents were never together. That migrant labor system changed people’s perceptions of what fatherhood is. These men were going to work for fifty years and be in five towns and establishing these relationships with women all over, while at the back of his mind, his wife was the real woman over there in the Eastern Cape. Men became used to siring children they would never father. There’s a difference. There’s a big difference. You sire, you drop sperm and you don’t father.

There are lots of children whose fathers are vague shades of memories they’ve never seen or never met. That’s a big problem, and it’s just become the way we do things. We drop sperm and move on; reckless breeding has become part and parcel of black life. That is partly what we learned as a race. If a man left the Eastern Cape, the Transkei, the Ciskei, or any of the villages or ancestral homes and
Sindiwe Magona, on Writing, HIV/AIDS, and Parenting in South Africa

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got to work in the mines and on the farms and in the cities at 16 or 18 or 20, that’s 25 years of life where he was never allowed to be with his lawfully wedded wife. It made mockery of marriage. Legally you could get married, but legally you had no right to live with this woman all of your working life. What does that say? Go and screw other women. Be an animal. Just make babies everywhere you want, and then disappear. There was no continuity. That’s because you got a contract to come to Cape Town for a year until next time you get another contract and can’t continue coming here. Next time your contract could be to Durban, make more children in Durban for a year. Family life was destroyed – black family life. Now we’re living with the results.

We got our uhuru, our freedom, in ’94, nobody stopped to say, “let us look at who we are.” We came to our freedom in brokenness, terrible brokenness, and we haven’t taken the steps to mend. Nobody’s talking about the process we have been through. We all knew it was wrong, we all knew it destroyed us. We needed to take stalk of all of the things we have been through.

We needed to go back and redo how we raise our young, and have everybody conscious of what we have been through, and what we have become, and what it has made us to be. We needed to heal ourselves, so that the next generation grows up aware that it is wrong to go around spreading your children so that by the time you are 45 you have 10 children from 10 different women. We need to make ourselves a nation that consciously breeds with a decision that, as a man, I will have all of my children with a woman that I call wife and I will look after my children. Should there be a break-up of my family, I will remain with my children, even if I no longer see eye to eye with my wife. My children will be with that wife and I will be present in their lives, not because I come when there’s a Christmas or a birthday. No, every week I will see my child until that child gets to be 18 or 21, I will be present in my child’s life - not because I pay child support. Children are not raised by child support. They are raised by parental love and guidance. That’s what raises children, and we’ve forgotten that.