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Creative Pathways to
Eradicate Gender Based Violence

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Contents

Woven fates and silenced bodies: Scenographic representations of gendered oppression in Shādhilī Faraḥ's *Night of the South*

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This study examines the role of scenographic design in representing gender-based violence in *Night of the South* (*Layl al-Janoub*) by southern Egyptian playwright Shādhilī Faraḥ. Focusing on the 2015 production directed by Ashraf El-Noubi with scenography by the author, it explores how visual and spatial elements deepen the narrative of female suffering in Upper Egypt. Using a descriptive-analytical method and case study approach, the research analyses how scenography—through symbolic motifs, spatial composition, colour schemes, and embodied performance—acts as a vehicle for cultural memory and social critique. The play intertwines the stories of four women, each shaped by systemic oppression, including infertility stigma, sexual repression, forced marriage, and maternal grief. Scenographic choices construct a layered visual language that reveals the tension between silence, tradition, and resistance. By situating *Night of the South* within the context of gender oppression in Upper Egypt, the article highlights the power of southern theatre to confront entrenched norms and express marginalised voices. Ultimately, the study positions scenographic storytelling as a powerful tool for visualising the often-unspoken realities of women's lives, contributing to broader conversations on gender, cultural identity, and reform in contemporary Egyptian theatre.
Keywords: gender-based oppression, scenography, Egyptian theatre, southern playwrights, Shādhilī Faraḥ

Iminwe ephilayo neemizimba ezithuleyo: Umelelo lwembonakalo yobugcisa KwiNkohlakalo Esekwe Kubulili KwiDrama KaShādhilī Faraḥ ethi *Night of the South*
Esi sifundo siphonononga indima yoyilo lwezemidlalo (scenography) ekuvezeni inkohlakalo esekwe kubulili kwidrama *Night of the South* (*Layl al-Janoub*) ebhalwe nguShādhilī Faraḥ, umbhali wasemazantsi eYiputa. Ijolise kwimveliso yango-2015 eqhutywa nguAshraf El-Noubi, apho umbhali enze uyilo, uphando luhlola indlela izakhiwo ezibonakalayo nezendawo eziqinisa ngayo ibali lentlungu yabasetyhini eMpuma yeYiputa. Kusetyenziswa indlela yokuhlalutya ngokweenkcukacha kunye nofundo lwetyala, olu phando luhlalutya indlela obugcisa bendawo (scenography)—ngeempawu zokomfuziselo, ulungelelwaniso lwesithuba, imibala, kunye nomdlalo womzimba—esiba sisithuthi sememori yenkcubeko kunye nogxeko lwentlalo. Le drama idibanisa amabali amane abafazi, ngamnye echanekiselwe ziindlela ezahlukeneyo zenkohlakalo—kubandakanya ihlazo lokungazali, ucinezelo lwezesondo, ukuphoswa emtshatweni, kunye neentlungu zokuba ngumzali. Izinto ezikhethiweyo kuyilo zenza ulwimi olubonakalayo oluxakathisayo, oluphawula udibano lwesilence, imveli, kunye nokuxhathisa. Ngokubeka le drama kumxholo wocinezelo lobulili eMpuma yeYiputa, inqaku libonisa amandla omdlalo wasemazantsi ekulweni imigaqo engqongqo nasekunikeni amazwi kula mabali angathethwa. Ekugqibeleni, uphando lubonisa ukuba ibali elilawulwa ngumfanekiso (scenographic storytelling) luyisixhobo esinamandla ekuvezweni kwezinto ezihlala zifihlakele ebomini babasetyhini, ngaloo ndlela lunegalelo kwiingxoxo ezibanzi ngobulili, isazisi senkcubeko, kunye notshintsho kwithiyetha yanamhlanje yaseYiputa.
Amagama aphambili: ucinezelo olusekelwe kubulili, umelelo lwezobugcisa, Ithiyetha YaseYiputa, Ababhali baseMazantsi, Shādhilī Faraḥ.

Theatre has long served as a mirror of societal values and injustices. In the Egyptian context, particularly in the South, women have often been portrayed as both central to dramatic structure and marginalised within the cultural narrative. Historically, female characters in

theatre have embodied the struggles of real women negotiating oppression rooted in poverty, fear, or ignorance, and often denied agency or voice. Southern Egyptian women, in particular, inherit a legacy of customs and false beliefs that frame them as intellectually and emotionally inferior, rendering them subject to inherited gender norms that blur the line between social expectation and systemic violence.

This study focuses on the play *Night of the South* (*Leil Al-Janoub*) by Shādhilī Faraḥ; a southern Egyptian playwright, whose dramatic voice emerges from the complexities of his cultural environment. The play offers a powerful lens through which to examine the scenographic and narrative strategies used to portray gender-based oppression. The research shall focus on the 2015 production of *Night of the South*, directed by Ashraf El-Noubi, with scenographic design by the author. The play was performed at the *Slices of Theatre* Festival in Egypt's Western and Central Delta region in February 2015. It offers a poetic, ritualistic, and deeply symbolic exploration of gendered suffering within the cultural landscape of Upper Egypt. It centres on the stories of four southern women, each shaped by different forms of social constraint and gender-based violence, interwoven through the memory journey of a male narrator in exile. Their narratives unfold through layered visual metaphors and emotionally charged scenographic design, revealing the oppressive dynamics of tradition, patriarchy, and silence.

Despite an increasing scholarly interest in gender and performance studies, there remains a noticeable gap in research on how scenographic design – especially within regional Egyptian theatre – can visually represent and critique such forms of oppression. Southern playwrights have produced rich, culturally embedded texts that centre women's experiences, yet their scenographic dimensions remain largely unexplored. This research identifies this critical gap and positions scenography not merely as a decorative or supporting element, but as a central narrative tool capable of amplifying the emotional and social weight of women's stories. Accordingly, this study investigates how *Night of the South* constructs a visual language that communicates the realities of gender inequality and social injustice in Upper Egypt. Through the spatial arrangement of the stage, symbolic motifs, colour palettes, and physical movement, the scenographic design functions as a conduit for cultural memory, resistance, and re-imagining social norms. This study is guided by the following question: How does scenographic design in the southern Egyptian play *Night of the South* represent and amplify the experience of gender-based violence within the cultural context of Upper Egypt, and give voice to silenced women's stories?

By addressing this core question, the study contributes to the field of gender and performance by highlighting the potential of visual theatre to render visible what is often silenced, particularly in regions where women's narratives have historically been suppressed. It foregrounds the distinct contributions of southern playwrights in voicing women's realities, and the scenographic strategies that allow those voices to resonate with clarity and urgency.

The article adopts a qualitative, descriptive–analytical case study approach to investigate the cultural, social, and aesthetic dimensions of *Night of the South*. The primary data comprise (1) the published script of *Night of the South* (*Layl al-Janūb*) by Shādhilī Faraḥ, (2) scenographic artefacts from the 2015 production (design drawings, colour plates, ground plans, costume sketches, and construction photographs) produced by the author as scenographer, and (3) performance documentation from *The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) at the Slices of Theatre Festival (2015), including production stills and author field notes. These materials are treated as interrelated visual and textual data through which the layered representations of gendered oppression are interpreted. Rather than offering a merely descriptive account of a design process, the study reads scenographic choices as a visual "text", whose spatial composition,

colour palette, and embodied interaction with performers generate meaning about gender-based violence in Upper Egypt and deepen engagement with the play's call for social reformation.

Following contemporary scenography scholarship that understands design as an active co-author of performance rather than a decorative backdrop (McKinney and Butterworth 2009; Hann 2019; McKinney and Palmer 2017), this article approaches scenography as a relational system of space, objects, bodies, and light that produces meaning in tandem with text and acting. In this process, the starting point of discussion shall be Violence Against Women in Upper Egypt. This shall be followed by a discussion of Shādhilī Faraḥ's contribution to Southern Egyptian theatre, and an in-depth analysis of the scenographic choices in the 2015 production. The study ultimately argues for the power of scenography as an act of cultural memory and resistance; one capable of challenging inherited norms and articulating new forms of social consciousness.

Gender-based oppression in Upper Egypt: Cultural roots and theatrical reflections

Ali Yūsuf (2018: 361) describes oppression as an emotional human experience that robs individuals of their agency, reducing them to a state of submission and defeat, to the point that they avoid unfamiliar situations. Sa'd 'Alī Nāğī (2019: 41) expands this by defining oppression as a deliberate material and moral behaviour that inflicts physical or psychological harm, aims to destroy and alienate others, strips them of their freedoms, marginalises them intellectually, and reduces them to instruments for achieving ends that negatively affect their existence and social interactions. Within the context of this study, we can define oppression as the sense of submission, brokenness, and powerlessness experienced by Upper Egyptian women; rooted in the customs, traditions, and norms particular to Upper Egyptian society, and the consequent negative impact on their material and moral being.

Studies by scholars such as Muṣṭafā Ḥijāzī (2005), Sulṭān *et al.* (2015), and Ṭāhir (2023), have confirmed the prevalence of gender-based oppression in Upper Egypt. These include systemic denial of inheritance, political disenfranchisement, early marriage, illiteracy, and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation. According to UNICEF (2016), as of 2014, Upper Egypt exhibited the highest illiteracy levels in the country, with approximately 30% of the population unable to read and write. The report also highlights a significant gender gap in literacy rates: 83.6% of males aged 15–24 was literate, compared to only 68.1% of females in the same age group. This disparity underscores the challenges women face in accessing education and the labour market in the region. Amid these conditions, gender-based violence (GBV) prevails and manifests for different reasons.

Violence against women (VAW) is a deeply entrenched social phenomenon that manifests across cultural, economic, and social domains. In the context of Upper Egypt, this violence is not only a lived reality but also a dramatic subject matter that finds powerful expression on stage. Theatre, as a mirror to society, has historically explored themes of power imbalance, injustice, and resistance, making it a potent space for confronting gendered oppression. To unpack the foundations of such violence, the causes of violence against women can be understood across three interconnected levels. At the individual level, perpetrators may suffer from personality disorders, mental illness, or substance abuse – factors that impair their impulse control and empathy. At the economic level, pressures such as poverty or insufficient household income can exacerbate stress and conflict, creating an environment in which violence is more likely to occur. At the societal level, pervasive cultural norms and media influences; whether through satellite television, the Internet, or digital news, can normalise aggression and transmit

images of conflict from both regional and global events into smaller communities, indirectly shaping attitudes that condone or even celebrate violence (Heise 1998; Ṭāhir 2023: 101–2).

Across generations, Egyptian women – particularly those in Upper Egypt – have inherited a legacy of rigid customs and beliefs that frame them as intellectually, emotionally, and physically inferior. These norms reduce women to roles deemed suitable by patriarchal authority and often blur coercion into accepted tradition. Such deeply rooted ideologies are not only perpetuated by male-dominated culture but also internalised by women themselves, leading to self-erasure and submission in exchange for perceived protection or absolution (Al-ʻAṭṭār 2020: 426-7). In Upper Egypt, the forms of violence against women are varied. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and social, political, and cultural rights; women still suffer violence because there is a large gap between law and its implementation (Sulṭān *et al.* 2015: 143). This cultural and social framework inevitably shapes the theatre of the region. Southern playwrights and directors viewed as the moral conscience of their communities; have long carried the burden of voicing women's silenced stories. Their works reflect the harsh customs and social codes that continue to define and constrain female identity in the South (Al-ʻAṭṭār 2020: 427).

Conceptualising gender-based oppression in Southern Egyptian theatre

At its core, the concept of oppression involves a dynamic between two unequal forces: the oppressor and the oppressed. The resulting conflict is inherently unbalanced, as the weaker party struggles – passively or actively – against a dominant power. This struggle, though unequal, becomes the dramatic engine of resistance and visibility (ʿAbd al-Khāliq 2015: 4). In the theatrical tradition, this theme of oppression is central and recurrent. Women, in particular, are depicted navigating a spectrum of violence, whether associated with poverty, fear, or ignorance. These conditions often strip women of the ability to fully experience life, love, motherhood, or agency. Their bodies and emotions become subdued under layers of social expectation, often leading to spiritual and emotional numbness (Al-ʻAṭṭār 2020: 430).

In the lived experience of Upper Egyptian women – and, by extension, in the theatrical narratives that articulate their social realities – female oppression is dramatised on stage through three emerging interrelated forms of dispossession: economic, sexual, and ideological. Economic dispossession is marked by the persistent undervaluing of women's labour and creative capacities, which diminishes their sense of self-worth and fosters psychological withdrawal and deepens patterns of deprivation and dependency. Sexual dispossession, on the other hand, reduces the female body to a passive vessel, an object of pleasure, reproduction, or shame, stripped of agency and framed as something to be concealed and controlled. Dramatised on stage, the female body becomes a site of shame or spectacle, portrayed either as a vessel of male desire or as a guardian of family honour (Al-ʻAṭṭār 2020: 431).

Yet the most insidious layer is the ideological captivity that Ḥijāzī (2005: 32) calls the "superstructural" dimension of backwardness – a psychological alienation whereby women internalise the very values that justify their subjugation. In Upper Egypt, this manifests both in mothers enforcing practices like early female circumcision on their daughters and in instilling a mindset of submission in their sons. As Nāğī (2019) explains, ideological dispossession causes women to internalise beliefs in their own inferiority and the presumed natural superiority of men. This belief system fosters submission and self-erasure, reinforcing gendered hierarchies as an immutable social order.

These modes of dispossession are not discrete. They overlap and intersect, shaping a daily reality of negotiation, suppression, and vulnerability. Such internalised oppression is

powerfully rendered on the theatrical stage when characters wrestle not only with external tyrants but also with the voices within that insist "this is your fate". Against this backdrop, the under-studied literary output of Egyptian southern playwrights, deserves critical attention. It offers intimate portrayals of women's suffering within patriarchal traditions. For this study, the author turns to the work of Shādhilī Faraḥ, whose plays give voice to Southern women's struggles and resilience. Faraḥ is an Egyptian playwright and actor born in the city of Aswān. He graduated from the Faculty of Arts at ʿAyn Shams University and served as Director of the Department of Production Monitoring and Committees, at the Egyptian General Administration of Theatre. He is considered one of the specialists in writing about Upper Egyptian women and is among the most capable authors in portraying the hidden feminine dimensions of the South. His passion for Southern women stems from his upbringing in the region.

Faraḥ has authored numerous plays that centre women as bearers of both trauma and transformation, including: *ʿAqd Ḥazūn* (2013) [The Sorrowful Contract], *Duhaybah* (2014), *Jabal Taqūq* (2017) [Mount Taqouq], *Naʿnāʿ ʿala al-Janīnah* (2007) [Mint in the Garden], *Layl al-Janūb* (2010) [Night of the South], *Inshiṭār* (2017) [Fracture], *Yā Ṣabr Nāʿisah* (2011) [Oh Patience of Nāʿisah] among others. As Faraḥ himself states: "All my writings carry the burdens of southern women, traditions, and rituals. I am the son of a land rich in stories and theatre needs diversity that archives the soul of the nation" (Al-ʻAṭṭār 2020: 432).

In conclusion, understanding the interrelated forms of female dispossession is essential for any scenographic project aiming to represent – and ultimately disrupt – gendered oppression. By dramatising both the external structures of violence and the internalised chains within women's psyches, theatre becomes a laboratory for resistance, a space where audiences can witness, question, and imagine new forms of liberation.

Research case study: *Night of the South*

The play *Night of the South* by Shādhilī Faraḥ, was published in 2011 as part of the Theatrical Texts series by the General Authority for Cultural Palaces, Egypt. The play has received multiple awards, including the Tawfiq Al-Hakim Prize (2012) and the State Encouragement Award (2016). It has been performed widely, directed by several prominent Egyptian theatre makers, and translated into German. It was staged at national and international festivals in Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Germany, reflecting its cultural resonance and global relevance. The 2015 production of *Night of the South* was produced with the title *The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) and was performed by Matrouh Cultural Palace Theatrical Troup in February 2015.

The Southerner (Al-Janūbī) theatrical performance

The Southerner is a play written by Shādhilī Faraḥ, directed by Ashraf El-Noubi, with scenography design by the author. It was performed during the *Slices of Theatre* Festival, organised in the Western and Central Delta Region in Egypt from 11-17 February 2015. The play exposes the illusion of rigid traditions that, like idols, demand a false sense of reverence. Beneath their surface lies a reality of pain and contradiction. People sacrifice their most precious values – children, happiness, and even honour – offering them up to a silent authority that observes their every move. This symbolic idol represents outdated customs that have given rise to deception, hypocrisy, and the loss of individual authenticity. The story highlights the stark contrast between what is said and what is hidden, critiquing a society imprisoned by false necessity and governed by a deterministic system long imposed by ancestral law and backwardness.

Play synopsis

The Southerner is a lyrical, poetic play deeply rooted in the cultural and emotional landscapes of Upper Egypt. Traditional southern Egyptian performance forms such as clapping songs, zār rituals,[1] and stick duelling *(taḥṭīb*) weave through the scenes, creating a sensory landscape of resistance, despair, and poetic beauty. The narrative navigates between realism and allegory, between social critique and metaphysical inquiry. Intertwining folkloric motifs, surreal imagery, and ritualistic expression, the play centres on a cultured Upper Egyptian man in his late thirties, living as a migrant in a European country. One night, in his solitude abroad, he begins a dialogue with himself, swept away by memories of his childhood in the village, where he witnessed the harsh realities faced by his mother's four companions – his aunts – and their suffering under the weight of inherited traditions that crushed their dreams.

The central narrative is framed through the voice of *the Man*, who appears both as an adult and in his child form, *the Boy*. Their dual presence allows the story to traverse temporal and emotional layers, blurring past and present. *The Rope Weaver* character emerges as the engine of events, twisting ropes as he conjures a ten-year-old boy (the protagonist's younger self) from the coils. He casts four palm-fibre ropes at the threshold of a tomb – or a womb – from which hands stretch out, seeking escape, freedom, or rebirth. As he pulls the ropes, four women emerge, bound, symbolising those trapped by tradition. The young man recounts the tragedies endured by his aunts: "I was witness to their torment... all of my aunts... all the women in our village... all the women of the South bore their share of pain" (Faraḥ 2014).

Through poetic reflection and symbolic performance, *the Man* conjures the stories of his four aunts, each embodying different facets of feminine suffering and resistance within the patriarchal backward society of the South. The stories of the women unfold in distinct, ritualised sequences. The play's structure resembles a series of mythic tableaux or dreamscapes, with each woman's life representing a different mode of entrapment and yearning: infertility, sexual repression, forbidden love, and maternal anguish.

Main characters' analysis

The Southerner, the dual figure of *the Man* and *the Boy*, functions as both narrator and embodied memory within the play. *The Man*, now in his late thirties and burdened by exile, is haunted by what he left behind: not only physical spaces but the intimate lives of the women who shaped his understanding of the world. *The Boy*, his younger self, appears alongside him, reflecting a temporal split in consciousness. Together, they become witnesses to the feminine tragedies unfolding before them. *The Man's* perspective is deeply poetic, introspective, and emotionally fraught, revealing his role not only as a passive observer but as someone complicit in cultural silences and exiles.

The Rope Weaver (Al-Ḥabbāk) functions as a metaphysical force throughout the play; a weaver not only of palm fibre ropes but also of destinies, memories, and social constraints. He is introduced early on as a near-mythical figure, appearing in a trance-like state, rhythmically crafting ropes with increasing hysteria. The ropes he spins are not inert materials; they bind the women physically and symbolically, marking their subjugation within a patriarchal system. *The Rope Weaver* does not speak; his actions and presence, however, permeate the narrative. He appears at moments of emotional or ritual intensity, responding to sorrow, confession, or

[1] Zār rituals are traditional spirit-possession ceremonies found primarily in parts of North and East Africa and the Middle East. They are often performed by or for women as a form of communal healing, especially in cases of emotional distress, psychological trauma, or illness believed to be caused by supernatural forces or spirit possession (Boddy 1989).

rupture with a frenzied acceleration of his weaving. In this way, he is less an individual character and more a cosmic agent; one who enforces societal codes while paradoxically revealing their cruelty. His presence underscores the play's central metaphor: that the lives of women in the South are intricately, even violently, woven into a cultural tapestry not of their own making.

The playwright's deliberate choice of names for the four aunts in *Night of the South* is far from arbitrary: each name functions as a symbolic gateway into the character's world, encapsulating the emotional, cultural, and existential dimensions of her suffering. These names reflect the individual trajectories of the women and signal their place within the broader landscape of southern Egyptian womanhood, where myth, memory, and social control converge.

Nakhl *(نخل)* – literally "palm tree" – serves as a tragic symbol of violated fertility and natural grace. Once admired in the village for her beauty and her gift for reciting the epic *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, Nakhl becomes ostracised for being barren, a condition that renders her socially obsolete. Though she shares a tender, loving marriage with Ja'far, their inability to conceive becomes a point of rupture, largely due to the tyrannical pressure exerted by Ja'far's father, who demands a male heir to inherit the family land. The father's refusal to consider the possibility that his son may be infertile exposes the rigid gender expectations that displace blame onto women by default. In a desperate attempt to "cure" her infertility, Nakhl is taken to a sacred mountain, where she undergoes a brutal, symbolic healing ritual that culminates in her rape by a stranger. This act, disguised as a traditional remedy, underscores the extent to which the female body is sacrificed at the altar of patriarchal custom and societal hypocrisy.

Wala'āna *(ولعانة)*, whose name connotes both burning passion and madness, is the most mythic and layered of the four aunts. A loving mother and spiritual matriarch, she is forced into an impossible position when her two brothers demand she surrender her son, Yassin, as retribution for the murder of their third brother, killed by Wala'āna's husband during a dispute over irrigation water on his wedding night. Her desperate efforts to protect her child, including a solemn vow to offer her body sexually to a stranger during a village carnival, reveal the extreme lengths to which women are compelled to go to interrupt cycles of tribal vengeance. Despite her resistance, Yassin is eventually killed, and Wala'āna is transformed into a spectral figure who haunts the mountainside, dressed in men's clothing and consumed by grief. She becomes a mythic hybrid; part woman, part legend, embodying a southern archetype of the bereaved mother whose love is transfigured into righteous wrath.

Shouq *(شوق)*, meaning "longing" or "desire," encapsulates the emotional and erotic deprivation faced by women left behind by the migratory labour of their husbands. Shouq's husband, 'Asran, works abroad and postpones his return year after year, sending only letters and small remittances. In his absence, his cousin 'Atwa relentlessly pursues her, clouding the boundaries between coercion and emotional vulnerability. Isolated and neglected, Shouq begins to conflate 'Atwa's advances with her fantasies of reunion, culminating in a moment of near seduction that dissolves into shame and withdrawal. Her body becomes a metaphor for drought: parched, exposed, and constantly surveilled. Caught between desire and self-erasure, Shouq turns to ecstatic rituals and trance states as a form of personal and spiritual reclamation, a fragile effort to reassemble a self, fractured by absence, repression, and longing.

Nour *(نور)*, whose name means "light," is the only one among the four aunts who attains formal education, and she stands apart for her intellect, ambition, and fierce individuality. Deeply cherished by her father, she becomes the only woman in the village to attend university, and she excels in the masculine-coded art of *taḥṭīb* (stick duelling), a traditional form of physical poetry and combat. Yet, her education and skill do not exempt her from the demands

of patriarchal custom. Nour falls in love with Marjān, a young Nubian man, but their relationship is rejected by both families as a violation of tribal codes, which decree that a woman must marry her paternal cousin "even if he is the devil himself", as her father declares. Her defiance is met with a humiliating virginity test and threats of forced marriage to her cousin; ʻAmmūsh al-Dīb, an ignorant mugger. In a moment of symbolic resistance, Nour challenges him to a *taḥṭīb* duel and defeats him, asserting her right to refuse, even within the confines of custom. Still, her rebellion is circumscribed by the unyielding boundaries of her community. Her tragedy lies not in individual failure, but in the erosion of her agency under the relentless weight of tribal judgment.

Together, these four women – each a manifestation of repressed power, silenced desire, and cultural entrapment – form a chorus of lamentation and resistance. They are not passive victims; rather, their bodies, voices, and rituals actively disrupt the symbolic order of the village, confronting the audience with the human cost of blind conformity to the false idols of social backwardness. In this play, Shādhilī Faraḥ renders the southern Egyptian landscape as both a mythic terrain and a repository of lived trauma, centring women's experiences as the poetic and political core of the narrative. The play becomes a ritual of remembrance and resistance, where naming itself becomes an act of invocation, and storytelling a gesture of survival.

Conceptualisation of scenographic design

This article conceptualises scenography as an interdependent configuration that generates meaning alongside, and in dialogue with, the text and performance. From this perspective, the set, costumes, and lighting in *Night of the South* are not illustrative of gender-based oppression; they constitute the primary medium through which that oppression is spatialised, ritualised, and made visible (Collins and Nisbet 2010).

Through close textual analysis and collaboration with the director to meet the demands of performance, the researcher developed a scenographic concept grounded in heritage and abstraction. The design adopts a symbolic approach that emphasises the theme of layered realities, where surface appearances obscure deeper emotional and social truths, particularly in relation to the characters. These thematic layers are reflected spatially through varied stage levels, multiple entrances and exits, and a central visual motif: rope formations resembling spider webs, extending from *the Tree of Traditions* and symbolically linked to the figure of *the Rope Weaver.*

At the core of the composition is *the Tree of Traditions*, where *the Rope Weaver* sits. The tree represents the societal structures binding all characters. It observes silently, acting as law, judge, and societal norm. These metaphorical "social cables" prevent creativity and personal growth. They instil fear, passivity, and blind conformity in individuals. Opposite this is the moon, a newborn crescent. It represents hope for a better future. The characters long for this alternative reality, yet it, too, is restrained by the same ropes pulling it back toward the tree. An additional layer of symbolism comes through the motif of the human double. Folklore often includes the idea of each person being accompanied by two extensions of their soul: one good and luminous, the other dark and frightening. This duality is expressed in the protagonist's interaction with his younger self (Dixon 2007: 241–2).

Scenography design process

As scenographer and researcher, the author was tasked with designing the sets and costumes for a proscenium-stage production at the Marsa Matrouh Culture Palace. The scenographic design comprised three primary scenic environments and six costumes. The author developed the design sketches using computer-aided design software, including 3D Studio Max, AutoCAD, and Adobe Photoshop. The key elements of the aesthetic treatment in the production is discussed below; all design plates and production documentation presented are drawn from the author's own scenographic work on *Night of the South*.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the analysis of these scenographic strategies, particularly in relation to how they visualise women's oppression and potential resistance, is shaped by the author's position as both scenographer and scholar. The design decisions discussed here emerge from the author's training, aesthetic preferences, and investment in foregrounding women's experiences in Southern Egypt. Other interpretive lenses, such as an anthropological focus on audience reception, or a legal-feminist approach to representations of gender-based violence, might emphasise different aspects of the same visual field, including spectators' ambivalent pleasure in viewing images of suffering or the risk of aestheticising trauma. Recognising these alternative perspectives underscores the need for scenographic analyses that remain self-reflexive about their own cultural and intellectual frames, particularly when working with material rooted in real communities and ongoing social injustices.

Colour scheme

Colour plays a vital role in shaping the audience's emotional response, conveying powerful psychological cues and enhancing the expressive potential of theatrical performance. When paired with lighting, colour can intensify emotional content and deepen the dramatic atmosphere on stage. In this production, a carefully curated colour scheme was employed, with each hue chosen for its symbolic resonance. Read through the lens of the interrelated forms of dispossession outlined earlier, the colour scheme functions as an affective map of women's constrained life worlds in the South, rather than as a purely decorative palette.

Black signified fear, sorrow, treachery, and grief. In the performance it visually registers what Ḥijāzī (2005) terms the "superstructural" psychological alienation of the oppressed. White represented innocence, peace, and purity and marked *the Boy*'s and Yassin's briefly idealised presence on stage (figure 15-b). Gray, a more subdued tone, conveyed coldness, submission, and occasional melancholy. Violet, rich and emotionally charged, evoked mourning and despair, though in deeper tones it also suggested grandeur. In combination with dark, blackish-grey tones, it dominates key moments when the women confront ideological captivity. At these points, male figures such as *the Rope Weaver*, ʿAsrān, Shouq's husband, and ʿAtwa appear in dense blackish-grey garments whose weighty, subdued palette visually anchors the scenes of judgement and control. Their clothing ties them chromatically to the same field of muted darkness that frames the women's suffering, signalling how patriarchal authority is materially clothed in – and thereby complicit with – the atmosphere of constraint it imposes (figures 14 and 16).

Green, the colour of nature, offered calm, hope, and fertility, though when mixed with blue, it implied emotional detachment. Blue itself symbolised tranquillity, clarity, and poetic dreaminess, associated with night, water, and introspection. In its softer tints, it extends the aura of possibility associated with *the Boy* and the moon across the stage picture. Soft blue, particularly when combined with white around the moon and *the Boy*'s figure, signals fleeting

moments of imagined alternative futures and emotional respite. Yellow radiated joy and vitality, but in darker shades could imply jealousy, deceit, or decline. Finally, brown evoked earthiness, harvest, and dignity, while also referencing the rural and natural world (Abdel-Mo'ti 1996: 176-9). Together, these chromatic choices are therefore not merely aesthetic; they materialise onstage the oscillation between submission and resistance that structures the aunts' lives, making the emotional geography of gender-based oppression sensorially available to the audience and reinforcing the production's critique of women's dispossession.

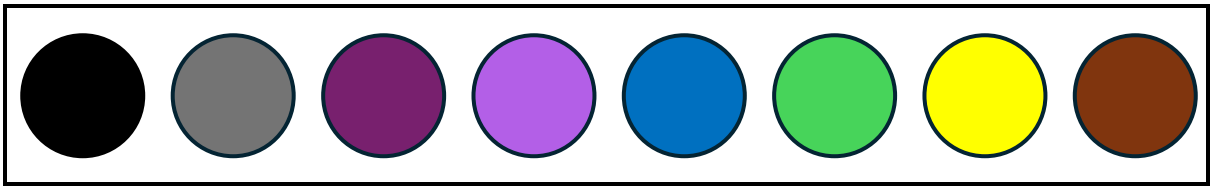


Figure 1
The Southerner (*Al-Janūbī*) – Selected Colour Scheme for the Design

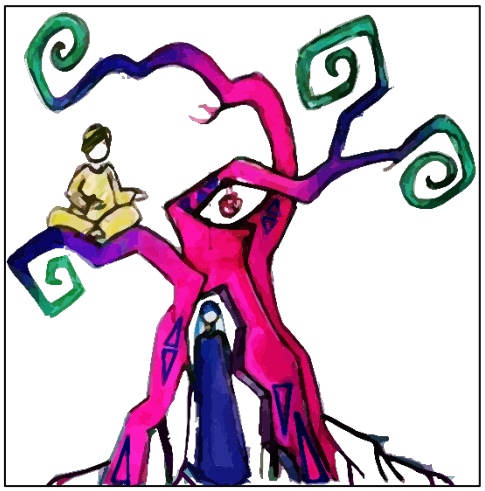
Set design

The author prepared a series of preliminary thumbnail sketches of decorative elements to visualise the scenographic concepts (figure 2). That was followed by mechanical and artistic renders that included ground plans, elevations, and coloured perspectives; presented as shown in the following figures.

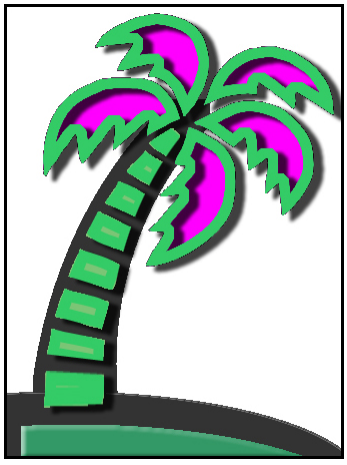
The overall scenic design leans toward symbolic abstraction and the use of structural elements, while preserving the folkloric essence and cultural imprint of the southern community. The scenic composition is primarily divided into:

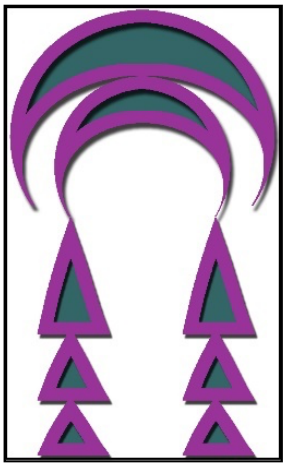
1. The Exile Space (The Southerner's House Abroad)
2. The Village (*al-Nagʿ*)
3. The Tombs and Mount *Abū al-Qomṣān*

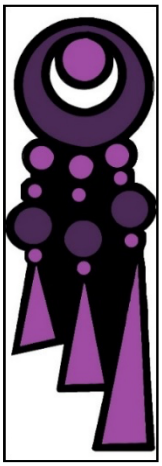
The central element in the composition is *the Tree of Traditions*, which takes on an organic form terminating in four distinct branches, an intentional symbolic reference to representing the four aunts. They are the daughters of the tree, its bitter fruit. At the heart of this structure lies what appears to be an eye, constantly watching the unfolding events. The colour treatment progresses from warm tones to calm violet, ending in cold, lifeless green. The tree is alive, but only because it draws vitality from those who are subject to it, while giving them nothing in return but death.



a. Thumbnail sketch of *the Tree* and *the Rope Weaver*







b. Thumbnail sketch of decorative elements inspired by folk art. To introduce visual rhythm and dynamism into the linear relationships of the composition, various suspended folk motifs were incorporated into the scene in multiple scales.

Figure 2
***The Southerner (Al-Janūbī)* – Preparatory sketch of scenic elements**

Scene One: The exile space (The Southerner's house abroad)

The composition of this scene is built across multiple spatial levels. Stage left represents *the Man*'s current life in exile, where he resides in a modern apartment. Though his environment is contemporary; he engages in an ongoing inner dialogue, some parts rooted in the present, others echoing the past. Behind the chair stands a mirror, used symbolically to reflect the fragmentation of the self. At times he confronts his own image, while at others he turns his back on it, signalling an ongoing internal conflict. Stage right represents his remembered self: a silhouetted image of *the Man* as *the Boy* appears behind a screen, pleading with his adult self to return to his origins; to the South. Rope formations connect the moon to both the exile space and the child's memory in the village, visually linking the past and present.

At the centre of the composition, four suspended draperies in shades of violet and yellow represent the four aunts. The draperies are organically linked to a large central drape that stretches from the grid to the stage floor, concealing behind it *the Tree of Traditions*, which will be revealed in later scenes. The abstract visual relationship between this central drape, the raised and lowered stage levels, and the overhead draperies is conceived as a massive, stylised projection of the tree – the play's central symbol – with its branches, trunk, and deep roots. The scene is framed by a false proscenium made of rope formations from which hang traditional folk ornaments. These ropes are the "threads of fate" manipulated by *the Rope Weaver*, who uses them to toy with the destinies of the characters. The lighting design underscores the young man's sense of entrapment, with projected imagery of bars interwoven with shadowy traces of tree branches, ever-present and dominant forces within the visual narrative (figure 3).

Scene Two: The Village (al-Nagʿ)

As the scene opens, the four draperies are lifted, revealing the full presence of *the Tree of Traditions*. The four women emerge from the tree trunk, each bound by ropes pulled by *the Rope Weaver* stationed atop the tree. The trunk of the tree functions as an entry point for the characters. The moon, suspended above, serves as a symbol of hope and longing for a better reality, though it is tightly bound in ropes, simultaneously a symbol of aspiration and confinement. The moon's appearance changes through lighting to express shifting emotional states experienced by the characters. At times, it burns red and orange with rage, and at others, it glows with a dreamy blue. The tomb area underscores that these women are "the living dead"; stripped of their right to joy by the very traditions that suffocate their dreams. They are reborn, metaphorically, from the womb of death (figure 4).

During the performance, the lighting shifts back to the exile space as the young man begins to recount the stories of his four aunts. He addresses himself, *the Rope Weaver*, and the moon in turn. Eventually, he returns to his seat in the exile zone, and the first aunt emerges from within *the Tree of Traditions*. The dramatic sequence unfolds as he narrates her story.

Scene Three: Mount Abū al-Qomṣān

The stage is reconfigured to transform the tombs into symbolic boats that carry the four aunts and the young boy across the Nile to the western bank, where they visit Mount Abū al-Qomṣān. A frontal light projection adds texture to the raised platform below the moon (the mountain), which Nakhl ascends. There, in a moment of ritualistic transgression, she enters into a forbidden sexual union with the mountain's guardian in an attempt to conceive a male heir. Though she gives birth to a child, the psychological trauma leads her to madness. At the height of despair, she climbs the mountain and throws herself off with her infant in her arms.

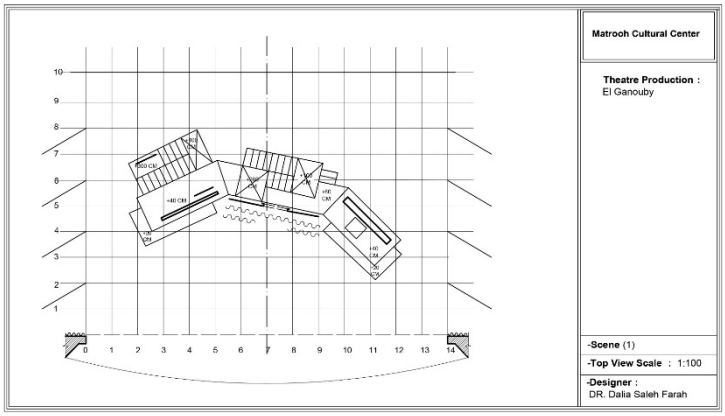
The lighting design evokes a mood of mystery, with projected water ripples encircling the symbolic boats (tombs). The background is bathed in a panoramic night sky filled with stars; a nod to the nocturnal world of the Upper Egyptian South, where secrets and schemes unfold under cover of darkness. *The Tree of Traditions* looms over the scene, always present, always watching, embedded as a natural part of the environment and the unfolding events. The composition is completed with units of palm trees that further reinforce the rural Southern setting (figure 5).

a. **The Exile Space Perspective Drawing**

b. **Detail#1**

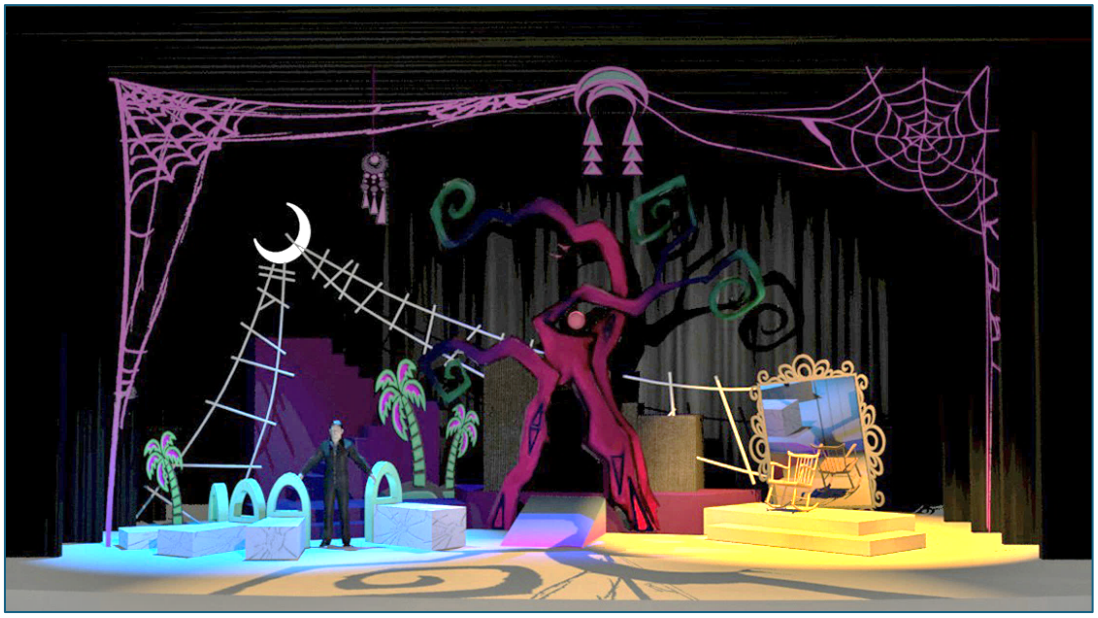
c. **Detail#2**

d. **Suggested Gobo unit for projection**



e. **Top View**

Figure 3
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) – Scene One Design: The Exile Space**

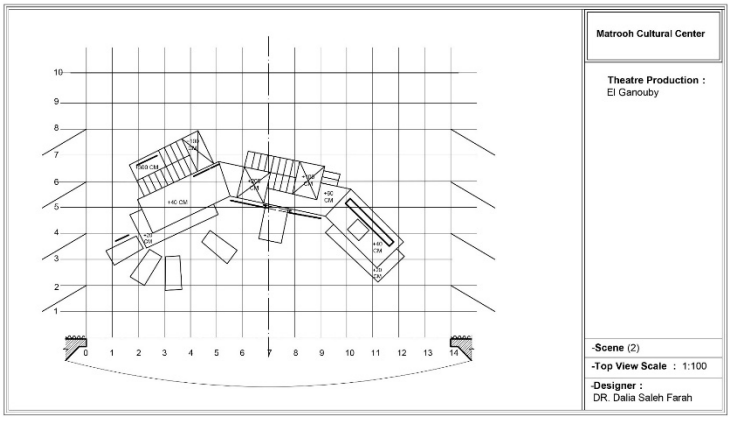


a. **The Village (al-Nagʿ) Perspective Drawing**

b. **Detail#1**

c. **Detail#2**

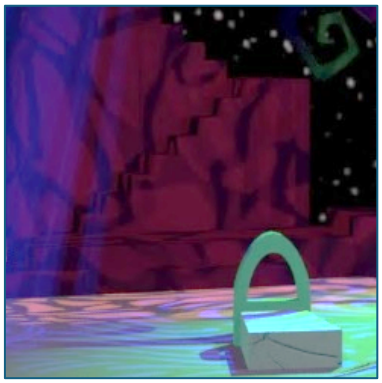
d. **Detail#3**



e. **Top View**

Figure 4
The Southerner (*Al-Janūbī*) – Scene Two Design: The Village (al-Nagʿ)

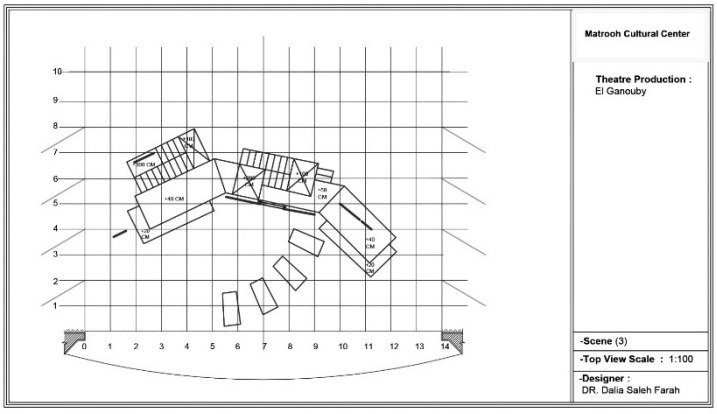
a. **Mount Abū al-Qomṣān Perspective Drawing**



b. **Detail#1**

c. **Gobo unit to project rock formations**

d. **Gobo unit to project water ripples**



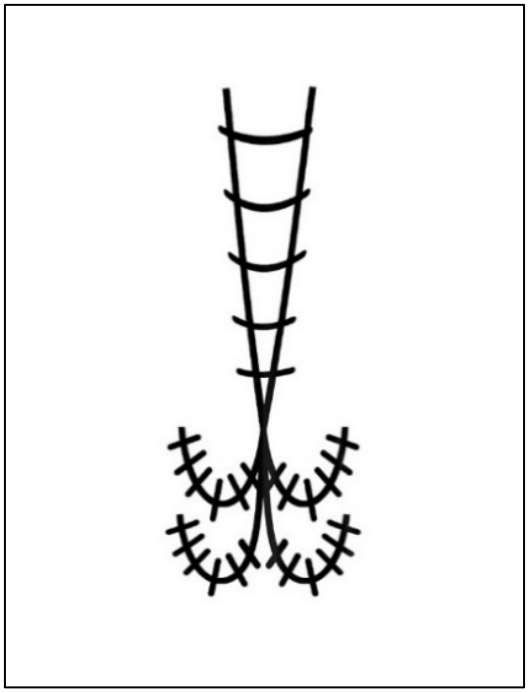
e. **Top View**

Figure 5
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) – Scene Three Design: Mount Abū al-Qomṣān**

Costume design

The costume design treatment adopted an abstract and symbolic approach for certain characters while preserving the local identity of Upper Egyptian culture. The costume designs for the four aunts drew heavily on traditional tattoo symbolism, employing large-scale motifs that communicated the inner worlds and social identities of each character. These motifs, inspired by authentic folk tattoo practices, were adapted to reflect the distinct psychological and narrative arcs of the four aunts. As documented by Mohamed (2013: 105, 118, 126, 182), traditional tattoos in rural Egypt function not only as aesthetic adornments, but also as markers of social status, emotional experience, and gendered meaning. Each motif was carefully selected and scaled to become a visual metaphor – inscribed on fabric rather than skin – evoking associations of honour, loss, longing, or transgression. This symbolic layering of costume design bridges the physical body and the socio-cultural codes it embodies, reinforcing the scenographic language of the production (figures 6-9).

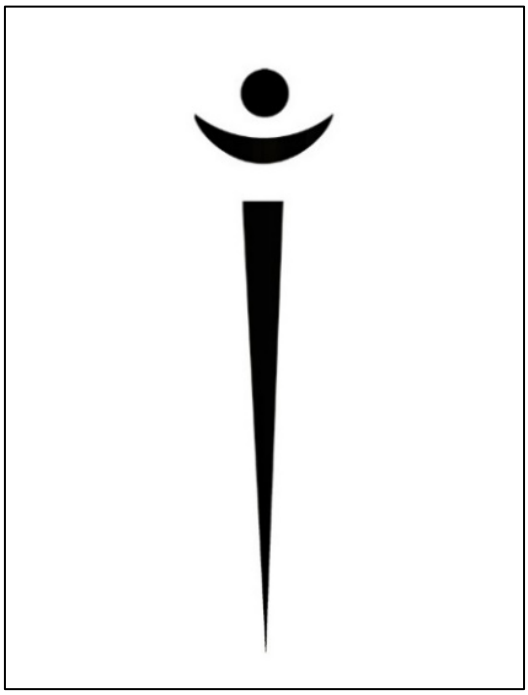
The costume design emphasises the idea of layered garments, symbolising the psychological and cultural strata enveloping the female characters. A unified colour palette of deep violet and dark yellow reinforces the organic connection between the women, *the Tree of Traditions*, and *the Rope Weaver.*



a. Tattoo Motif on Nakhl's Costume
The palm tree tattoo traditionally signifies a virtuous woman of abundant blessings, whereas a withered palm tree symbolises hypocrisy. In Nakhl's costume, the design features an inverted palm tree, used as a metaphor for her fall into sin. This visual inversion foreshadows both her moral collapse and her eventual suicide.

b. Costume Design: Nakhl
The inverted palm tree motif reinforces Nakhl's moral downfall, ending in her symbolic and literal fall from the mountain.

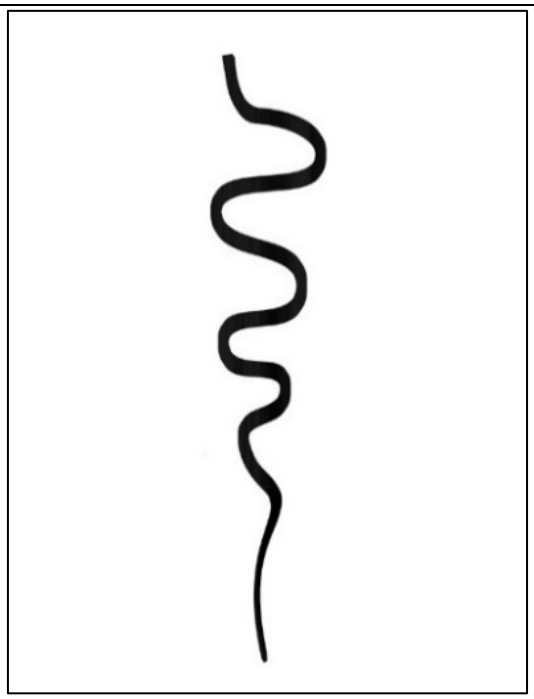
Figure 6
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) – Nakhl costume design**



c. **Tattoo Motif on Wala‘āna’s Costume**
One of the common tattoo styles in Southern Egypt features a crescent-like arch across the forehead, linking the eyebrows, with a central dot known as the nūna, resembling the moon in a clear sky. A circular tattoo on the chin is traditionally reserved for a family’s only son. These motifs are employed to symbolise Yassin, her only child, who is ultimately betrayed and sacrificed.

d. **Costume Design: Wala‘āna**
The circular and crescent motifs on her costume represent her son’s innocence and fate. The dot encircled by a crescent, reflects Yassin’s vulnerability and doom.

Figure 7
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) – Wala‘āna costume design**



e. Tattoo Motif on Shouq's Costume **Across various cultures, the snake is associated with sin and betrayal. In the context of the play, a forbidden relationship emerges between Shouq and 'Atwa, her husband's cousin, making the serpent motif a visual metaphor for seduction and moral danger.**	**f. Costume Design: Shouq** **Caught in a storm of resentment and weakness, she lives in tension between desire and resistance. Her costume evokes this tension, bearing visual cues of danger, temptation, and vulnerability.**

Figure 8
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) – Shouq costume design**

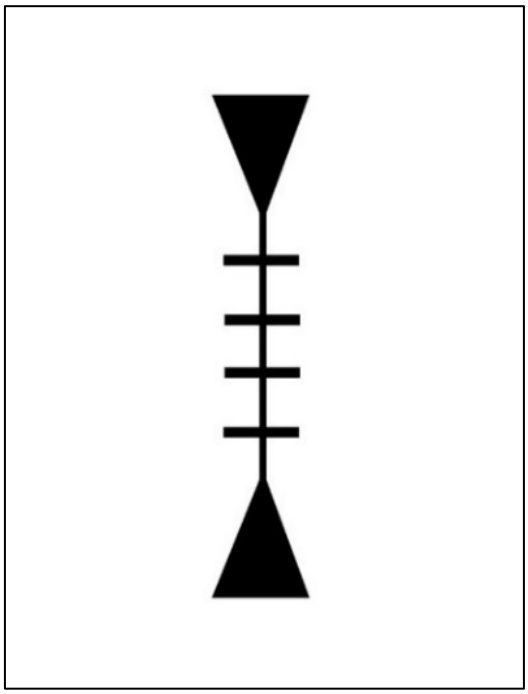
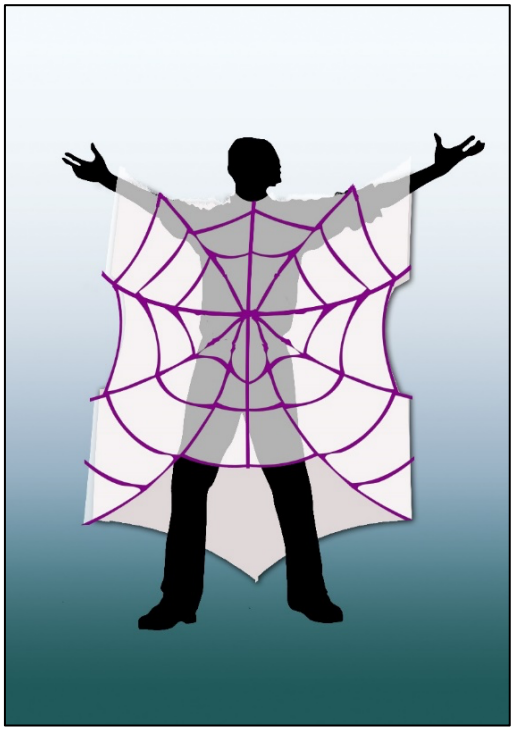
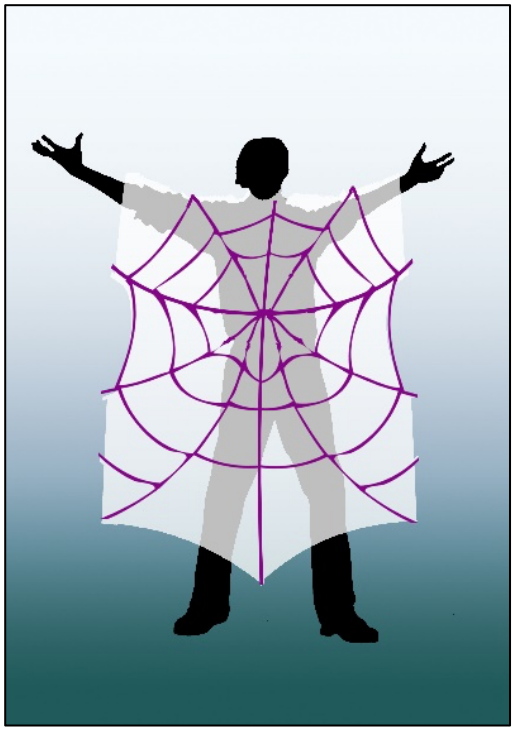
	
g. Tattoo Motif on Nour's Costume **The motif is drawn from a traditional tattoo known as "the cousin's pillow," placed on the woman's right arm. This refers to the tribal custom that dictates a girl must marry her paternal cousin, who is expected to rest his head on that very arm. The motif underscores Nour's struggle against familial and social expectations.**	**h. Costume Design: Nour** **The costume design reflects the inner conflict between Nour's autonomy and the tribal laws that bind her to marry her cousin.**

Figure 9
The Southerner (*Al-Janūbī*) – Nour costume design

In the aunts' costume design, tattoo-derived motifs are treated as socio-cultural "inscriptions" rather than decorative flourishes, which positions costume as a key analytic site for reading gendered power. In each case, the motif materialises the form of dispossession the woman embodies. These designs thereby transform the women's bodies into moving archives of oppression; as they dance, plead, or resist, the motifs circulate across the stage, making visible the otherwise invisible codes that script their lives.

a. Costume Design: The Southerner
Though modern in his appearance, he remains deeply attached to his roots and memories of the village. His costume is contemporary in cut, yet chromatically linked to the broader scenographic palette, particularly *the Tree of Traditions* and *the Rope Weaver*, indicating his entanglement in ancestral memory and cultural inheritance.





b. Costume Design: Expressive Choreography Performers (front and back views)
A group of choreography performers accompany the songs and dramatic scenes with interpretive sketches. Their costumes consisted of bat-winged cloaks embroidered with spiderweb threads, worn over neutral black undergarments. These designs reinforced the themes of entrapment and fate that run throughout the production.

Figure 10
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) – Costume Design: The Southerner and choreography performers**

Set construction process

The production proposal was approved by the Egyptian General Administration of Theatre. However, the allocated limited budget and technical constraints necessitated the integration of all three scenes, The Exile Space, The Village, and Mount Abū al-Qamṣān, into a single, cohesive scenographic composition. Modifications were carried out directly on the stage, including the fabrication of set components and the arrangement of ground-level platforms.

Carpentry and construction of set elements

Using the design drawings, the scenic façades were enlarged through light projection and traced onto plywood boards. The external outlines of the surfaces were then cut, and openings were hollowed out as needed. Reinforcements and structural backing were added to ensure the elements could be stably mounted onstage (figure 11).

Assembly of the scenic composition

After constructing the three-dimensional elements, they were assembled onstage along with the ground-level platforms. A technical rehearsal was conducted with the set in place, followed by the application of paintwork and tonal shading in accordance with the proposed colour palette (figure 12).

Figure 11
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) – Carpentry and Construction of Set Elements**

Figure 12
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) – Assembly of the Scenic Composition**

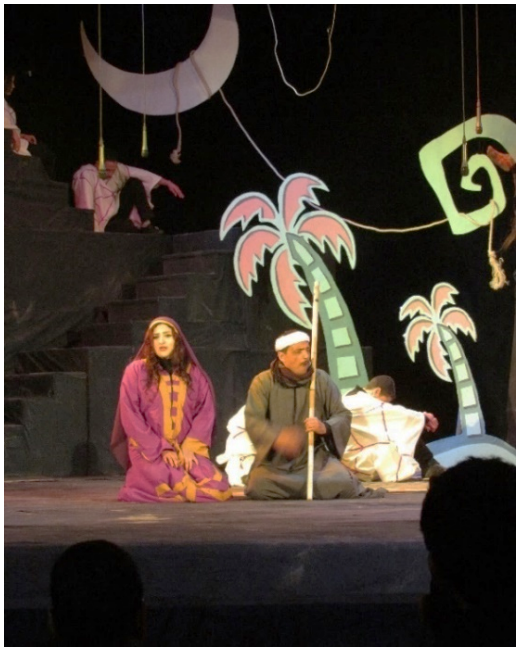
The Southerner (*Al-Janūbī*) performance on stage

The *Southerner (Al-Janūbī)* theatre performance, written by Shādhilī Faraḥ and directed by Ashraf al-Nūbī, was presented as part of the Regional Theatre Festival of the West and Central Delta, held from 11–17 February 2015. The performance featured a series of expressive musical sketches woven into the narrative, including: *"Hazīn"* (Sad), *"ʿĀyez Aṭīr fī al-Samā"* (I Want to Fly in the Sky), and *"Tāyihīn"* (The Lost Ones).

The set of *Al-Janūbī* (*The Southerner*) was fully assembled and installed onstage, integrating the three key spatial zones: the Exile Space, the Village (*al-Nagʿ*), and the Cemetery (figure 13). In analytical terms, the spatial organisation translates the article's conceptual triad of economic, sexual, and ideological dispossession into a navigable stage geography. The Exile Space configures *the Man*'s present as a zone of apparent mobility that is nonetheless visually tethered, through rope formations and mirror imagery, to the Village and the Tombs. The central *Tree of Traditions* operates as what we might call a scenographic "apparatus of oppression": it anchors the women's entrances and exits, literally swallowing and expelling their bodies, while its colour gradation – from warm to lifeless green – visualises how communal vitality is extracted from women's suffering. The audience thus witnesses

oppression not only as narrated content but as an embodied negotiation of constrained pathways, blocked vistas, and inescapable lines of force on stage. The following section presents documentation by the author of key dramatic moments involving the four aunts' characters (figures 14-7).

Figure 13
The Southerner (*Al-Janūbī*) – The set assembled on stage

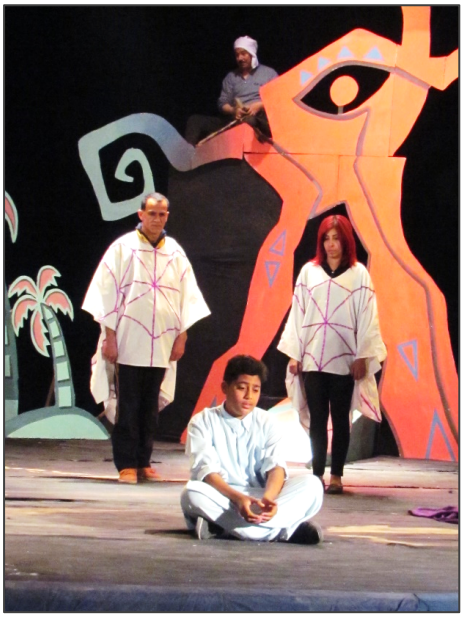


a. Nakhl, the first of the aunts, and her husband ʿAsrān engage in a sorrowful exchange about their inability to conceive

b. ʿAsrān is seen in dialogue with his father, whose voice -gruff and domineering- booms from offstage, berating his son for failing to produce a grandson to inherit the land. *The Rope Weaver* sits silently, turning his back on ʿAsrān.

Figure 14
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) - Performance Stills: Nakhl and ʿAsrān**

a. Wala'āna, the second aunt, pleads desperately with her two brothers (the Blind and the Lame) who insist that her son Yassin must be killed to avenge the murder of their third brother by her husband. Her pleas are in vain.



b. In a haunting moment, expressive performers encircle Yassin before his impending death, choreographically enacting the inevitability of his fate. After Yassin's execution, Wala'āna exits the stage in stunned silence, only to be symbolically swallowed by *the Tree of Traditions*.

Figure 15
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) - Performance Stills: Wala'āna and Yassin**

a. Shouq, the third aunt, listens longingly to a recorded message from her husband ʿAsrān, who appears projected at the moon's level as he reads his letter aloud. Yet when she tries to reach out to him in her imagination, the attempt is futile.

b. In another scene Shouq appears before *the Tree of Traditions* as ʿAtwa - her husband's cousin - emerges from within it, beginning his seduction.

Figure 16
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) - Performance Stills: Shouq, ʿAsrān and ʿAtwa**

a. Nour, the fourth aunt, shares a joyful scene with Morjān, the young Nubian man she loves, as they spar playfully using the traditional *taḥṭīb* stick-fighting form, accompanied by improvised folk poetry.

b. Nour's hopes are dashed when her father - never seen in the flesh - manifests only as a grating voice and a limp, hollow gallabiyah hanging from above. This disembodied presence announces his refusal to allow her to marry Marjān, upholding the rigid law of cousin marriage.

Figure 17
***The Southerner* (*Al-Janūbī*) - Performance Stills: Nour and Morjān**

Conclusion

This study has examined how scenographic design can serve as a powerful tool for amplifying marginalised voices and representing the lived realities of gender-based oppression in Upper Egypt. By focusing on *Layl al-Janūb* (*Night of the South*), a play deeply rooted in the social and symbolic codes of Upper Egyptian culture, the research has demonstrated that scenography can transcend its conventional role as background decor, becoming instead a dramaturgical language in its own right.

The analysis of the 2015 production, directed by Ashraf El-Noubi with scenographic design by the author, revealed how space, costume, colour, and movement work together to reflect and critique the ideological, economic, and sexual forms of female dispossession. From the entangled ropes symbolising fate and control, to tattoo-inspired costume motifs, each visual element functioned as a narrative device, embedding layers of meaning into the physical structure of the stage.

More broadly, the case study has shown that scenography can engage with the hidden textures of a society; covered by a thin veneer of modernity, yet still governed by unyielding tribal and patriarchal codes. In this context, the theatrical space becomes a contested site; one where trauma is narrated and embodied, where silence is disrupted, and where the audience is invited to bear witness to the interior and exterior struggles of Southern women. These women, as represented in Shādhilī Faraḥ's text, are neither one-dimensional victims nor abstract symbols; they are emotionally complex, historically situated figures whose bodies and memories animate the space of resistance.

In doing so, the production reflects the broader role of Southern Egyptian theatre in negotiating between inherited structures of power and the desire for social change. At the same time, the reading offered here is a situated one: as a scenographer working from within – but also writing about – the cultural frame to which the material belongs, the author inevitably privileges certain narratives of resistance and healing over others. A different feminist, anthropological, or reception-based perspective might, for instance, foreground the ambivalence of spectators' responses, the risk of aestheticising women's suffering, or the limits of theatrical representation in transforming material conditions on the ground. Acknowledging these tensions invites practitioners and scholars alike to treat scenography not only as a vehicle for critique but also as a site of ethical responsibility. Practically, this implies design processes that are attentive to women's voices in the communities represented, collaborative devising with performers, and pedagogical practices that train emerging designers to read and work with local cultural codes reflexively.

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Visualising positive masculinity in three contemporary South African artists' works

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Gender-based violence (GBV) remains critically high in South Africa despite legal interventions, with toxic masculinity as a key driver. This study examines how contemporary South African art portrays positive masculinity, defined as emotional vulnerability, empathy, and non-violent conflict resolution, as cultural resistance to GBV. Using feminist visual culture theory and semiotic analysis, this research examines selected works by South African artists Mzoxolo Mayongo, Loyiso Mkize, and Lindiwe Mayisela, chosen for their explicit engagement with themes of masculinity. Analysis reveals recurring themes of soft masculinity, emotional openness, and resistance to dominant gender norms. These artworks function as counter-narratives that normalise alternative masculine identities. Findings highlight art's potential for cultural change around masculinity by providing accessible alternatives to toxic masculine ideals, contributing practical strategies for leveraging cultural production in GBV prevention efforts.
Key words: artivism, self-reflection, gender-based violence prevention, self-agency

Uitbeelding van positiewe manlikheid in drie kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse werke
Geslagsgebaseerde geweld (GGG) bly kritiek hoog in Suid-Afrika ten spyte van regsinisiatiewe, met toksiese manlikheid as 'n sleutel dryfveer. Hierdie studie ondersoek hoe kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse kuns positiewe manlikheid uitbeeld, gedefinieer as emosionele kwesbaarheid, empatie, en nie-gewelddadige konflikhantering, as 'n vorm van kulturele weerstand teen GBV. Deur gebruik te maak van feministiese visuele kultuurteorie en semiotiese analise, ondersoek die navorsing geselekteerde werke van Suid-Afrikaanse kunstenaars Mzoxolo Mayongo, Loyiso Mkize, en Lindiwe Mayisela, wat gekies is vir hul eksplisiete betrokkenheid by temas rondom manlikheid. Die analise toon herhalende temas van sagte manlikheid, emosionele oopheid, en weerstand teen dominante geslagsnorme. Hierdie kunswerke funksioneer as teenverhale wat alternatiewe manlike identiteite normaliseer. Die studie stel voor dat kunsgebaseerde metodes geïntegreer word in GGG-voorkoming deur gemeenskapswerkswinkels, samewerking met museums, en visuele geletterdheidsveldtogte. Die bevindings beklemtoon die potensiaal van kuns om kulturele verandering rondom manlikheid te bevorder deur toeganklike alternatiewe tot toksiese manlike ideale te bied, en dra praktiese strategieë by om kulturele produksie in te span in pogings om GGG te voorkom.
Sleutelwoorde: kunsaktivisme, selfrefleksie, voorkoming van geslagsgebaseerde geweld, selfagentskap

South Africa faces a persistent crisis in the form of gender-based violence (GBV), which is deeply rooted in historical and socio-cultural constructs. During colonialism and apartheid, social hierarchies were enforced along racial and gender lines (Dube 2019). The use of violence to deal with conflict was normalised, and women of colour were treated as subordinate citizens and were denied basic rights and protection (Segale 2025). This historical marginalisation continues to shape contemporary experiences of GBV, as intersecting inequalities based on race, gender, and class perpetuate the structural conditions that enable ongoing violations of women's rights (Chiumbu 2022). The disproportionately high rates of violence against women in South Africa reflect entrenched gendered power

relations and position the country among the most dangerous globally for women. According to the South African Medical Research Council, during the period between 2020-2021, intimate partner violence accounted for 60.1% of all femicides, and 1 in 6 women who were murdered were also sexually violated.[1] A 2023–2024 report by the Commission for Gender Equality found that 21% of women experienced physical violence from their partners, and 51% were exposed to some form of GBV.[2] While the majority of GBV research in South Africa has centred on cisgender, heterosexual women, there is comparatively limited attention given to the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community and cisgender, heterosexual men (Shabalala 2023, Mphatheni 2024). This may be attributed to the limited reporting of GBV against men and LGBTQ+ individuals because of complex factors, including social norms, institutional bias, and cultural prejudice. LGBTQ+ and heterosexual masculinities relate to GBV in distinct ways, with heterosexual masculinity often shaped by hegemonic norms linked to the perpetration of violence, while LGBTQ+ masculinities are frequently targeted by GBV through homophobic and transphobic policing of gender norms, illustrating how different masculine identities experience and reproduce violence within unequal gender systems. Hegemonic masculinity, which equates strength with emotional restraint, discourages men from disclosing victimisation due to fears of being perceived as weak (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Among LGBTQ+ individuals, underreporting is exacerbated by police indifference, dismissiveness, or homophobia, leading to inadequate data collection. Acts such as "corrective rape" against lesbian and transgender individuals are often included under general rape statistics, obscuring their specific nature (Mwambene and Wheal 2015, Sibanyoni *et al* 2023). Furthermore, religious institutions frequently perpetuate stigma and intolerance, further deterring disclosure (Ngongoma and Maweni 2023). These factors have contributed to the complexity of GBV and resulted in the development of the National Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Strategic Plan by the South African government in 2020. The purpose of this comprehensive policy framework was to develop a coordinated, multi-sectoral roadmap to address the GBV crisis. Despite this effort from the South African government, many people lack faith in the country's justice system and the ability of those in power to protect vulnerable groups. Several factors contribute to this, including the under-resourced and overburdened South African police service and Justice departments, low GBV conviction rates, and the rise in violent crimes against women and children despite protective legislation (Tholaine and Calvino 2021). This has resulted in widespread public frustration with the lack of progress in addressing GBV, and this reflects a broader societal disillusionment with top-down interventions. This study responds to these concerns by adopting a bottom-up approach that interrogates the root causes of GBV, with particular emphasis on how toxic masculinity sustains such violence. It further examines how artistic practice can serve as a critical medium for challenging dominant gender norms and nurturing alternative, non-violent masculinities.

The term "toxic masculinity" was introduced by Shepherd Bliss, a key figure in the 1980s mythopoetic men's movement, which focused on male healing in response to a perceived crisis in masculinity (Zhao and Roberts 2025). Since then, the term has entered self-help

[1] South African Medical Research Council. 2024. *South Africa's Femicide Crisis Persists: New Report Highlights Increase in Intimate Partner Femicide Violence and Declining Convictions*. Retrieved from https://www.samrc.ac.za/press-releases/south-africas-femicide-crisis-persists-new-report-highlights-increase-intimate on 15 July 2025.

[2] Commission for Gender Equality. 2024. *Towards a Gender-Based Violence Index for South Africa.* An overview and proposed way forward. Retrieved from https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/OISD/Reports/Commission_for_Gender_Equality/2024/01-08-2024/GBV_Index_Report.pdf on 13 July 2025.

literature, policy discourse, social psychology, and academic scholarship (Harrington 2021). Although its definition remains debated, toxic masculinity generally refers to traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, including misogyny, homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality, emotional repression, and the normalisation of aggression as conflict resolution (Harrington 2021). Most academic research indicates that toxic masculinity is a result of a combination of social, psychological, and cultural factors, and is not something innate (Almassi 2022). It consists of acquired socially regressive male traits that are associated with the maintenance of patriarchal power, the devaluation of women, and hyper-aggression (Kupers 2005). Toxic masculinity harms both others and the self by promoting emotional suppression, social isolation, and the denial of health concerns, which are perceived as signs of weakness incompatible with hegemonic masculinity (Courtenay 2000, Addis and Mahalik 2003). This contributes to increased risk-taking behaviours, substance abuse, and poor dietary habits (Ríos-González *et al* 2021, Kirby and Kirby 2019). The rejection of emotional vulnerability and help-seeking exacerbates mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, often resulting in further psychological decline, diminished interpersonal intimacy, and, in severe cases, suicide (Gough and Novikova 2020, Stanaland *et al* 2023). This type of masculinity reinforces the belief that men are entitled to control women's bodies and choices. This logic drives legislative and institutional decisions that restrict access to abortion and reproductive healthcare, subordinating women's autonomy to male-dominated moral and political agendas. Such dynamics are central to the perpetuation of GBV, including intimate partner abuse, sexual assault, rape, and femicide. In contexts of economic insecurity, some men perpetrate GBV as a means of reasserting control when they perceive themselves as failing to meet socially sanctioned ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Cools and Kotsadam 2017, Sanz-Barbero *et al* 2015). Structural inequalities such as poverty, unemployment, and earning less than a partner challenge the normative expectation of male breadwinning, leading to feelings of inadequacy and loss of status. The intersection of economic marginalisation and gendered expectations thus contributes to the normalisation of violence as a performance of masculinity (Calabresi 2025, Obierefu and Ojedokun 2019).

Despite the widespread implementation of GBV awareness campaigns in South Africa, their impact on reducing violence remains limited (Mkwananzi and Nathane-Taulela 2024). One contributing factor is the disconnect between campaign messaging and the lived realities of many South Africans (Gibbs *et al* 2015). Language barriers and low literacy levels hinder the accessibility and effectiveness of these campaigns, particularly in rural areas where public information is often communicated in the dominant language and through written materials (Van der Heijden *et al* 2020). In addition, poverty and limited infrastructure restrict access to mainstream media platforms, leaving large segments of the population, particularly in under-resourced communities, excluded from awareness efforts (Ngcobo 2024, Mathungeni 2025). These structural barriers weaken the reach and resonance of anti-GBV messaging, contributing to the persistence of violence despite extensive public engagement campaigns.

Given the limitations of GBV awareness campaigns in South Africa, there is a critical need to explore alternative, community-responsive prevention strategies. Central to this is the promotion of psychological competencies such as emotional regulation, self-awareness, introspection, and self-agency (Magaloni *et al* 2025, Pispira *et al* 2024). These capacities, emphasised in mental health primary prevention frameworks, enable individuals to exercise conscious control over their responses to stress, conflict, and social pressure (Rousseau-Jemwa and Hendricks 2016, Maloney *et al* 2023). Strengthening self-agency allows individuals, particularly those at risk of perpetrating violence, to develop accountability and engage in prosocial decision-making (Tolman *et al* 2019). Visual art offers a promising

medium for prevention, particularly when considered in relation to popular visual culture. Through rapidly consumed images, popular visual culture can normalise or challenge harmful gender norms and this influences everyday understandings of masculinity. Fine art on the other hand encourages a slower, more reflective method of challenging negative gender norms. Despite this difference, both provide powerful, non-verbal ways of driving social change and disrupting negative gender norms. Historically used in resistance movements and public health campaigns in South Africa, visual art can transcend linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries, facilitating emotional engagement and reflective dialogue (Choudhary and Zaman 2025, Gough and Novikova 2020, Martin 2004, Saayman Hattingh *et al* 2011). Its participatory and affective dimensions position it as a powerful tool for developing non-violent, positive masculinities and strengthening self-agency (Christensen 2019).

This study proposes the inclusion of arts-based approaches into GBV prevention strategies to promote psychological insight, support self-regulation, and promote ethical constructions of male identity. It is anchored in South African art and visual culture scholarship that has long interrogated gender, sexuality, race, and the politicised body, positioning visual practice as a site of resistance and ethical contestation within post-apartheid socio-political contexts (Crenn 2016, Klopper 2013, Lewis 2001). Building on this lineage, artists such as Nomusa Musah Mtshali and Thandiwe Msebenzi have challenged heteronormative and patriarchal visual regimes through representations of vulnerability, fluidity, and embodied difference (Strydom-Fourie 2025). Within this tradition, artworks by South African artists Mzoxolo Mayongo, Loyiso Mkize, and Lindiwe Mayisela are analysed for their engagement with masculinity. Although situated in the South African socio-cultural context, their emphasis on emotional openness, non-violence, and resistance to hegemonic gender norms resonates across global contexts.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodological approach grounded in critical masculinity and visual culture frameworks, informed by Black masculinity studies and intersectional feminist theory. Using feminist visual culture theory and semiotic analysis, it examines visual artworks by three South African artists, Mzoxolo Mayongo, Loyiso Mkize, and Lindiwe Mayisela, selected for their shared engagement with masculinity as a socially constructed and visually mediated identity rather than a fixed biological or social constant. Although their aesthetic strategies and mediums differ, all three artists interrogate hegemonic Black masculinity by placing vulnerability at the centre of masculine representation, relationality, and ethical self-reflection as viable alternatives to dominant representations of male strength rooted in control and aggression. Each artwork was analysed as a visual text, attending to both denotative and connotative elements in line with Barthes' (1968) semiotic framework, with particular focus on emotional expression, the stylisation of the male body, and compositional strategies that subvert dominant visual codes of masculinity. Viewed together, these works function as interconnected sites of resistance within a broader visual culture that normalises toxic masculinity, positioning art as both a critical and generative intervention for modelling non-violent, soft masculinities in the context of GBV.

The study also draws on the visual methodologies of Gillian Rose (2001) and the feminist art historiography of Griselda Pollock (1988), with an emphasis on how power, gender, and identity are constructed through visual culture. Visual elements such as gaze, posture, setting, costume, and texture were interpreted in relation to broader cultural narratives of masculinity, GBV, and social transformation. The artworks were further situated within the sociopolitical context of post-apartheid South Africa, where issues of race, class, and historical

trauma intersect with gender performance. This interpretive strategy supports an art-historical enquiry that enables a critical reading of how these artworks operate as counter-narratives, normalising emotional openness, challenging entrenched ideals of masculinity, and proposing aesthetic alternatives to violent or repressive masculine identities. The analysis contributes to the growing body of scholarship exploring how visual art can serve as a site of resistance and introspection in contexts of gender inequality.

Visual analysis and interpretation

This section offers a close reading of selected visual works that visually engage with the themes of soft masculinity, emotional vulnerability, and resistance to dominant gender norms. Drawing on feminist visual culture theory and semiotic analysis, the interpretation attends to the symbolic elements, compositional choices, and performative aspects of masculinity as constructed through visual codes. The visual works by Mzoxolo Mayongo, Loyiso Mkize, and Lindiwe Mayisela were analysed not merely as aesthetic objects but as cultural texts that articulate alternative masculinities within a South African context. Each image is examined in relation to the broader discourses of gender performance, adornment, and the body, with attention to how these works destabilise entrenched gender binaries and invite affective engagement from the viewer.

Visual artist profile

Mzoxolo Mayongo

Mzoxolo Mayongo is a Johannesburg-based artist whose interdisciplinary practice explores the intersections of masculinity, vulnerability, and Black embodiment through performance and photography. Informed by his lived experience as a Black man in post-apartheid South Africa, Mayongo stages visually arresting tableaux that subvert hegemonic gender norms and prompt critical reflection. His use of adornment, nudity, and floral symbolism complicates dominant representations of Black male strength, offering a counter-narrative to cultural scripts of stoicism and emotional suppression. Beyond his visual practice, Mayongo is committed to social activism and is the founder of TalkingMen, a platform dedicated to promoting dialogue around contemporary masculinities in South Africa.

This visual rearticulation of masculinity in figure 1 aligns with recent scholarship on soft masculinity, which challenges hegemonic masculinity by privileging emotional expressivity, aesthetic sensitivity, and relational ethics over dominance and control. The photograph presents a Black male figure seated in a relaxed, almost contemplative pose, his body fully exposed yet deliberately adorned with pearls, high heels, and an elaborate floral headpiece that obscures his face. This compositional choice simultaneously renders the body hyper-visible and anonymised, disrupting conventional associations between Black masculinity, visibility, and power. The concealment of the face shifts attention away from assertive identity performance toward embodied vulnerability and self-fashioning. The use of pearls and flowers, traditionally coded as feminine and ornamental, exemplifies what Demetriou (2001) describes as the "hegemonic bloc," wherein masculinity is reconfigured through hybrid practices that incorporate marginalised gender expressions rather than simply opposing them. Rather than signalling weakness, these aesthetic interventions reframe softness as an intentional disruption of patriarchal authority and racialised expectations of masculine hardness. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity further illuminates how such stylised gestures denaturalise normative masculinity, revealing it as a contingent and repeatable performance rather than a fixed essence. The relaxed posture, crossed legs, and exposed skin articulate a

visual language of introspection and corporeal ease that resists dominant scripts linking masculinity to physical dominance and emotional restraint. As Barry (2018) argues, dress and bodily presentation are critical sites through which masculine identities are negotiated, particularly when they unsettle hegemonic norms. In this context, vulnerability functions not merely as an aesthetic strategy but as an ethical orientation, modelling a form of masculinity grounded in self-awareness and emotional regulation, capacities directly implicated in the prevention of GBV. This interpretation situates the artwork within feminist visual culture scholarship that understands representation as a critical site where dominant and oppositional constructions of gender identity are actively contested and reimagined (Ali 2024).

Figure 1
Mzoxolo Mayongo, *Mtoto wa kike II*, (Exhibition:"“Ubukho be Ndoda” Demystifying the Phallus of Man, retrieved from the public domain https://artafricamagazine.org/mzoxolo-mayongo-demystifying-the-phallus-of-man-julie-miller-investment-art-institute-art-africa/, courtesy of Julie Miller Art Investment Institute).

Loyiso Mkize

Loyiso Mkize is a South African visual artist and illustrator, born in Butterworth, Eastern Cape. Trained in fine art and best known for his work in both painting and comic book illustration, Mkize works primarily in oil on canvas. His oeuvre engages with representations of contemporary African identity, centring the African subject within both historical and modern contexts. Mkize's portraiture highlights the emotional depth of his subjects through expressive brushwork, particularly in the rendering of skin texture and the gaze. His work articulates themes of self-awareness, cultural continuity, pride, and resilience and reflects a sustained engagement with questions of African masculinity, personhood, and belonging. Through his practice, Mkize contributes to visual narratives that reclaim and affirm the dignity and inner life of African individuals in a postcolonial context.

Figure 2
Loyiso Mkize, *Spirit of a Warrior*
(Collection: *My Reflection*, retrieved from the public domain https://www.vukadarkie.com/loyiso-mkize/).

The artwork under analysis (figure 2) is a composite symbolic portrait that stages Black masculinity through a dense assemblage of regal iconography, historical references, and animal symbolism. At its core, the work constructs a deliberate tension between outwardly coded signs of strength and an inwardly oriented masculinity marked by vulnerability and reflection. Visually dominant symbols of power such as the lions, spears, a Zulu shield, and a raised Black Power fist are juxtaposed with a bare-chested central figure whose closed eyes and solemn expression suggest meditation, mourning, or ethical self-examination. This inward-facing posture destabilises conventional heroic masculinist iconography, redirecting strength away from aggression and toward introspection.

The exposed torso and the cruciform Black figure positioned at the chest are particularly significant. Drawing on Christian visual traditions of sacrifice and suffering, the cruciform motif repositions the Black male body as both sacred and historically violated, highlighting vulnerability as a constitutive element of masculine identity. Rather than functioning as a passive symbol, this embodiment aligns with Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity. Here, vulnerability operates as a performative act that contests emotional restriction.

Behind the central figure, the clenched Black Power fist functions as a historically charged signifier of resistance, anti-colonial struggle, and Black consciousness. Its placement above/behind the bowed head introduces a productive tension between collective political strength and individual emotional reckoning. This compositional relationship suggests that resistance need not rely on domination or emotional suppression. Instead, the image proposes a masculinity capable of holding both historical defiance and affective depth. The lions flanking the figure further reinforce this rearticulation. Conventionally emblematic of patriarchal authority and alpha masculinity, their averted gaze and passive stance subvert expectations of aggression. This visual softening aligns with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) account of hegemonic masculinity as a regulatory ideal defined by dominance and emotional restraint, while simultaneously echoing Demetriou's (2001) argument that masculinities are hybrid formations capable of incorporating subordinated traits.

The artwork also resonates with bell hooks' (2004) critique of how Black men have historically been denied emotional subjectivity under both colonial and patriarchal regimes. Through symmetry, subdued facial affect, and ritualised symbolism, the artist reclaims affective space and reframes emotional openness as a dignified and ethical mode of being. In this sense, the work exemplifies soft masculinity as theorised by Jiang (2022), where vulnerability and relationality function as forms of resistance rather than weakness.

Situated within the post-apartheid South African context, the image engages directly with contemporary debates on patriarchy, intergenerational trauma, and GBV. In a society marked by persistently high levels of intimate partner violence, the visual reconstitution of Black masculinity offered here is politically and socially consequential. The artwork does not reject historical strength but redefines it through emotional accountability and ethical self-styling, qualities increasingly identified as central to violence prevention scholarship. As such, the image operates as a dialogic site within feminist visual culture, where representation becomes a means of contesting inherited gender ideologies (Minissale 2015).

Lindiwe Mayisela

Lindiwe Mayisela is a Johannesburg and Cape Town-based stylist, creative director, and founder of Chuck Styles Concepts, a fashion and wardrobe styling agency that specialises in the creation of immersive sartorial narratives for visual productions. Operating under the

creative nickname Chuck or Usisi Wendwangu, Mayisela has, over the past decade, established herself as a leading figure in South Africa's fashion and visual culture industries. Her styling practice, which spans television commercials, editorial campaigns, and fashion photography, has contributed to brand identities for major corporations including Samsung, Coca-Cola, Telkom, and DStv. Her work has also been featured in Vogue Italia, Sunday Times Lifestyle, and the trend-forecasting platform WGSN. Mayisela's creative direction is grounded in a commitment to interrogating dominant gender ideologies through visual styling. In her photographic series *Boys Don't Cry*, she engages with discourses of hegemonic and soft masculinity, employing fashion as a medium through which to challenge rigid constructions of male identity. By integrating traditionally feminised textures and silhouettes into menswear styling, her work makes visible the emotional vulnerability and affective depth often denied to men of colour under patriarchal norms. Through this, Mayisela contributes to broader critical conversations in feminist visual culture and contemporary African art on the politics of representation, gender performance, and cultural resistance.

The photograph (figure 3) depicts two Black male figures standing in close physical proximity against a lush natural backdrop, composed through soft, diffused natural light and a shallow depth of field that produces an atmosphere of calm, intimacy, and affective suspension. The figure on the left rests his hand gently on the shoulder of the other, who averts his face and covers his eyes with one hand, a bodily gesture that signals emotional overwhelm rather than confrontation. The exposed torsos and sartorial choices such as the flowing white and grey garments typically associated with softness or non-dominant gender expression, position the image as a subversive rearticulation of masculinity. Informed by Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasises dominance, emotional restraint, and compulsory heterosexuality, the photograph subverts dominant visual codes of masculinity by privileging vulnerability, physical intimacy, and relationality.

The use of natural light and the verdant landscape situates masculinity within a nurturing, non-aggressive environment, symbolically aligning male subjectivity with care, growth, and emotional openness rather than control or violence. The tactile gesture of support functions as a visual anchor, directing attention to relational touch as an ethical masculine act. The covered face of the second figure further emphasises vulnerability as an embodied condition that is neither isolated nor aestheticised but held within a framework of mutual presence. These visual strategies expose the performative nature of gender, resonating with Butler's (1990) argument that masculinity is constituted through repeated acts and embodied gestures rather than biological determinism.

Conceptually, the work aligns with soft masculinity, a framework that designates alternative modes of being male grounded in care, relationality, and emotional expressivity (Mehta 2024). Soft masculinity is communicated not only through posture and gesture but also through fabric, movement, and compositional restraint, reinforcing Ben Barry's (2018) assertion that dress and bodily presentation function as critical sites for renegotiating masculine identity. The photograph may further be read as a critique of toxic masculinity, which normalises aggression, homophobia, and emotional suppression (Kupers 2005). By staging physical affection between men without over coding sexualisation or dominance, the image destabilises homophobic norms that regulate masculine intimacy in postcolonial African contexts (Ratele 2016).

Figure 3
Lindiwe Mayisela (stylist, creative director) Simzphoto (photographer), Unlabelled (Series: *Boys Don't Cry*, retrieved from the public domain https://www.unlabelledmagazine.com/post/2018/02/01/boys-dont-cry-challenging-the-social-constructs-of-masculinity).

The refusal of one subject to meet the viewer's gaze, paired with the composed stillness of the other, invites reflection rather than confrontation, repositioning Black male identity as contemplative and relational rather than reactive or violent. As hooks (2004) argues, the reclamation of tenderness and affect among Black men constitutes a political intervention against colonial and patriarchal inscriptions of hypermasculinity. The gesture of care depicted here constructs a visual narrative of solidarity and interdependence, offering an alternative archive of Black masculinities within the South African context. Situated against the backdrop of pervasive GBV, the photograph operates as a counter-hegemonic visual intervention that

reimagines masculinity beyond dominance and emotional stoicism, proposing instead a model of male subjectivity grounded in relational ethics, affective visibility, and non-violence.

Discussion

The visual narratives presented across the three analysed images offer a compelling critique of hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal structures underpinning gendered visual culture in contemporary South Africa. These artworks operate at the intersection of aesthetics and activism, using the visual language of art and styling to destabilise entrenched conceptions of masculinity. By rendering male vulnerability visible, emphasising corporeal softness, and highlighting interpersonal intimacy, the works present a discursive counterpoint to the dominant tropes of Black male representation that continue to circulate in South African popular and political spheres. This study is situated within a longer South African art-historical tradition in which artists such as Zanele Muholi, Tracey Rose, Steven Cohen, Nicholas Hlobo and Athi-Patra Ruga have critically interrogated masculinity, gender, sexuality, and the politicised body through practices of exposure, transgression, and embodied vulnerability (Brown 2017, Makhubu 2012, Sizemore-Barber 2016, Van der Vlies 2012, Von Veh 2012). While these earlier works primarily unsettled heteronormative, patriarchal, and racialised constructions of identity, the contemporary artists in this current study extend this lineage by moving from critique alone toward the visual construction of emotionally open and relational masculinities. By doing this, they reframe the body not only as a site of resistance but also as a generative space for imagining non-violent, positive masculine identities.

Drawing from theoretical frameworks in gender studies and African visual cultural criticism, the images can be read as articulations of "soft masculinity", a counter-hegemonic expression of male identity that resists the restrictive codes of patriarchal masculinity (Goniwe and Gqola 2005). This form of masculinity is rendered visible through gestures of care, sartorial fluidity, and aesthetic references to traditionally feminised textures and postures. These acts disrupt the hegemonic "gender order" conceptualised by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).

In this context, Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity becomes crucial. The stylised embodiment of masculinity in the analysed images exemplifies how gender is constituted through repeated performances rather than innate characteristics. Through the deliberate staging of softness, expressed in the fluid drapery, the affectionate interactions between male bodies, and the deliberate vulnerability of exposed skin, the images unmask the performative labour required to sustain hegemonic masculinity. They also offer alternative scripts that legitimise emotional expression and tenderness within the domain of black male identity. The notion of toxic masculinity, as theorised by Kupers (2005), is particularly relevant in interpreting the images' political function. Toxic masculinity entails the suppression of emotions, the valorisation of dominance, and the policing of gender non-conformity. The photographic works in question challenge these norms by visually re-inscribing vulnerability as a form of resistance. The subjects are not rendered passive but rather empowered through their refusal to conform to violent and repressive masculinist codes.

The spatial and aesthetic composition of the images reinforces these themes. By situating the male body in open natural landscapes or in stylised, intimate arrangements, the artworks symbolically liberate masculinity from the surveillance of urban, hyper-masculine settings. The use of colour, texture, and body language collectively works to undo the aesthetic grammar of patriarchy, replacing it with a visual vocabulary of softness, fluidity, and connection. This is aligned with the notion of "alternative masculinities", which legitimise male embodiments that

fall outside heteronormative and patriarchal paradigms (Hobbs 2013, Jiang 2022). Furthermore, the images contribute to the broader discourse on gendered visual culture by foregrounding the black male body as a site of affective depth and complex subjectivity. Historically, visual and literary representations of black masculinity in South Africa have often been circumscribed by narratives of violence, resistance, or hypersexuality (Morrell 1998, Mfecane 2018). In contrast, the works discussed here refigure black masculinity as a space of introspection, softness, and affect. This refiguration is not merely aesthetic; it is political. Artistic interventions challenge the ideological underpinnings of patriarchy by asserting new possibilities for being and becoming male in post-apartheid society (Shefer and Ratele 2023). In summary, toxic masculinity provides the ideological foundation for GBV, while South African popular visual culture normalises and disseminates this ideology through repeated and familiar imagery. The artworks analysed in this study intervene in this visual economy by disrupting these normative representations and visually modelling "soft masculinities" that resist violence and expand the cultural possibilities of manhood. The significance of these visual interventions lies in their capacity to mediate public discourse and shape cultural understandings of gender: by engaging with themes of emotional openness, mutual care, and embodied vulnerability, the artists not only critique the limitations of existing gender norms but also propose transformative alternatives.

Conclusion

This study has examined how contemporary South African visual art reconfigures Black masculinity by focusing on vulnerability, emotional openness, and relationality as deliberate aesthetic and political strategies. Through sustained visual analysis, informed by feminist, queer, and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the paper demonstrates that masculinity is neither fixed nor singular, but performative, contested, and culturally produced. Across the selected artworks, masculinity is visualised not through dominance or emotional restraint, but through intimacy, care, and embodied softness, thereby disrupting hegemonic masculine norms that have historically been aligned with authority, control, and violence.

Each artist contributes a distinct yet interconnected articulation of this counter-hegemonic project. Mayongo's work emphasises tenderness and emotional exposure, challenging the myth of Black male invulnerability through gestures of introspection. Mkize's work presents Black masculinity as simultaneously powerful and emotionally introspective, thereby exposing masculinity as constructed and performative rather than a fixed identity. Mayisela's imagery centres relational presence and tactile intimacy, emphasising masculinity as constituted through connection rather than autonomy. Taken together, these practices demonstrate how visual art can function as a site where alternative masculinities are not only imagined but also made visible and socially legible.

Theoretically, the findings extend Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity by illustrating how visual culture participates in both its reproduction and disruption. Drawing on Butler's (1990) notion of performativity and Barthes' (1968) semiotics, the analysis shows that these artworks intervene at the level of representation, unsettling dominant gender myths and offering new semiotic resources through which masculinity can be re-signified. From a feminist visual culture perspective, these images function as culturally situated interventions that disrupt patriarchal visual norms and make space for ethical, non-violent forms of masculinity (Pollock 1988).

Importantly, the study moves beyond critique to interrogate the practical implications of these visual reconfigurations within the context of GBV prevention. The representations

analysed here align with primary prevention frameworks that identify rigid gender norms and emotional suppression as key drivers of violence (Ratele 2016). By modelling emotional expressivity, empathy, and introspection, these artworks decouple masculinity from aggression and control, positioning art as a dialogic tool that reshapes public understandings of gender.

Integrating arts-based methods into GBV prevention emerges as a theoretically grounded extension of this study's argument. Community workshops, museum partnerships, and visual literacy initiatives can use visual storytelling to prompt critical reflection on gender norms, positioning art as an active tool for dialogue, ethical engagement, and cultural change.

In conclusion, the visual refiguration of Black masculinity examined in this study should be understood as both an aesthetic intervention and a socio-political strategy. By rendering vulnerability, care, and emotional presence visible, these artworks contribute to broader efforts to dismantle patriarchal violence and cultivate more just and compassionate gender relations in post-apartheid South Africa. The study thus affirms the value of visual culture as a critical resource in GBV scholarship and prevention, demonstrating how art can participate meaningfully in reimagining masculinities beyond violence.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were observed, with all images sourced from public domains, ensuring respectful and contextually grounded interpretations.

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Co-designing service spaces for gender-based violence response in South African universities: an interdisciplinary and participatory approach

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Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to affect university campuses across South Africa, demanding spatial responses that are not only functional but ethically and culturally attuned. This qualitative interior design study explores how co-design can inform the development of service spaces that support prevention, reporting, and survivor care. The study within a South African university involved walking interviews and a participatory workshop that engaged medical and psychological support staff in mapping and co-creative activities. Participants utilised generative toolkits and spatial modelling to express their embodied knowledge of service gaps and spatial limitations, integrating it into their decision-making processes. The findings reveal the need for adaptable, confidential, and welcoming environments that convey care, safety, and trust. This study enhances gendered spatial practice and trauma-informed design by positioning co-design as an ethical methodology in infrastructure planning that responds to GBV. It argues that co-design as a methodological praxis can promote the incorporation of lived experiences into the spatial and cultural framework of higher education institutions.
Keywords: co-design, gender-based violence, trauma-informed design

Die ontwerp van diensruimtes vir geslagsgebaseerde-geweld diens in Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite: ’n interdissiplinêre en deelnemende benadering
Geslagsgebaseerde geweld (GGG) beïnvloed steeds universiteitskampusse regoor Suid-Afrika en vereis ruimtelike oplossings wat nie net funksioneel is nie, maar ook eties en kultureel ingestel is. Hierdie kwalitatiewe studie in die veld van interieurontwerp ondersoek hoe gesamentlike-ontwerp die ontwikkeling van diensruimtes kan verbeter wat voorkoming, verslaggewing en ondersteuning van oorlewendes bevorder. Die studie aan ’n Suid-Afrikaanse universiteit, het onderhoude gedurende ’n stap en ’n deelnemende werksessie ingesluit, waartydens personeel van mediese en sielkundige ondersteuning betrokke was by kartering en mede-skeppende aktiwiteite. Deelnemers het generatiewe hulpmiddels en ruimtelike modellering gebruik om hul geborge kennis van diensgapings en ruimtelike beperkings uit te druk, en dit in hul besluitneming geïntegreer. Die bevindinge dui op die behoefte aan aanpasbare, vertroulike en verwelkomende omgewings—eienskappe wat sorg, veiligheid en vertroue oordra. Hierdie studie bevorder geslagsensitiewe ruimtelike praktyke en trauma-ingeligte ontwerp deur mede-ontwerp te posisioneer as ’n etiese metodologie in infrastruktuurbeplanning wat op GGG reageer. Daar word aangevoer dat gesamentlike-ontwerp as metodologiese praktyk die insluiting van daaglikse lewens ervarings in die ruimtelike en kulturele raamwerk van hoër onderwysinstellings kan bevorder.
Sleutelwoorde: gesamentlike-ontwerp, geslagsgebaseerde geweld, trauma-ingeligte ontwerp

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to harm directed at an individual based on their sex, gender identity or expression, sustained through oppressive social and cultural structures (Bhana *et al.* 2019, Segalo and Fine 2020, Reverter 2022). South African universities mirror national challenges of GBV, which disproportionately affect women and LGBTQIA+ students (Manik 2021, Manik and Tarisayi 2021, Mutinta 2022). These experiences unfold within spatial and organisational environments that may either enable or inhibit prevention, reporting, and support strategies. These challenges shape everyday experiences of vulnerability and help-seeking in institutional structures, resulting in a need to design environments which are responsive to the need for safety and care.

This paper explores how co-design, a participatory methodology that centres experiential knowledge in the development of spatial solutions, can strengthen the planning of GBV service environments in higher education. Within design scholarship, co-design enables stakeholders

to articulate latent needs, express embodied knowledge, and contribute meaningfully to spatial problem-solving beyond professional design training (Arthur and Sopjani 2022; Rill and Hämäläinen 2018). For GBV response settings, where emotional sensitivity, privacy, and institutional coordination are critical, co-design provides an avenue for integrating diverse forms of expertise into early design decision-making.

A central contribution of this study is its focus on frontline medical and psychological support staff as key co-design partners. These practitioners routinely work at the intersection of trauma, institutional processes and spatial constraints, and therefore hold nuanced, practice-based understandings of how environments can mitigate or exacerbate distress. Trauma-informed care literature repeatedly emphasises that practitioners develop specialised knowledge through their ongoing engagement with traumatised individuals, including vicarious and secondary exposure (Levenson 2017, Kim *et al.* 2021; Sutton *et al*. 2022). This professionalised, embodied understanding is widely acknowledged as essential for shaping service environments that promote safety, trust and emotional regulation (Ervin *et al.* 2021, Goldstein *et al.* 2024). For interior design and spatial planning, such practitioner insight is particularly valuable because it reveals operational dynamics, confidentiality challenges and sensory considerations that may not be readily accessible through policy review or abstract design analysis alone.

Within South Africa, national frameworks such as the National Strategic Plan on GBV and Femicide (NSP-GBVF),[1] as well as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) policy framework to address GBV in Post-School Education and Training (PSET)[2], establish institutional responsibilities for prevention, reporting, and support; yet, they offer limited guidance on the spatial and infrastructural conditions required to carry out these mandates effectively. This gap highlights the need for design-led inquiry that foregrounds how spaces function in practice, how staff navigate procedural and emotional complexities, and how environments can be configured to support coordinated GBV response.

By engaging these frontline staff through a co-design workshop and generative activities, this study explores how collaborative spatial thinking can inform the creation of trauma-aware, welcoming and operationally effective GBV service spaces. The article demonstrates how co-design supports the translation of practitioner knowledge into actionable spatial ideas, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how interior design and built-environment planning can support institutional responses to GBV.

The role of medical and psychological support services in creating GBV safe spaces

Medical and psychological support services constitute part of the core infrastructure of GBV response in South African universities. Although national frameworks articulate procedural responsibilities for care, reporting and case handling[3], it is frontline practitioners who translate these responsibilities into situated spatial practice. Their daily encounters with survivors, and

[1] DWYPD. 2020. *National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide*. Retrieved from https://www.justice.gov.za/vg/gbv/nsp-gbvf-final-doc-04-05.pdf

[2] DHET. 2020. Policy Framework to Address Gender-Based Violence in the Post-School Education and Training System. Retrieved from https://www.dhet.gov.za/Social%20Inclusion/DHET%20GBV%20Policy%20Framework%2030July2020.pdf

[3] Higher Health. 2021b. Implementation Procedural Guidelines on Sexual and Gender-related Misconduct in Post-Schooling Education and Training (PSET) Sector, Higher Health.

with the organisational systems that support them, generate a nuanced understanding of how environments function in real-time: how they can ease distress, intensify vulnerability, or influence a survivor's willingness to engage with care. This type of experiential, practice-based knowledge has long been recognised in trauma-informed care literature as emerging from repeated engagement with traumatised individuals, often through vicarious or secondary exposure (Levenson 2017, Kim *et al.* 2021, Sutton *et al*. 2022). Such professionalised, embodied knowledge is foundational to shaping environments that support emotional regulation, trust, and safety (Ervin *et al.* 2021, Goldstein *et al.* 2024).

Within medical environments, practitioners navigate a sequence of highly sensitive tasks, from initial stabilisation and forensic processes to treatment, referral and follow-up, each of which carries spatial implications.[4] Their experience highlights the importance of discreet and protected access routes, private circulation paths and controlled thresholds that reduce visibility during moments of heightened emotional risk (Dlamini 2023, Hanass-Hancock *et al.* 2024). Confidentiality emerges as both a spatial and a procedural issue.[5] Staff consistently describe how acoustically porous rooms, shared waiting areas, or cramped examination spaces undermine trust and discourage patients from disclosing sensitive information. These observations align with regulatory and quality assurance standards, of which the SAMRC's post-GBV quality assurance tool, which outlines the infrastructural conditions required for safe and confidential care, serves as a useful facility guide (Hanass-Hancock *et al.* 2024).

Medical practitioners also emphasise how sensory conditions, lighting, temperature, airflow, and sound must often be adjusted dynamically to help survivors settle. These micro-adjustments reflect a tacit spatial competence developed through daily practice rather than through formal training or policy guidance, illustrating the depth of embodied knowledge that underpins trauma-informed medical response (Goldstein *et al.* 2024).

Psychological service environments reflect a similarly intimate relationship between spatial experience and emotional well-being. Practitioners routinely encounter survivors who arrive in states of acute distress, requiring environments that offer containment, calm and a predictable sensory atmosphere. The counselling literature supports these experiential observations. Ann Devlin and Jack Nasar's work (2011, 2012) demonstrates how personalisation, visual warmth, and perceptible order influence a client's sense of safety and their expectations of care. For psychological practitioners, such environmental considerations extend beyond aesthetics—they shape the therapeutic potential of the space.

Staff also highlight the need for a diversity of therapeutic settings, including private counselling rooms, group spaces, art- or movement-based therapy areas and outdoor environments for reflection or grounding. These spatial modalities correspond to different stages of recovery, allowing practitioners to tailor support to survivors' needs (Sinko and Saint-Arnault 2019; Yan *et al*. 2024). Insights shared during the study's co-design workshop further revealed practitioners' sensitivity to the emotional contrasts between medical and psychological work, reinforcing the importance of maintaining spatial separation between these functions while enabling controlled interconnection for coordinated care.

Across both medical and psychological domains, these accounts illustrate how frontline GBV response work generates tacit spatial knowledge through an embodied understanding of

[4] DoJ & CD. 2012. National Policy Framework: Management of the Sexual Offences Matters. Pretoria. Retrieved from www.justice.gov.za.

[5] HPCSA. 2021. Booklet 5, Confidentiality: Protecting and Providing Information. Retrieved from chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.hpcsa.co.za/Uploads/professional_practice/ethics/Booklet_5_Confidentiality_Protecting_and_Providing_Information_vDec_2021.pdf.

thresholds, emotional cues, confidentiality risks, referral flows and the micro-adjustments that support survivors at critical moments. Such spatial intelligence rarely appears in policy documentation or high-level design guidance; instead, it emerges from the iterative, relational and emotionally complex work undertaken by practitioners. Recognising this form of knowledge is essential for GBV-responsive design, as it reveals friction points and possibilities that remain invisible to external observers.

It is this tacit, practice-informed knowledge that the subsequent co-design activities were structured to surface. The next section examines how co-design served as a methodological bridge, enabling practitioners to externalise experiential insights and articulate spatial possibilities reflective of the complexities inherent in GBV response work.

Co-design: incorporation of disciplinary knowledge in the design process

Co-design refers to a collaborative design methodology in which stakeholders contribute their experiential, contextual, and disciplinary knowledge to the development of design concepts. Rooted in participatory design traditions, co-design positions participants as context experts, whose situated knowledge enriches and challenges formal design assumptions (Arthur and Sopjani 2022; Rill and Hämäläinen 2018). Rather than serving as a consultation mechanism, co-design functions as an epistemic process, one that enables the articulation of tacit knowledge, the negotiation of shared meanings, and the collective interrogation of spatial possibilities.

Within interior design scholarship, co-design is increasingly recognised as a means of engaging with complex spatial problems, particularly those involving vulnerable users or emotionally charged environments. Generative design research emphasises that creative, open-ended activities, such as mapping, persona-building, and spatial modelling, allow participants to externalise perceptions and insights that may otherwise remain unspoken (Damala *et al.* 2022; Hanington 2007 and 2015, Martin and Hanington 2019). These projective and constructive tools are not merely pedagogical supports; they serve as methodological devices that elicit embodied, practice-based knowledge, which is often difficult to communicate verbally. When used in GBV-responsive spatial planning, co-design thus enables practitioners to express the sensory, emotional, procedural, and relational dimensions of their daily work.

Co-design is particularly relevant in contexts where spatial barriers intersect with trauma, confidentiality, and user vulnerability. Participatory scholars highlight its value in revealing systemic and environmental factors that exclude or marginalise users, and in supporting the development of more equitable, contextualised spatial solutions (Kroning 2017, McKercher 2020, Grindell *et al.* 2022). In addition, co-design can challenge top-down institutional cultures by validating the situated expertise of service providers, thereby redistributing design agency (Bain *et al.* 2021, McLachlan and Leng 2021). For GBV-responsive environments, where practitioners routinely navigate emotional regulation, risk management, and confidentiality, recognising practitioner expertise is essential.

In this study, co-design serves as a methodological bridge between disciplinary knowledge and spatial decision-making. The frontline practitioners who participated in the workshop bring distinct forms of embodied, professionalised knowledge shaped through sustained engagement with GBV survivors. The trauma-informed care literature emphasises that such expertise develops through vicarious and secondary exposure to trauma (Levenson 2017, Kim *et al.* 2021, Sutton *et al*. 2022) and is integral to shaping service environments that promote safety, trust, and emotional regulation (Ervin *et al.* 2021, Goldstein *et al.* 2024). Through co-design, this tacit spatial intelligence becomes visible, allowing practitioners to

articulate how thresholds, sensory conditions, circulation patterns, and interdepartmental flows influence service accessibility and survivor wellbeing.

Accordingly, the workshop was structured as a generative research sequence that began with projective activities to surface participant perspectives and ended with constructive modelling to synthesise these insights into spatial propositions. Mapping exercises, persona development, and customer journey analysis supported the externalisation of experiential knowledge, while spatial modelling enabled participants to negotiate and materialise their collective understanding of an integrated, trauma-aware GBV service environment. Importantly, the purpose of this process was not to produce a definitive blueprint, but to demonstrate how co-design can illuminate the relational, procedural, and spatial dynamics that underpin frontline service work.

By incorporating disciplinary knowledge from medical, psychological, and interior design perspectives, co-design enables a richer and more contextually grounded design inquiry. It reveals how practitioners interpret space through the lens of their professional routines, emotional labour, and institutional constraints, and how these interpretations can inform more responsive spatial configurations. The following section presents the co-design workshop conducted with frontline GBV support staff, illustrating how generative activities made visible the tacit, practice-informed expertise that shapes their daily engagement with survivors.

Generative co-design workshop with GBV frontline staff

This section presents the methodological structure and outcomes of a one-day generative co-design workshop conducted with ten medical and psychological support staff from a South African university. All participants were actively involved in GBV response work and brought extensive experiential, contextual and disciplinary knowledge into the process. As the culmination of a two-phase data-collection sequence, consisting of walking interviews, facility mapping, and collaborative design activities, the workshop was designed to surface tacit spatial knowledge and facilitate shared meaning-making about GBV-responsive environments.

The workshop took place in a design studio on campus to encourage creativity, reflective dialogue and interdisciplinary engagement. Participants voluntarily responded to a call inviting frontline professionals to contribute to the development of trauma-aware support-facility concepts in response to GBV. Before the workshop began, a curated synthesis of the walking-interview findings, accompanied by photographs of the institution's medical and psychological service areas, was presented to the group. This provided a shared reference point and enabled participants to recognise common spatial challenges and organisational pressures across their respective units.

The workshop followed a three-stage generative sequence, informed by Bruce Hanington's (2007) rationale for how generative methods support the elicitation and synthesis of participant knowledge. These stages reflect recognised principles of design thinking that progressively build a knowledge base toward the development of design resolutions. (Hanington 2015, Martin and Hanington 2019). The stages included:

1. **Exploring** (foundational/orienting) – activities to establish a common understanding of the GBV service ecosystem, including stakeholder roles, service flows and contextual constraints.
2. **Generating** (developmental/co-creative) – activities to create projective and constructive representations of user journeys, service chains and required functions.

3. **Evaluating** (reviewing/assessing/refining) – activities enabling participants to interrogate, refine and synthesise ideas into a coherent spatial proposition.

The workshop comprised four activities: stakeholder identification, persona development, customer journey mapping, and spatial modelling. These activities were deliberately sequenced to guide participants from individualised reflection toward collaborative synthesis. Each activity concluded with a facilitated reflection, enabling participants to interrogate the emerging insights, identify contradictions or gaps, and consider how their shared experiential knowledge could inform the conceptualisation of a comprehensive GBV-responsive service space.

Materials such as feedback boards, worksheets, sticky notes, emoticon stickers, and a model-building toolkit (Lewrick *et al.* 2020) were provided to support the externalisation of ideas. These tools were not merely used as creative aids but as generative tools that help translate embodied and practice-based knowledge into visible form (Hanington 2007, Rill and Hämäläinen 2018).

Throughout the workshop, participants acted as co-interpreters of their own practice: articulating institutional constraints, mapping procedural flows, and negotiating spatial priorities. As they progressed through the activities, their collective understanding of the GBV service journey, its emotional intensities, sensory triggers, procedural demands and interdepartmental dependencies became more explicit. This shared meaning-making formed the foundation for the final spatial model, which synthesised the group's insights into a conceptual representation of an integrated, trauma-aware GBV service hub.

Together, Activities 1 through 4 illustrate how a generative co-design sequence progressively surfaces tacit, practice-based knowledge and transforms it into shared spatial understanding. Beginning with foundational mapping of the service ecosystem and deepened through the construction of personas and customer journeys, participants articulated the emotional, procedural and sensory dynamics that shape GBV response work. The final spatial modelling activity synthesised these insights into a conceptual representation of an integrated, trauma-aware service hub. This progression, from exploration to generation to evaluation, demonstrates how co-design methods support shared meaning-making and create opportunities for frontline practitioners to externalise their embodied expertise in ways that meaningfully inform spatial planning.

Activity One: Stakeholder identification and service eco-system mapping

The stakeholder identification activity served as the foundational step in the workshop's generative sequence, designed to orient participants toward a shared understanding of the GBV service ecosystem within the university. Drawing on insights that had already emerged through the walking interviews and preliminary mapping, where participants noted that the same broad categories of actors tended to recur across departments. This activity functioned as both an icebreaker and a conceptual anchor for subsequent exercises.

Participants engaged in two tasks:

1. **populating a feedback board** with all stakeholders involved in the prevention, reporting, treatment, and case-handling processes of GBV response; and
2. **completing a stakeholder mapping worksheet**, categorising stakeholders into service users, internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, and public stakeholders. Participants collaboratively placed sticky notes onto the board.

As these activities occurred, participants vocalised stakeholder names to avoid duplication, an informal but effective practice of collectively validating the service network as they understood it. The stakeholder mapping, shown in Figure 1, also prompted participants to articulate their own institutional positioning as internal stakeholders alongside Campus Protective Services (CPS), student residences, student judicial services, and various student governance structures. Through deliberation, they identified CPS, residence managers, and themselves as the most common first points of contact for survivors. Participants also emphasised the importance of external actors, including the South African Police Service (SAPS) and Thuthuzela Care Centres (TCCs), particularly for cases requiring forensic or criminal proceedings.

Figure 1
Co-design workshop: stakeholder identification activity
(photographs by the author, 2024).

Prevention-focused stakeholders were primarily located within government and NGO structures, such as the DHET and Higher Health, as well as internal peer-education teams responsible for awareness and advocacy activities. The treatment and post-care categories revealed a complex ecosystem of medical and psychological support services, supplemented by NGOs such as SADAG and institutional health and wellness departments.

Across the mapping, participants repeatedly emphasised the need for stronger coordination mechanisms, noting fragmentation and duplication of effort as recurring challenges. This prompted the identification of a shared need for a “GBV office” in the “other” category of the worksheet. Participants verbally expressed their collective vision of this office as a central coordinating body responsible for integrating prevention, reporting, and support functions across the institution. This concept aligns with recommendations from Higher Health to establish such a space. The value of the activity lay in its ability to facilitate collective meaning-making and ideation by vocalising thought processes within the group.

By the conclusion of Activity 1, participants had collectively constructed a shared representation of the GBV service ecosystem, clarifying both interdependencies and gaps. This foundational understanding established the epistemic and relational groundwork for the subsequent co-design activities, enabling participants to approach persona development and journey mapping with a more integrated and institutionally grounded perspective.

Activity Two: Persona development and context mapping

Activity two marked the transition from foundational exploration toward a more interpretive mode of generative inquiry. Through persona development and context mapping, participants externalised their tacit knowledge of survivor experiences, case types and the spatial or organisational pressures that shape help-seeking within the university. Working in small groups, participants drew on their accumulated service experiences to construct personas representative of the cases they most frequently encounter in practice. The persona profile worksheet prompted each group to describe a survivor scenario, outline the nature of the GBV incident, and articulate the persona's emotional state and immediate needs.

This exercise required practitioners to reflect on the emotional intensities that frame early-stage support interactions, such as fear, shame, confusion, and urgency, and translate these states into design-relevant considerations. The process helped to surface patterns that might otherwise remain implicit, such as the prevalence of sexual assault cases among female students, the increasing visibility of cyber-GBV, and the presence of financially or emotionally abusive partner relationships.

In the subsequent context-mapping task, shown in Figure 2, participants located each persona within a broader socio-ecological environment, identifying the intersecting environmental, economic, systemic and ethnographic factors that shape survivor pathways. The mapping sheets prompted explicit reflection on variables such as residence environments, access to transport, social stigma, financial insecurity, family dynamics, and academic pressures. This moved the activity beyond case description toward an integrated understanding of the structural and material conditions that influence help-seeking.

Figure 2
Co-design workshop: persona profile and context mapping activity
(photographs by the author, 2024).

The discussions that accompanied persona construction also facilitated peer-to-peer recognition of shared challenges across departments. Participants noted gaps in institutional support, inconsistencies in service capacity, and vulnerabilities related to visibility and confidentiality in existing facilities. They also recognised the limitations of the personas they produced. Although the majority represented female students, reflecting their most common service users, the absence of LGBTQIA+ survivors and students with disabilities was identified and later addressed during the spatial modelling phase. This iterative adjustment of considerations towards the development of a resolution again indicates the value of these practice-focused collaborative activities.

As a generative exercise, persona development and context mapping served to anchor the subsequent design activities in a grounded, empathetic understanding of survivor needs while

also highlighting the organisational constraints that shape frontline work. The activity supported shared meaning-making, enabling participants to articulate the complex social and spatial dynamics that inform GBV response within the campus environment.

Activity Three: Customer journey mapping and critical-service design

Activity Three extended the generative work of the previous tasks by asking participants to examine the survivor's help-seeking pathway and to articulate the critical services required at each stage. By combining customer journey mapping with critical service identification, the activity enabled participants to connect emotional experiences, procedural flows, and spatial implications into a single, layered representation of the GBV response process.

Working from the personas and contextual insights developed in Activity Two, each group constructed a projected journey that their persona would likely follow when seeking assistance. Using a structured worksheet, participants traced the sequence of service interactions, beginning with the moment the survivor recognises a need for help and continuing through to treatment, referral and post-care. Each step was annotated with the responsibilities of relevant stakeholders, potential service stops, and the actions required from both the survivor and the institution. Emotional intensities were visually expressed using emoticon stickers, supplemented by short reflective quotations that participants wrote to convey the likely thoughts or fears of survivors.

As they mapped these journeys, participants drew attention to several recurring patterns in practice: survivors' hesitation to disclose, the emotional volatility of repeated storytelling, inconsistencies in service encounters, and the disorientation caused by moving between internal university departments and external entities such as SAPS and TCCs. These discussions often led participants to reflect on systemic delays, perceived judgment or dismissal, and the accompanying psychological consequences for survivors, insights that were echoed during the discussions captured in figure 3.

Figure 3
Co-design workshop: customer journey activity
(photographs by the author, 2024).

The critical-service identification activity, shown in figure 4, followed naturally from this mapping. Participants identified the specific services, spaces and functions essential to survivor support at each stage of the journey. Early-stage needs centred on safe disclosure, discreet and predictable access points, and immediate emotional stabilisation. Mid-journey needs included trauma-aware counselling, medical care, coordinated referrals, and clear communication about processes. Later-stage supports focused on academic and psychosocial recovery, case follow-up, and long-term mental health care.

Figure 4
Co-design workshop: critical service identification activity
(photographs by the author, 2024).

Throughout the activity, participants emphasised that the university's existing spatial arrangements often undermine these functions. Issues such as public or acoustically porous waiting areas, convoluted circulation routes, and poorly demarcated service zones were repeatedly noted as friction points that amplify survivors' anxiety. Conversely, participants highlighted that warm, calm, and private spaces, particularly those that allow continuous emotional containment, played a stabilising role. These spatial inferences emerged organically from the mapping and were reinforced by participants' lived professional experience of supporting survivors.

A recurring theme across groups was the fragmented nature of the current service landscape, wherein survivors are required to move back and forth between departments, external agencies and campus offices to secure the support they need. This cyclical movement illuminated the importance of a centralised, well-coordinated GBV office, an insight that aligned with the service-ecosystem reflection in Activity One and signalled the need for an integrated spatial model. By visualising survivor journeys alongside critical service needs, Activity Three made clear how spatial design must accommodate emotional regulation, confidentiality, service predictability, and coordinated care across institutional and inter-institutional boundaries.

As a generative method, this activity enabled practitioners to externalise their tacit and practice-based knowledge of survivor pathways. It provided a structured means of synthesising emotional and procedural insights, setting the conceptual foundation for the spatial modelling exercise that followed. In this way, Activity Three acted as a bridge between understanding survivor experience and envisioning the spatial conditions required to support a comprehensive GBV-responsive environment.

Activity Four: Spatial modelling and collaborative synthesis

Activity Four represented the evaluative phase of the generative design sequence, in which participants translated the emotional, procedural and spatial insights developed in the previous activities into a tangible spatial proposition. Whereas Activities One to Three surfaced layered understandings of the service ecosystem, survivor pathways and critical service requirements, this final constructive activity enabled practitioners to synthesise these insights into a three-dimensional representation of a GBV-responsive campus environment.

Participants worked collectively around a shared table, using a curated modelling toolkit that included building blocks, Lego components, figurines, icons, and directional arrows.

Drawing on recognised principles of generative design research, these constructive tools served as more than creative aids; they functioned as epistemic devices that support externalisation, negotiation and refinement of tacit knowledge (Hanington 2007, Martin and Hanington 2019). As shown in figure 5, the diversity of materials allowed participants to experiment rapidly, manipulate spatial relationships, and iterate on emerging ideas while maintaining a low-stakes, exploratory approach.

Figure 5
Co-design workshop: spatial modelling activity
(photographs by the author, 2024).

As participants assembled the model, they continuously verbalised their reasoning, discussing threshold conditions, visibility concerns, sensory qualities and proximity requirements. This conversational, collaborative making process surfaced additional layers of tacit knowledge that had not been fully articulated in earlier activities. Figure 5 shows participants collectively shaping the model and adjusting elements in response to one another's professional insights.

The completed model, presented in Figure 6, depicted an abstracted portion of the campus organised around four key zones, including:

1. CPS access-control and reporting point,
2. centralised GBV, health and wellness centre,
3. shared mixed-use outdoor advocacy and awareness space, and
4. secluded therapeutic garden area.

These zones were deliberately differentiated yet interconnected, reflecting participants' recognition that GBV-responsive environments must balance confidentiality, accessibility, emotional regulation and operational coordination.

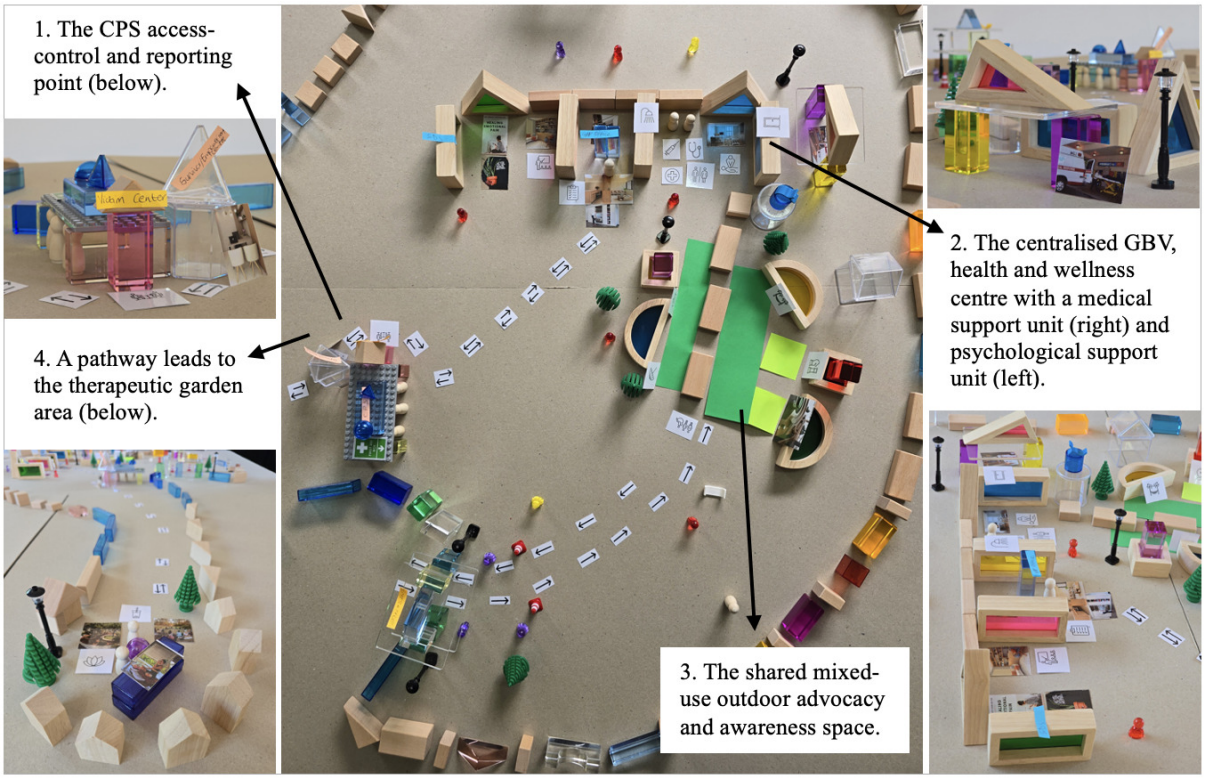

Figure 6
Co-design workshop: spatial modelling result
(photographs by the author, 2024).

The CPS zone included a private victim centre, a reporting desk, a comfort room, and an empowerment centre for planning GBV initiatives. This configuration signified participants' desire for CPS to house a dedicated GBV practitioner and for immediate reporting to occur in a discreet yet operationally integrated environment.

A GBV office, modelled as a private, inclusive, universally designed, front-of-house facility, was positioned adjacent to both medical and psychological services. Participants emphasised the importance of keeping these departments physically distinct, reflecting the different emotional demands of medical treatment and therapeutic support, while still enabling controlled interconnection to support coordinated care.

The medical clinic featured an emergency examination room, ablutions, a medicine dispensary, and a private ambulance bay, all accessible via a rear entrance. Participants repeatedly stressed that discreet vehicular access was essential for maintaining confidentiality and reducing the potential for secondary victimisation. The psychological support wing was modelled with individual and group therapy rooms, art-based therapy areas and multipurpose wellness spaces, illustrating the diversity of therapeutic modalities practitioners rely on in practice.

Participants also emphasised the importance of outdoor environments for both advocacy and recovery. The mixed-use advocacy space was conceived as a flexible, semi-covered area suitable for peer-education events, NGO outreach, awareness programmes and wellness initiatives. A secluded therapeutic garden was modelled as a quiet, natural landscape for yoga, meditation, support groups and contemplative activities. Both areas were intentionally designed to offer alternative entry points for survivors who may wish to approach support services discreetly.

This constructive modelling activity produced a rich synthesis of the insights generated throughout the workshop. By manipulating materials and negotiating spatial relationships, participants engaged in a shared meaning-making process that clarified priorities, resolved inconsistencies, and revealed how their professional knowledge could inform spatial planning.

Importantly, the model does not represent a final design solution; rather, it illustrates how co-design enables participants to envision operational requirements that may be difficult to articulate through verbal methods alone. As the culmination of the generative sequence, Activity Four demonstrates how co-design supports the development of integrated, trauma-aware environments and provides an essential bridge between experiential knowledge and early-stage design conceptualisation.

This generative sequence, from initial stakeholder mapping through persona construction, journey analysis and finally collaborative spatial modelling, demonstrates how co-design methods enable frontline practitioners to articulate the tacit, practice-based knowledge that ordinarily remains embedded in routine service work. Each activity progressively revealed the emotional, procedural and spatial dynamics that shape GBV response on campus. In contrast, the final spatial model synthesised these insights into an integrated representation of a trauma-aware service environment. The following conclusion reflects on the methodological contribution of this co-design process, highlighting how it advances early-stage spatial planning for GBV-responsive environments in South African higher education institutions.

Conclusion

This generative sequence, from initial stakeholder mapping through persona construction, journey analysis and finally collaborative spatial modelling, demonstrates how co-design methods enable frontline practitioners to articulate the tacit, practice-based knowledge that ordinarily remains embedded in routine service work. Each activity progressively revealed the emotional, procedural and spatial dynamics that shape GBV response on campus. In contrast, the final spatial model synthesised these insights into an integrated representation of a trauma-

aware service environment. The following conclusion reflects on the methodological contribution of this co-design process, highlighting how it advances early-stage spatial planning for GBV-responsive environments in South African higher education institutions.

This paper examines how co-design can support the development of trauma-aware, spatially responsive GBV service environments in South African universities by engaging frontline medical and psychological practitioners, those who work most closely with survivors and understand the emotional, procedural, and infrastructural demands of GBV response. While the study does not include students or survivors, and does not claim to represent their lived experience, it demonstrates that practitioner expertise constitutes an indispensable source of knowledge for early-stage design conceptualisation. Their professional encounters with trauma and their routine navigation of institutional constraints generate forms of tacit, practice-based spatial intelligence that are rarely documented in policy frameworks or conventional planning processes.

The generative co-design methodology positions practitioners as co-constructors of knowledge rather than mere informants. Through the structured sequence of Activities One to Four, participants externalised insights about service ecosystems, survivor pathways, emotional intensities and operational frictions, culminating in a collaboratively produced spatial model. This process illustrates how co-design methods not only surface latent forms of expertise but also facilitate shared meaning-making, enabling practitioners from different disciplines to negotiate and align their understandings of what GBV-responsive environments require. The material and visual nature of the generative tools support iterative interpretation and synthesis, key affordances for conceptualising complex environments that must simultaneously uphold confidentiality, emotional safety and functional coordination across departments.

In addition to demonstrating the value of co-design for uncovering practitioner knowledge, the study contributes to broader conversations on the spatial determinants of safety and care within higher education. As national GBV policies increasingly mandate institutional response mechanisms, there remains a limited understanding of the environmental conditions necessary to implement these responsibilities effectively. The insights generated through this study suggest that spatial planning should be seen as a central component of GBV governance rather than an ancillary consideration.

While the study's scope does not extend to survivor-led perspectives, its focus on frontline staff offers a critical first step in understanding how institutional environments support or hinder GBV response. Future research would benefit from incorporating the voices of students and survivors to deepen and diversify the spatial understanding established in this paper. Nonetheless, the findings presented demonstrate that co-design provides a rigorous, context-sensitive approach to early-stage planning, particularly in complex, emotionally charged contexts where practitioners' embodied knowledge is essential for informing design.

By integrating disciplinary perspectives, tacit expertise, and generative methods, this study demonstrates how co-design can inform the development of more coherent, trauma-aware, and contextually grounded GBV service environments. Such approaches hold significant potential for transforming university spaces into places of safety, care and restorative support.

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Uncovering: Cartographic performance methodology in practice

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This article introduces cartographic performance methodology (CPM) as a performance-as-research framework for understanding how dance theatre can function as a mode of inquiry. CPM describes how meaning is mapped through movement, space and symbolic objects within performance. The article articulates CPM through *Uncovering (*2024*),* a site-specific dance theatre production developed at Tshwane University of Technology during the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based-violence campaign. Grounded in artivism*, Uncovering* unfolds across four spatially connected vignettes in which clothing functions as a metaphorical burden, carrying memory and resistance. These vignettes guide the audience through a series of sites that expose the body as a crime scene, explore inherited silences, interrogate constrained masculinities, and gesture towards collective agency. CPM frames performance as a cartographic act in which embodied and spatial processes are organised and interpreted through mapping. Drawing on reflective accounts and visual documentation, the article demonstrates how CPM functions as a transferable methodological framework for performance-as-research in socially engaged dance theatre.
Keywords: artivism, body as sensorial cartographer, cartographic performance methodology, gender-based violence, performance-as-research

Onthulling: 'n Kartografiese uitvoeringsmetodologie vir beliggaamde weerstand
Hierdie artikel stel kartografiese uitvoeringsmetodologie (KUM) voor as 'n uitvoering-as-navorsing-raamwerk in dans-teater. KOM beskryf hoe betekenis deur beweging, ruimte en simboliese voorwerpe binne 'n optrede in kaart gebring kan word. Die artikel illustreer KOM deur *Uncovering* (2024), 'n dans-teater produksie wat aan die Tshwane University of Technology ontwikkel is, gedurende die 16 Dae van Aktivisme teen geslaggebaseerde geweld veldtog. Gegrond in kuns-en-aktivisme, ontvou *Uncovering* oor vier ruimtelik-verbonde *vignette* waarin klere as metaforiese las funksioneer, wat herinnering en weerstand dra. Hierdie vignette lei die gehoor deur 'n reeks terreine wat die liggaam as 'n misdaadtoneel blootstel, oorerfde stilte ondersoek, maskuliniteit bevraagteken en na 'n kollektiewe agentskap wys. KOM raam uitvoering as 'n kartografiese daad waarin beliggaamde en ruimtelike prosesse georganiseer en geinterpreteer word deur middel van kartering. Met die gebruik van refleksie en visuele dokumentasie demonstreer die artikel hoe KOM funksioneer as 'n oordraagbare metodologiese raamwerk vir uitvoering-as-navorsing in sosiaal betrokke dans-teater.
Sleutelwoorde: kuns-aktivisme, liggaam as sensoriese kaartmaker, kartografiese uitvoeringsmetodologie; GGG, uitvoering-as-navorsing.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an urgent and ongoing problem in South Africa, where it has been described as "an epidemic" (Tshilongo 2023: iii). Indiran Govender (2023: 1) reports that five times as many women are killed by intimate partners in South Africa as the global average. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines GBV as "violence that is directed against a person on the basis of their gender" (Kempen 2019: 16). More broadly, GBV could be described as any act that deprives an individual or group of full participation in society based on gender (Rose 2013: 62). The scope of GBV ranges from behaviour that marginalises individuals of any gender, depending on how gender is valued or

devalued within a specific socio-cultural context. Such behaviour is often coded into cultural practices, which adds to its complexity (Kwenaite and Van Heerden 2011).

Within this context, performing artists have a civic duty to engage in creative practice as a form of social intervention. *Uncovering* is a dance theatre performance grounded in artivism, memory work, and embodied narratives. It draws on the lived, embodied experience of performers to navigate the complex and multifaceted nature of GBV. The project was developed in collaboration with the Tshwane University of Technology's Research Niche Area "Artivism as a tool to combat GBV", reinforcing the niche area's commitment to socially engaged performance practice.

The article introduces cartographic performance methodology (CPM) as a performance-as-research framework for understanding how embodied and spatial processes in dance theatre generate research knowledge. CPM is articulated through *Uncovering,* which unfolded through four interconnected site-specific performances held at the Tshwane University of Technology arts campus on November 29, 2024. The work formed part of the global campaign for the 16 Days of Activism against GBV, curated by Dr Nicola Haskins and Dr Karina Lemmer in collaboration with the Tshwane University of Technology performing arts students. The performance guides audiences through a sequence of sites that expose the body as a crime scene, explore inherited silences, interrogate constrained masculinities, and move towards collective agency. Clothing functions as a metaphor for memory and resistance across the four vignettes. The vignettes can be understood as "sites" on the map that act as narrative landmarks within the performance cartography. Additionally, performers mapped their lived journeys shaped by GBV, which was then translated to four performance sites.

This performance context frames the theoretical underpinnings of the study of artivism and embodiment. Artivism is a combination of art and activism that has the potential to use creative expression to challenge issues and promote social change (Raaber 2022: 3). Artivism can potentially become an effective tool for navigating the themes, experiences, and silence surrounding the issue of GBV. The medium of dance theatre can open a space to raise awareness and engage audiences in experiences that challenge their perceptions through embodied and visceral mediums. As Augusto Boal (1992: xiii) suggests, "theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it". Boal's (1992) statement positions theatre as an artistic expression that allows its visceral medium to generate knowledge and allow social transformation. By engaging audiences, performance has the potential to challenge and provoke critical reflection on urgent issues such as GBV.

Performance implies an embodied exchange between performer and audience in space and time. This exchange situates bodies not only as a site of expression but also as a container of memory and emotion. The concept of the body as a site implies that the embodied expression of the performers in the space will lead to each audience member making their individual meanings as they engage in the performance. The body reacts to and is influenced by the space and in turn, the space is influenced by the bodies that shape it. As the body moves in space and time, it in effect "creates" the individual's understanding and experience of space and time (Csordas 2015: 51), making embodiment central to human experience. Therefore, one knows one's own body by its relation to other bodies and objects in space (Burns 2012: 40). Ultimately, embodiment implies that the body does not perceive or experience in isolation, but in a socio-cultural context informed by lived experience. In this research, the performers' bodies become expressions of their lived experience, enacting personal and collective narratives of GBV. The frameworks of artivism and embodiment shape both the creation and interpretation of *Uncovering*. They position performance as an embodied form of inquiry –

what Rae Johnson (2023: 2) calls "embodied activism", where movement and spatial encounter emerge as methods of social engagement.

This article guides the reader through the process and performance of *Uncovering* using CPM. It aims to enable the reader to have their personal embodied "felt sense" (Cornell and McGavin 2021: 30) of *Uncovering* and possibly a "thinking bodily" experience (Bannerman 2010: 474) as we lay the cartography of the performance. Through photographs and the map of the Tshwane University of Technology campus connecting the sites, the visual architecture will be revealed as the cartography of *Uncovering*. The cartography will layer our affective reflections on and after the performance of *Uncovering*. Affective reflections reveal inner sensations, feelings, perceptions, and emotions of the body-minded being (Zhu 2012: 293). In embodied experiences, emotions are "embodied social communicators" (Stodulka *et al.* 2019: 282) that recognise tacit knowledge and the present writers' subjective experiences (Kontos and Naglie 2009: 689). Drawing on reflective practice, the article presents the perspectives of the authors as they interpret and discuss the project.

Methodology

In this article, methodology refers to the organising logic and framework through which performance functions as a mode of inquiry and through which embodied, spatial, and material processes are understood (Nelson 2022: 108). The study emerges from a practice-based inquiry that uses performance-as-research to engage with the multifaceted themes of GBV. Central to this inquiry is what we define as CPM, a performance-as-research approach that maps meaning through spatial, somatic and movement practices developed in the site-specific production *Uncovering* (2024).

Mark Fleishman (2024: 53) argues that performance-as-research is "a series of embodied repetitions in time, on both micro (bodies, movements, sounds, improvisations, moments) and macro (events, productions, projects, installations) levels". This perspective highlights how performance-as-research operates through iterative processes, in which various themes emerge through a multimodal exploration. In this approach, performance becomes both the process and the medium of inquiry, where the embodied exploration of themes around GBV creates embodied meaning and understanding.

The knowledge generated through *Uncovering* reveals how creative process and performance can lead to insights through doing (Bondar and Andrade Pires 2024: 3). By using performance as a reflective lens and also as a mode of inquiry, the study reveals how movement, space, and objects interweave to carve out cartographies of meanings (Roth 2021: 84). The section below describes how CPM operates and how its elements allow a reading of embodied and spatial processes within the performance.

Cartographic performance methodology (CPM)

A CPM builds on broader discourse around performance cartographies and mapping in performance, where the relationship between bodies and space is used to articulate movement, affect, and place. Scholars such as M.J.M. Sánchez (2021: 1) refer to "dynamic cartography" as an "architectural analysis of space based on the body movements that take place in it", as well as Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter (2009), who explore how performance can serve as a means of inquiry to creating "creative cartographies" that map intersections of theory and practice. CPM expands on by situating performance within a socially engaged dance theatre context, where performance emerges as a spatial and embodied mode of inquiry.

We position the *Uncovering* performance as a map where spaces, bodies, movement, and objects emerge as "topographical features" that intersect to generate meanings. This approach conceptualises the performance as a living, evolving map, emphasising the interplay between space, body, and narrative. Drawing from Janice Rieger *et al.* (2022), who formulate mapping as a relational and embodied practice between bodies, space, and objects, *Uncovering* uses the map to offer space for individual embodied experiences, within an organised spatial trajectory. Sites of the performance emerge as markers on the map, assisting in articulating the narratives of GBV. This methodology emphasises thematic mapping, where the themes of GBV are represented through the interplay of space, objects, and embodiment. For example, the layering of clothing on performers' bodies is a metaphorical representation of the burdens GBV can cause. At the same time, removal becomes a symbolic act of release and reclamation. The intertwining of space, objects, and embodiment reveals the narrative of *Uncovering.*

When generating embodied meanings, it is important to acknowledge that narrative is not chronological, revealing consistency in event, space, and time. A narrative in dance theatre can "communicate a complex felt idea", a "felt sense", or an embodied narrative (Chappell 2008: 161). This embodied narrative allows the "finely textured experience of the body" to be revealed (Anderson 2001: 84), which invites the audience to encounter the narrative through kinaesthetic empathy or "sympathetic resonance" (Reynolds 2012). The choreography allows the audience to fully experience the narrative, the "perceptual, visceral, sensorimotor, kinaesthetic, and imagined senses are invited to come alive to the images as though the experience were their own" (Anderson 2001: 84).

In clarifying what a CPM entails within performance, the ontological assumption is that the body is a site of knowledge, what Mimi Sodhi (2008:1) refers to as an "embodied knowing" – a form of understanding that emerges through sensory engagement, movement, and the body's interaction in the world. The epistemological assumption is that knowledge emerges through spatial, embodied, and symbolic processes.

Component	**Description**	**Application in *Uncovering***
Ontological premise	The body emerges as a site of knowledge and lived experience	Performers' bodies act as archives of memory, lived experience, and resistance
Epistemological approach	Knowledge is generated through embodied, spatial, and symbolic processes	Movement, space, and clothing become a mode of inquiry and meaning-making
Mapping logic	Performance is conceptualised as a living map	Four site-specific vignettes represent landmarks on the cartographic journey
Spatial trajectory	Physical movement through space generates meaning and an emotional progression	Audiences travel from one site to the next, engaging with various aspects of GBV
Symbolic objects	Objects are choreographically and metaphorically important	Clothing embodies weight, shame, and becomes a way of reclaiming agency
Embodied narratives	Stories are expressed kinaesthetically through gesture, effort, shape, and proximity	Themes of GBV are communicated through the bodymind
Audience role	Audience members are somatically engaged co-witnesses	Proximity and spatial positioning invite co-witnessing

Table 1: Summary of the cartographic performance methodology (CPM)

The methodology follows a spatial narrative that engages and leads the audience through a series of site-specific performances, each exploring a theme related to GBV. Objects serve as central elements within these performances, carrying both physical and metaphorical significance. Movement, gesture, effort, and spatial relationships convey the embodied narratives. The audience becomes a co-witness and participant in a layered, multisensory experience. Table 1 provides a summary of a CPM.

How cartographic performance methodology (CPM) works

CPM emerges as a performance-as-research framework that foregrounds how embodied, spatial, and symbolic objects of performance are interpreted. Rather than functioning as a set of methods for making performance, CPM provides an orienting structure for understanding performance as a cartographic act shaped by movement, space, and material presence. Within this approach, meaning emerges through three interconnected elements that structure how the performance is read: mapping through movement and space, the body as sensorial cartographer, and clothing as metaphor. These elements function relationally, allowing bodily experience, spatial encounter, and symbolic material to be brought into dialogue as part of a cartographic process (Burns 2012: 40). The following section outlines how each element functions within CPM in relation to *Uncovering*.

Mapping through movement and space

Each vignette in *Uncovering* becomes a choreographic site that explores various aspects of GBV. These sites connect to one another as narrative landmarks layered with emotional and spatial architecture. The audience is guided through the sites in a way that reflects the emotional journey of the performers, from moving from silence and shame towards resistance and reclamation. This spatial approach is central to the CPM, where it activates a relationship between various bodies (performers and audience) and their relation to the objects and architecture in a multimodal way (Rieger *et al.* 2022). The performers become embodied agents of memory as they "map" their lived experiences across the various sites. Each movement in space offers the audience not only a visual insight but a kinaesthetic experience of the performers' emotional landscape through their bodies as sensorial cartographers.

The body as sensorial cartographer

In *Uncovering,* the body emerges not only as an agent of memory and movement but as a sensorial cartographer navigating and responding to space through multisensory engagement. This idea is drawn from Maria João Durão (2009: 399), who describes the "body as cartography of sensorial meaning". Further, the body as sensorial cartographer draws on Juhani Pallasmaa's (2005: 41) reflections in *The Eyes of the Skin*, where all meaningful encounters with space are multisensory:

> Every touching experience of architecture is multisensory; qualities of space, matter and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton, and muscle. Architecture strengthens the existential experience, one's senses of being in the world.

This perspective informs how *Uncovering* activates the audience's full sensory engagement, guiding them through spaces where memory and resistance are not only "seen" but felt. Each performance site is constructed as an embodied topography navigated visually, kinaesthetically, and emotionally. This references Josephine Machon's (2013: 57) concept of the (syn)aesthetic:

> The architectural impact of site makes the audience aware of the haptic quality of spatial presence and their position within that. With site-specific performance the workings of the (syn)aesthetic hybrid ensure that space truly becomes 'a tangible, physical place'.

The audience does not just see the performance through their visual sense. They feel it, move within it and experience it bodily and sensorily. *Uncovering* embraces this thinking, where the body emerges as both receiver and transmitter of meaning across mapped performance sites. As the audience members move through the various spaces or "sites", their senses, emotions, and spatial awareness become part of the unfolding of meaning. This intertwining of space, senses, and narrative is central to CPM.

Clothing as metaphor

In *Uncovering,* clothing is applied as a metaphor. The role of clothing in arguments surrounding GBV is well documented. De Lange *et al.* (2012: 196) note that clothing is often implicated in narratives around GBV, with questions such as "Is it something she wore?" Women are cautioned not to wear clothing that can be "distracting" (Ezcurra and Mitchell 2018: 141), and these societal notions about clothing can be used to make victims feel somehow responsible for GBV. This shifting of responsibility onto clothing is heightened by cultural values in conservative communities where clothing can be deemed to be an "invitation" to certain acts of GBV (Kwenaite and Van Heerden 2011). The connotations that exist in relation to clothing regarding GBV result in hypervigilance amongst women and girls, leading to a loss of sense of self (Rose 2013: 63).

Such material embodied connections with clothing were central to the explorations in creating the performance, enabling performers to draw from their lived experience. Clothing was then used as a semiotic means to convey meaning to the audience. Therefore, in *Uncovering* the layering of items of clothing is simultaneously a metaphor and a creative tool. We interpret the use of clothing as "covering" and offer "uncovering" as a means towards resistance and reclamation through shedding layers of clothing as a symbolic act.

Within the performance, clothing is layered, removed, and reinterpreted to enact symbolic meaning. Each piece of clothing becomes an extension of memory, and when it is removed, it becomes a process of release and agency. Thematically, this metaphor is woven through all four sites, offering a visible, tangible, and emotional way of externalising the internal burdens of GBV.

Cartography of Uncovering

Figure 1 presents a map of the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus that charts the physical route of both performers and audience across the four performance sites. The map traces how *Uncovering* unfolded spatially, showing the sequence of the sites and the pathways between sites as they were experienced during the live performance. The map operates as a cartographic record of movement, revealing how spatial progression shaped the performance encounter. Within CPM, such mapping makes visible how bodies moved through space during the performance. The map provides an orienting structure for the reader, allowing the journey of *Uncovering* to be followed across the campus.

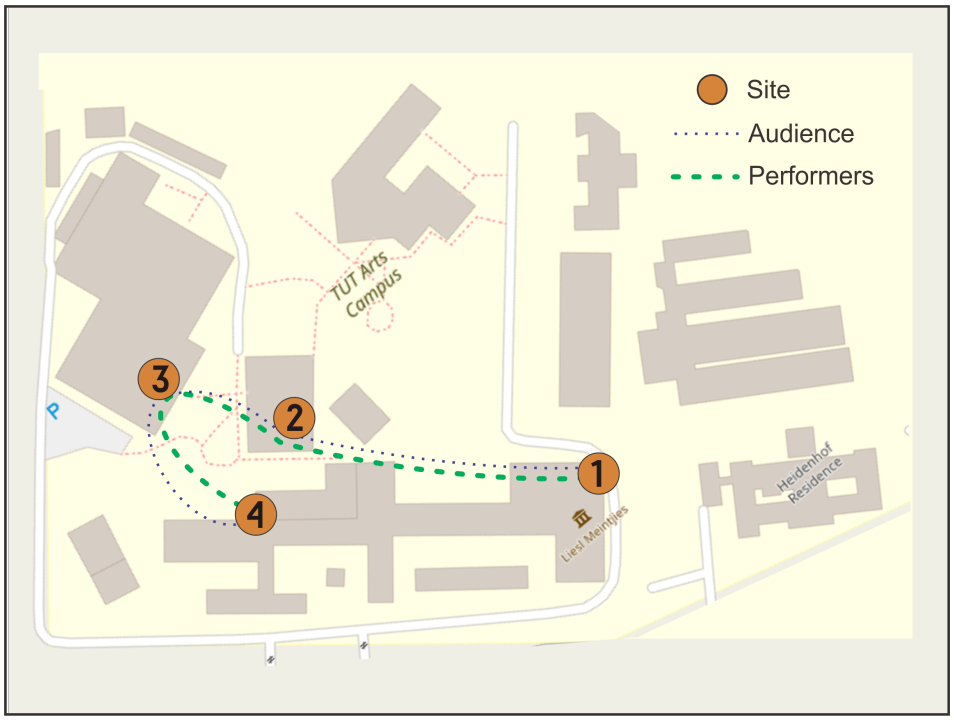

Figure 1
A map of the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus showing the route of *Uncovering*

Read in relation to the visual map, the poem below, titled "A mapping of *Uncovering*", offers a textual cartography of the performance. The poem provides a reflective mapping device that reveals affective and sensory dimensions of the journey of the exchange between performers and audience. While the Tshwane University of Technology map charts physical movement, the poem traces how space was "felt" and inhabited by both performers and audience, revealing the porous exchange between them. The poem follows the four sites indicated on the map: 1. *My body is not a Crime Scene*, 2. *Wearing Silence*, 3. *Bound by Silence*, and 4. *Uncovering*. Read together, the map and the poem operate as cartographic forms: one visual and spatial, and the other affective and temporal. Together, they extend the cartographic logic of CPM, showing how performance can be mapped through physical locations, embodied experience, and relational movement across space.

A mapping of Uncovering

The audience gathers, drawn by sounds of breath
Bodies wrapped in danger tape, witnessed through the glass
My body is not a crime scene
The performers emerge as the audience follows with anticipation
to a woman floating in water
Her voice ripples through the air
as another woman washes her clothes in the water
Further, the audience follows
Three men, ties binding them
their masculinity a tie that binds
We move to an open space
Clothes layered upon clothes across the landscape

Each story a scar, a memory, an unveiling
The performers peel clothes off
casting their burdens to the wind
Freedom from the weight of covering

Each site explores a specific theme or aspect of GBV along the cartographic journey. These sites are not isolated as they are interconnected into one journey for the audience. The journey from one site to the next reflects a navigation through the themes, allowing the audience to follow a narrative that unfolds spatially, emotionally, and through movement. Each site provides another topographical layer to the performance's map, deepening the audience's musings about GBV and allowing them to engage with various themes in an embodied way. This layering of one performance over the other provides a palimpsest of meanings, narratives, and stories within the space (Sánchez 2021).

The performers guide the audience between sites, as the performance links various aspects of the complexities that constitute GBV. The audience is taken on a journey of awareness and resistance.

Site 1: My body is not a Crime Scene

Bound my body
Danger
No entry
Glass walls confine
as people stare in
a scream penetrating my skin
the impossibility of silence
the weight of experiences past and present

Figure 2
Site 1: *My body is not a Crime Scene*
(photographed at Site 1 on the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

The first performance in the *Uncovering* series is *My body is not a Crime Scene,* which allows a visceral exploration of the violence and dehumanisation felt by those affected by GBV. This vignette features three performers wrapped in danger tape, transforming their bodies into symbols of violation and exclusion. The performers are enclosed in a large glass box, confronting the audience with the stark image of containment. The performers are contained and simultaneously exposed, trapped yet visible, silenced yet shouting at the audience. The deliberate choice of danger tape and positioning them within a glass box evokes the dual reality faced by survivors of GBV: the labelling of their bodies as sites of violence and the public scrutiny that often accompanies victimhood.

The three performers began the performance by walking slowly in the glass box, whispering as they navigated the confined space. Gestures of reaching and recoiling characterised the movement language. The performers fell and rebounded off the walls as they covered their eyes and mouths. The gestural movement language of the performers revealed a sense of conflict and discomfort as they moved through the space.

Figure 3
Reflected witnessing: Gaze, reflection, and responsibility
(photographed at Site 1 on the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

The audience is forced to navigate their role as witnesses as the glass box allows their gaze, and at the same time, challenges it. The glass box reflects their images onto the glass, compelling them to consider their position as witnesses. The reflective surface turns their gaze back on itself, challenging how they look and what they see. Three white chairs are positioned in the glass box for a space for sitting and confession. The performers repeat the line "My body is not a crime scene" in three languages: Afrikaans, Venda, and Sesotho. The vocal intonations vary as they move their words into being.

Figure 4
The body speaks
(photographed at Site 1 on the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

At the end of the performance, the performers open the door and move into the audience, ripping off the danger tape. This symbolises an act of resistance, rejecting their identity as a "crime scene" and reclaiming their bodies as spaces of agency. The audience follows them to the next site as they rip off the danger tape: a sense of reclamation. Figures 5 and 6 show the connecting pathway between Sites 1 and 2 across the Arts Campus.

Figure 5 (left)
Embodied traces
(photographed between Site 1 and Site 2, the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

Figure 6 (right)
Carrying the weight of visibility
(photographed between Site 1 and Site 2, the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

The journey continues as the performers take the audience to Site 2, where they encounter remnants from the past. The performers explore the world of their mothers and grandmothers in a space where social norms are passed down from one generation to another.

Site 2: Wearing Silence

Go tswelapele re hlopega (to keep on suffering)
We find a woman dressed in layers of clothing
submerged in water in a steel bath
She attempts to cleanse herself
but remains trapped by the layers of clothing
and the water
She speaks a translated excerpt from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*
declaring that she is captive
A second woman accompanies her text with a song
while washing clothing in the bath
Their plea intensifies in rhythm, breath, and voice

Figure 7
Site 2: *Wearing Silence*
(photographed at Site 2, the sculpture studio, Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

The second performance in the *Uncovering* series is *Wearing Silence.* Site 2 symbolises a socio-cultural context where women are "imprisoned" by circumstance. This vignette is an outcome of the creative process where the performers shared and explored notions passed down by their family and socio-cultural context. This reflects belief systems that reinforce gender

inequality through customs and language use (Ratele and Suffla 2011). In contrast to the other three sites where the performers' physical embodiments were the core material, the vignette performed at Site 2 included words as a central component of the exploration process. Using clothing as an anchor for embodied expression, performers were invited to recall and vocalise words and phrases from their experience connected to restrictive gendered circumstances. No distinct aesthetic goal was posed, which allowed freedom in the prosodic delivery. Statements emerged, such as: "cover yourself", "don't be loud", "girls should be quiet", and "know your place". We contemplated the long-term embodied impact of such statements and how it socialises women to believe that they are powerless (Buqa 2022: 2). From our collective contemplation, *Wearing Silence* emerged using clothing and water to depict the notion of women "drowning" in their circumstances. The embodied prosodic experience achieved through free exploration was then applied to a text excerpt selected collectively, thus literally giving the women a "voice". We used a translated excerpt from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

go tšwelapele re hlopega (to keep suffering)
ba goba le makoko, / ba go epotša (under proud men)
ba go robega dipelo (rather the heartaches of rejected love)
naga yela ya go se tsejwe (than the fear of the unknown land)
re se tšhabele mathata ao re sa a tsebego (rather this than the troubles we don't know)

One woman speaks the text while struggling under the weight of the clothing and water, while the second woman sings the text while washing clothing. The basic melody and tone of the singing emerged from the prosody discovered in the free exploration and was applied to contrast the lyrical and responsive, signalling the notions of duty and resistance. The text is repeated, applying the vocal effect patterns associated with fear. This repetition encompasses the use of breath and prosodic features (pitch, duration, intensity) in a manner that depicts the vocal shifts that organically occur in heightened emotional states (Dal Vera 2001: 55). In this performance, pitch, duration, and intensity are applied in an erratic manner, intensity fluctuates, and pausing is moved to irregular positions in phrases. This erratic pitch is evident in the breath pattern and is echoed in the altering rhythm of the singer. The women continue with their actions despite the increasing sense of discomfort and pain. The scene speaks to women being immersed in abusive circumstances and those who choose to remain in those circumstances over the "unknown". The performers continue to "wash" the clothing as a metaphor for the submissive entrapment in violent circumstances and the metaphorical desire to "cleanse" the violated body. This submersion alludes to the socio-cultural complexities surrounding GBV that leave many women "submerged". These women continue to labour dutifully and in circumstances that perpetuate GBV.

Figure 8
A cleansing
(photographed at Site 2, the sculpture studio, Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

As the text and singing escalate, the two women become aware of the performers from Site 1, who are witnessing their performance. A possible reflection emerges of the empowered women in the present, commenting on the disempowered past. In response, the performer rises out of the water and is led out of the space by the performers from Site 1. This emersion is a literal emersion from a suppressive context, a leaving of the abuse known, and a move towards possibilities of the unknown, towards a space of reclamation.

Figure 9
Resting in the rupture
(photographed between Site 2 and Site 3 ar Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

The journey continues as all five performers symbolising multigenerational women direct the audience to Site 3. This journey is a silent, private space where the audience will encounter a male perspective.

Site 3: Bound by Silence

Two men move carefully perceived from above
Ties coiled around their throats as
knots of masculinity
shirts removed, baring their chests
Hands reaching
pressing against the railing's edge
a moment of release
as they uncover their perceptions
voiceless

Figure 10
Site 3: *Bound by Silence*
(photographed at Site 3, décor studio, Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

The third performance in the *Uncovering* series is *Bound by Silence* and embodied the "felt sense" of how men experience and respond to GBV. Tshanduko Tshilongo (2023: 13) argues that men tend to be silenced or conceal GBV perpetrated against them "to avoid being labelled as weak or for not being 'real' men", indicating that they experience GBV as their own failure to meet societal expectations of masculinity. It is not only men who have experienced GBV that are silenced, but perceptions amongst men reveal that they are often "left" out of conversations surrounding GBV. *Bound by Silence* aimed to challenge this exclusion, creating a visceral portrayal of how men are silenced by societal norms and their own internalised narratives.

Figure 11
Hung by norms
(photographed at Site 3, décor studio, Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

The *Bound by Silence* performance featured two male performers wearing ties in a corridor-style space on a balcony that created a raised platform for their performance. Ties, symbolising masculinity and professionalism, hung throughout the space, suggesting a visual metaphor for the weight of societal expectations. The ties became symbols of constriction and an imposed identity that they "wear". The performers use the ties, and by grabbing, pulling, and struggling with and against them, revealed the emotional constraint by men within these constructs.

Figure 12
The vulnerability of unheard men
(photographed at Site 3, décor studio, Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

The performers on the balcony, above the audience, forced the audience to look up, which shifted the traditional audience-performer relationship. The audience witnessed the performers from an elevated perspective, forcing them to view their vulnerability from below. The movement language juxtaposed movements of strong weight and more fluid, lightweight movements, revealing the internal conflict and moments of resistance.

The performers, now a collective, lead the audience to the next site. The audience is guided to a space where they have a panoramic, raised view of the final site, a pile of clothing. The mountain of discarded clothing slowly comes alive as bodies emerge.

Site 4: Uncovering

Performers covered in clothes
layers upon layers as memories are woven into the fabric
Each thread a weight
Hands reaching outwards
Pressing through the air
Bound in time and space
They begin to uncover themselves
peeling back memories and burdens
Each piece of clothing a burden uncovered
a story untold
They walk away from the clothes
free from the burdens

Figure 13
Site 4: *Uncovering*
(photographed at Site 4, a communal space on the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

Figure 14
An uncovering
(photographed at Site 4, a communal space on the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

At the final site, Site 4, the fourth and final performance of the Uncovering series took place. Clothing becomes an embodied artefact with personal and collective memory. Clothing does this through its symbolic and physical presence on the performers' bodies. The performers' bodies, draped in layers of clothing, transform into living archives where fabric

holds and communicates untold stories and silenced narratives. Simultaneously, clothing can represent the emotional burdens and societal expectations of survivors of GBV. Clothing's "close contact with the body gives it the ability to hold personal and intimate stories from the past. Worn clothing represents traces of lives lived; it is alive with everything it has witnessed, and evokes deep feelings, and can tell real-life tales".[1] Clothing also serves as a link between the first three sites: exposing the body (Site 1), the layers and restrictions of traditional socialisation (Site 2), and the ties of masculinity (Site 3).

The performers emerge as living embodied archives (Site 4) (Parker 2020: 8-9). At the start of the performance at Site 4, the performers are encased in layers of clothes as one moving mass. This massiveness suggests the weight of experience and how this is embedded in the performers' bodies. The movement language under the layers of clothing is deliberate and sustained. The movements are bound, revealing how the burdens of GBV are embedded within their being, shaping how the performers move and exist in the world.

The final act of uncovering is where the performers peel away layers of clothing, each piece signifying a sense of release. The discarded clothes are left scattered across the site and become a visual marker of release, as well as a silent testimony to untold stories and the weight of their experiences. The performers walk away from the site, leaving the clothes behind as a memento of their memories and lived experiences.

Figure 15
Cartographies of release
(photographed at Site 4, a communal space on the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Motshidisi Manyeneng).

Discussion

The discussion section reflects on the layered meanings and insights that emerged through *Uncovering* as performance-as-research using a CPM. This methodology structured the production and creative process as a living map where each performance site emerges as a narrative landmark. Spatial, somatic, and symbolic elements intertwined to explore the performers' lived realities of GBV as a systemically embedded and multilayered social phenomenon (Nyagumbo and Ross 2025: 11). Hannah Bows and Bianca Fileborn (2020: 299)

[1] Retrieved from https://www.lindafriedmanschmidt.com/clothing-and-memory/ on 4 February 2025.

argue that space is often cited in instances of GBV, such as "domestic" violence or "street" harassment. This embodied connection between space and GBV served as an impulse for creating *Uncovering*.

A choreographic unfolding of memory, resistance, and reclamation occurred as the audience moved through a site-based progression. From the visceral containment of *My body is not a Crime Scene* to the intergenerational trauma of *Wearing Silence*, the constrained masculinities in *Bound by Silence*, and the final act of collective *Uncovering,* the performance created what Sánchez (2021:1) refers to as a palimpsest of meaning:

> In the same way as in the manuscript, what has been written before remains and is still visible after writing over it, it happens equally with space.

Each transition between spaces added another layer of experience for the audience, not only narratively but physically and emotionally. The performers' bodies became sensorial cartographers in and through space, expressing their emotional landscape around GBV (Durão 2009: 399). Their physical interaction at each site traced emotional responses to GBV into the space through the performers' embodied states that expressed how GBV is carried and released in their lived experience. The audience followed the emotional and spatial journeys in and with the performers in relational engagement.

At the first site, the audience viewed the performers encased in an industrial container with glass windows, visibly close yet physically distanced, forcing them to gaze inward. At the second site, the audience stood around the bathtub, where submerged clothes evoked intergenerational weight and submersion. At the third site, the audience looked upward at the performers on a balcony, which became a spatial metaphor for emotional distance. At the final site, the audience was positioned three floors above, looking down onto the performance below, the distance intensifying the weight of communal release and reflection. Across the four sites, the audience's engagement moved beyond visual observation into a mode of embodied co-witnessing through sensory immersion (Hart 2023: 67). The spatial structuring of the work invited the audience to traverse the thematic terrain of GBV alongside, beneath, above, and around the performers, transforming them into active participants experiencing the performance through multisensory engagement (Pallasmaa 2005).

This article introduced CPM to describe a performance-as-research framework that spatially and somatically maps themes of GBV through site-specific, movement-based performance, based on scholars Sánchez (2021) and Riley and Hunter (2009). This analytical and creative approach frames performances as mapping processes, where spatial relationships, expressive movements, and metaphorical components through dance theatre interweave to construct meaning across various landscapes (Fiordilino 2022: 59). This mode of inquiry explores the connection between the body and space in and through movement as a performative modality – a "dynamic cartography" (Sánchez 2021: 1).

A CPM allowed *Uncovering* to emerge as a mapping process through which affect, memory, and reclamation were revealed across multiple sites, allowing a porous interplay between both the performers and the audience. This methodology frames performance as a cartographic unfolding that traces how GBV is carried within bodies and spaces. In this way, CPM situates performance as a mode of inquiry that addresses relational experience and embodied knowing, contributing to performance-as-research by articulating how spatial and bodily processes can be read as forms of cartographic knowledge.

Figure 16
An uncovering
(photographed at Site 4, a communal space on the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Samkele Mahamba).

Figure 17
Tracing an uncovering
(photographed at Site 4, a communal space on the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Motshidisi Manyeneng)

Conclusion

Fleishman (2024: 58) argues that performance-as-research "is the desire to make conscious, to become aware from within the midst of the endless process of becoming and then to attempt to translate this for others through a variety of modalities". This article has argued that CPM provides one such modality for framing performance as a cartographic act through which embodied, spatial, and material processes generate research knowledge. The article has demonstrated how CPM organises performance as a mode of inquiry that traces how GBV is carried and negotiated through bodies and spaces.

CPM suggests that the body is a sensorial cartographer, and its movement produces meaning in relation to objects and space. Through the organisation of site-specific vignettes, CPM enables individual embodied experiences to unfold within a shared spatial structure. The pathways between sites and the accumulation of movement and material operate as cartographic processes. In this way, CPM extends ideas of dynamic cartography (Sánchez 2021) by situating mapping within a performative and relational framework.

The first step in CPM is empowering performers to utilise their lived experience in embodied expression (in this case, through movement and/or words), therefore, in a sense, providing a safe frame in which the individual traces and maps their embodied archive. The body's sensorial engagement with material objects (clothing in this instance), architecture, and other bodies is then mapped into thematic constructs and organised into sites. The sites and the routes between the sites become a mapping of themes (in this case, specific lived aspects of GBV). This mapping assigns communal points both physically and thematically for both performer and audience, while honouring and assigning agency to individual lived experience.

Uncovering problematises aspects of GBV using clothing as a metaphor. Each site leaves a residue in the form of traces, discarded garments, witnessed gestures, and shifted spatial relations. This residue speaks to what remains after the act of witnessing. The residue marks how the audience moved and considered their relation to each space. The performance reorganised the space through a sense of collective witnessing. The cartographic structure of the site-specific performance allowed the audience to move in and through multiple spaces, becoming co-witnesses. Throughout the journey, clothing represents gendered lived experience. *Uncovering* gradually unfolds embodied narratives that problematise various aspects of GBV, allowing for a collective journey for performers and audience toward acknowledgement and empowerment.

The article contributes to performance-as-research by coining and applying CPM as an approach that unites artivism, embodiment, and spatial inquiry. *Uncovering* demonstrates how CPM can function where performance becomes a method of inquiry and a spatial cartographic exploration.

Figure 18
Traces of release
(photographed at Site 4, a communal space on the Tshwane University of Technology Arts Campus, Pretoria by Motshidisi Manyeneng).

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Gender, narrative, and agency: The contemporary jewellery of Geraldine Fenn

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Contemporary jewellery is a medium through which identity, narrative, and artistic vision are expressed. This article explores how South African contemporary jewellery contributes to critical engagement with gender-based violence (GBV). While jewellery is often regarded as a decorative adornment, this study considers its function as a medium for social commentary. The work of contemporary jeweller Geraldine Fenn is examined to understand how individual and collective gender narratives are embedded in her artistic practice. Using her series of brooches as a case study, the article analyses how wearable objects visually challenge gender dynamics. A qualitative research design is employed, drawing on life history research methodology, feminist theory, and hermeneutic phenomenology as a theoretical framework to interpret the complex dimensions of Fenn's artistic creations that challenge conventional gender norms. The article proposes that her series of brooches positions contemporary jewellery as a medium of cultural critique, foregrounding women's agency and contributing to broader discourses on gender equality and social transformation.

Keywords: contemporary jewellery, gender dynamics, feminist visual culture, life history research, hermeneutic phenomenology

Geslag, narratief en agentskap: Die kontemporêre juweliersware van Geraldine Fenn
Kontemporêre juweliersware is 'n medium waardeur identiteit, narratief en artistieke visie uitgedruk word. Hierdie artikel ondersoek hoe Suid-Afrikaanse kontemporêre juweliersware bydra tot kritiese betrokkenheid by geslagsgebaseerde geweld. Hoewel juweliersware dikwels as dekoratiewe versiering beskou word, ondersoek dié studie die funksie daarvan as 'n medium vir sosiale kommentaar. Die werk van die kontemporêre juwelier Geraldine Fenn word ondersoek om te verstaan hoe individuele en kollektiewe geslagsnarratiewe in haar artistieke praktyk ingebed is. Deur haar reeks borsspelde as 'n gevallestudie te gebruik, ontleed die artikel hoe draagbare voorwerpe geslagsdinamika visueel uitdaag. 'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsontwerp wat voortbou op lewensgeskiedenis-navorsingsmetodologie, feministiese teorie en hermeneutiese fenomenologie as 'n teoretiese raamwerk word gebruik om die komplekse dimensies van Fenn se artistieke skeppings wat konvensionele geslagsnorme uitdaag, te interpreteer. Die artikel stel voor dat haar reeks borsspelde kontemporêre juweliersware as 'n medium van kulturele kritiek posisioneer, vroue se agentskap op die voorgrond plaas en bydra tot breër diskoerse oor geslagsgelykheid en sosiale transformasie.

Sleutelwoorde: kontemporêre juweliersware, geslagsdinamika, feministiese visuele kultuur, lewensgeskiedenisnavorsing, hermeneutiese fenomenologie.

Jewellery is defined by Marjan Unger (2019: 18) as "an object that is worn on the human body, as a decorative and symbolic addition to its outward appearance". While it can be categorised in various ways, including precious jewellery, fashion jewellery, ethnic jewellery, ephemeral jewellery, heritage jewellery, and mass-produced commercial jewellery, contemporary jewellery is characterised by its conceptual and critical orientation (Cheung *et al*. 2006: 12, Unger 2019: 26–7).

Damian Skinner (2013: 11) describes contemporary jewellery as a "self-reflexive studio craft practice that is oriented to the body". It is created by practitioners who question traditional notions of adornment, employing innovative processes and materials to develop new aesthetics and meanings (Scarpitti 2021: 67, Cheung *et al.* 2006: 12, Den Besten 2012: 17). This "self-reflexive" aspect encompasses the practitioner's interpretation of personal and broader societal contexts within a medium that is intimately connected to or worn on the body. Chiara Scarpitti (2021: 61) adds that this practice engages with the community by exploring current cultural narratives. Therefore, contemporary jewellery can reflect and comment on various cultural, social, and political aspects. This interplay between self-reflection and cultural engagement suggests that contemporary jewellery is not merely about aesthetics or craftsmanship but also about constructing and conveying meaning.

Meaning-making is central to contemporary jewellery. According to Andra L. Cole and Gary Knowles (2001: 10–1), individuals derive meaning from their lived experiences through storytelling, expressed in various artistic forms. This meaning-making occurs through the selection of themes, materials, and techniques that embody personal and collective narratives. Consequently, contemporary jewellery becomes an artefact of self-reflection, embedding both personal histories and broader social narratives.

As a form of visual culture studies, contemporary jewellery practice represents a dynamic interplay between individual agency and social constructs. In this context, meaning arises from materiality and semiotics that are both personalised and culturally shared, functioning as a form of critical visual language (Adami and Pinto 2019: 74). It is therefore interpreted not only as an object of design but also as a visual discourse embedded in a sociocultural and political context.

While contemporary jewellery as a practice is well documented in international scholarship, South African contemporary jewellery, along with its broader design history, has received limited scholarly attention (Den Besten 2012: 7-8, Pretorius 2016: 42). The absence of sustained academic discourse on South African contemporary jewellery can be attributed to limited academic programmes, the scarcity of dedicated researchers, and the positioning of jewellery within adjacent fields such as craft or fine art. Consequently, South African contemporary jewellery remains marginalised within academic discourse.

Sarah Rhodes (2013: 184) asserts that there is minimal research output in this discipline. Geraldine Fenn (2019b: 1) similarly notes that South African contemporary jewellery is relatively unknown and underappreciated. Without robust discourse, the field lacks critical engagement, despite its potential to contribute to cultural and political debates, especially around gender.

Gender-based violence (GBV), specifically as it affects women, remains a pressing social issue in South Africa. It is described by Kunle Oparinde and Rachel Matsha (2021: 2) as an "extreme manifestation of gender inequality", enabled by structural patriarchy. Treasire Malatjie and John Mamokhere (2024: 1059) confirm that prevailing power imbalances, societal expectations, and gender norms all contribute to its high prevalence.

Contemporary jewellery offers a medium for exploring GBV through a visual language capable of materially representing gendered narratives. As a wearable art form, contemporary jewellery engages the body, the viewer, and the wearer both in public and personal ways. This embodied presence makes it well-suited to provoke dialogue on gendered violence.

Geraldine Fenn is a contemporary jeweller and co-owner of Tinsel Gallery in Johannesburg. Her work is exhibited locally and internationally, and she received the Inaugural Art Jewelry Forum (AJF) Solo Exhibition Award in 2025. Her *Pin-Up Girl* brooches were

selected as a case study because they explore narratives surrounding gender dynamics through their title, format, and materials such as vintage tins and beads. As a white South African woman, her identity informs her practice, positioning her feminist narratives within a specific cultural and historical context.

This paper addresses a critical gap in scholarship by offering a scholarly interpretation of Geraldine Fenn's series of brooches, *Pin-Up Girl*, through a life history lens. By integrating hermeneutic phenomenology, the article contributes to feminist art historical discourse by interpreting contemporary jewellery as a visual activism artefact from a South African context. Fenn's brooch series exemplifies how South African contemporary jewellers negotiate identity through their practice within a complex cultural and sociopolitical landscape. This study aims to demonstrate how personal experience, expressed through contemporary jewellery, challenges patriarchal gender dynamics.

Origins and conceptual foundations

Contemporary jewellery practice emerged in the 1940s, mainly in Europe and the United States, as a response to the traditional conventions of commercial jewellery-making (Turner 1996: 7), gaining significance in the 1960s, influenced by that era's social, political, and cultural paradigm shifts (Astfalck *et al.* 2005: 12). Liesbeth Den Besten (2012: 8) notes that these shifts affected attitudes toward the design and function of jewellery and generated a desire for greater individuality in design, prompting jewellers to question the material value and its purpose.

The practice increasingly positioned itself in opposition to commercial jewellery, as contemporary jewellers sought to disrupt expectations of its value and meaning. Instead, it shifted the focus towards jewellery as a form of the practitioner's creative expression, embedding intellectual and conceptual contexts into their work. Susan Grant Lewin (1994: 13) confirms that contemporary jewellers deliberately challenge the established norms, creating one-of-a-kind works. In this context, it became a medium for personal expression where the "communication of [one's] own sensibilities and ideologies [is] paramount" (Watkins 2000: 8).

Personal narrative and reflective practice

The turn towards self-expression enabled contemporary jewellery to function as a form of personal narrative. Skinner (2013: 179) describes it as a reflective practice, where the contemporary jeweller's lived experiences inform the selection of material and intent behind each work. Narrative jewellery often expresses personal experiences, emotions, spiritual beliefs, or aspects of identity. Mark Fenn (2017: 6), a scholar on narrative jewellery, observes that such work can encompass multiple levels of meaning and understanding, shaped by the practitioner's personal and symbolic references.

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Wassily Kandinsky's (1977) theory offers a valuable lens for understanding emotion and abstraction in artistic creation. According to Kandinsky (1977: 2, 4), the content of art originates from the inner emotions of the artist. Applied to contemporary jewellery, this theory supports the reading of symbolic material choices as expressions of internal narratives. However, the personal narrative may not always be readily apparent to wearers or viewers, as meaning is often embedded symbolically or abstractly.

Contemporary jewellery as social critique

Contemporary jewellery not only conveys internal reflections; it also responds to external influences, including broader political, cultural, and social contexts. As a wearable form, it can serve as a critical or reflective medium that provokes thought, raises awareness, and questions established norms. Among these external influences are gendered power dynamics and feminist perspectives, which are often communicated through choices in material, form, or motif. Jivan Astfalck, Caroline Broadhead and Paul Derrez (2005: 25, 28) note that jewellery worn on the body engages with personal, social, cultural, and gendered identities and can articulate vulnerability as well as experiences of trauma.

Arthur C. Danto (2021: 32, 46, 67, 68) argues that the criteria for evaluating art have shifted from focusing on aesthetics to emphasising the conceptual aspects of art, where meaning and interpretation take precedence. According to Danto (2021: 107, 108, 111), art becomes a response to the diverse nature of contemporary culture, with artists creating works that comment on broader social, political, and cultural issues.

This perspective applies equally to contemporary jewellery. Formal features, typically associated with aesthetic experimentation or craftsmanship, are employed to establish a context for the practitioner's commentary on the external environment. Ralph Turner (1996: 88) highlights the practitioner's power to create works to "address the dilemmas in society and by so doing, oppose them". In this way, contemporary jewellery serves as a visual language, expressing both personal insights and collective concerns.

Michelle Wilkinson (2020: 99) observes that contemporary jewellery can comment on important issues within society and, although mainly viewed as an expression of the individual, can also be considered an indicator of social, cultural, and historical paradigms. Similarly, Bruce Metcalf (1989: 7) affirms that jewellery is historically grounded in the human condition, providing insights into the past. This dynamic aspect renders contemporary jewellery a form of cultural dialogue.

Den Besten (2012: 26) extends this further by noting that contemporary jewellery not only comments on external influences but also has the potential to reflect specific places and cultures. This situatedness is established through the incorporation of indigenous materials, techniques, and themes. As a result, contemporary jewellery functions as a narrative artefact, providing valuable insights as a form of material culture. As a wearable medium, it serves as a platform for social commentary, particularly on gender-related issues such as GBV. Contemporary jewellery's engagement with the body allows for a visual and material exploration of themes of vulnerability and resistance, often drawing on personal experiences shaped by feminist strategies.

Contextualising the South African contemporary jewellery practice

In the South African context, contemporary jewellery is shaped by the country's diverse natural, cultural, social, and political landscapes. Carine Terreblanche (Rhodes 2013: 176) reflects on the significance of this practice in the country, noting how its communicative power fosters personal connections and contributes to social cohesion. She observes that contemporary jewellery's ability to provoke, critique, and document holds particular relevance in a society that values unity and inclusion, especially in a context marked by historical divisions.

Although its documented history is limited, the contributions of Fred Van Staden (2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016), Rhodes (2013) and G. Fenn (2019a, 2019b) have expanded the understanding of South African contemporary jewellery and its practitioners. These

contributions are vital given the increasing recognition of South African practitioners on the international stage and the growing need for contextualised scholarship.

The contemporary jewellery practice in South Africa was mainly initiated during the mid-twentieth century by skilled immigrant goldsmiths from Europe (Van Staden 2014: 91). These practitioners experimented with various materials and techniques, laying the foundation for more conceptual approaches to jewellery.

Post-apartheid practitioners began to reference their sociocultural identity more authentically, incorporating various local features such as materials, themes, and techniques into their work. This incorporation of local features represented a shift away from the superficial appropriation of South African motifs that characterised earlier works, moving towards a more nuanced interpretation of the post-apartheid practitioners' identity and sense of place (Van Staden 2016: 139).

Gendered narratives in South African contemporary jewellery

Contemporary jewellery in South Africa continues to evolve as a form of meaning-making. It enables practitioners to articulate personal narratives while also responding to collective experiences. Each piece can be understood as both a personal artefact and a culturally significant object, allowing the practice to function simultaneously as an individual and shared cultural expression. As a growing discourse in visual culture, various South African practitioners, including Marlene de Beer and Nanette Veldsman, have interrogated themes such as cultural identity and gender in their works (Rhodes 2013: 179-80). However, the brooch series discussed in this paper presents an explicit reference to gender dynamics, explored from both personal and cultural perspectives.

Interpreting gendered narratives: A theoretical framework for reading Fenn's brooches

To formalise the interpretation process of the *Pin-Up Girl* brooches, the main author applies a theoretical framework that integrates three multidisciplinary lenses: feminist theories, life history research, and hermeneutic phenomenology. This framework is essential for fostering a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between a practitioner's identity, shaped by her life experiences, and her creative expressions. Rather than applying these approaches in isolation, they are integrated as interrelated and layered perspectives, enabling a holistic interpretation of meaning in Fenn's practice and the generation of contextually grounded insights into her work.

Through the first lens, the main author contextualises life history research and discusses the biographical context of Fenn. Life history research employs a qualitative methodology that aids in constructing individual identities (Samuel *et al*. 2022: 187). The personal narratives of Fenn shape her identity, including her social and cultural positioning, gender, and formative experiences such as education, heritage, and family background. These factors inform her creative practices, influencing the material and conceptual choices evident in her jewellery. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how and why her personal experiences manifest in her creative practice.

Through the second lens, the main author applies feminist theory to examine various aspects of the multidisciplinary framework from a feminist perspective. Fenn's brooch series explores gendered experiences and dynamics within the South African context, and feminist theory offers a critical lens for engaging with these themes. To foreground the theme of GBV within Fenn's brooches, the main author draws on the work of feminist theorists Rosi Braidotti,

Judith Butler, and bell hooks. This approach emphasises Fenn's narratives as evidence of how feminist perspectives inform women's empowerment and leadership in the South African contemporary jewellery practice.

Through the third lens, the main author employs hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret how Fenn's experiences and identities are reflected in her contemporary jewellery practice. Hermeneutics is defined by Victor Jupp (2006: 133) as the study of the understanding and interpretation of experiences, focusing on the details and nuances that create meaning. In this study, the main author references the hermeneutic phenomenological approach presented in *Truth and Method* by Hans-Georg Gadamer (2006) to deepen the understanding of Fenn's works. Gadamer's (2006: 304) hermeneutics includes key concepts such as the fore-structure of understanding, the hermeneutic circle, and the fusion of horizons, which guide the interpretive process. These are incorporated into the interpretive process, connecting life history and feminist theory to enable a deeper reading of Fenn's work. Figure 1 illustrates the intersection of these framing lenses, aiding the interpretation process of the brooches. This visual model underpins the strategy that informs the subsequent interpretation of Fenn's brooches.

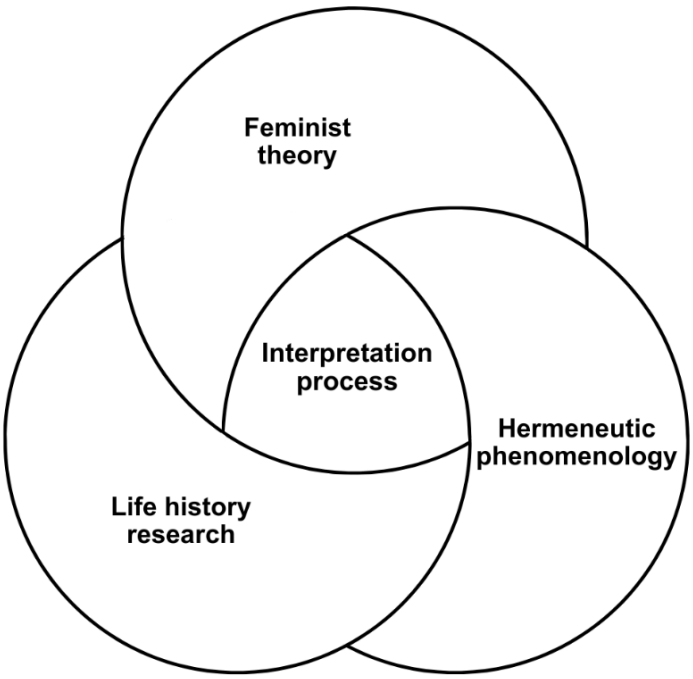

Figure 1
The theoretical framework integrates three multidisciplinary lenses in the interpretation process: feminist theories, life history research, and hermeneutic phenomenology (diagram by the main author).

Methodological approach

The study is positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges that meaning is constructed through individual experiences (Chowdhury 2014: 433). Given the interpretivist focus on subjectivity and meaning making, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach, focusing on understanding the lived experiences and contemporary jewellery practice of Fenn.

To generate a nuanced interpretation of Fenn's works, this study integrates the three interrelated framing lenses: life history research, feminist theories, and hermeneutic phenomenology, each providing a unique perspective to shed light on the intricate nature of gender, power dynamics, and identity within Fenn's contemporary jewellery practice.

Case selection and contextual framing

Fenn was chosen as a case study due to her significant contributions to contemporary jewellery as both a practitioner and gallerist in South Africa. Her *Pin-Up Girl* series serves as an important site for narrative reflection and sociopolitical commentary. Comprising five brooches, these works support the study's aim of exploring how contemporary jewellery challenges traditional gender conceptions. Furthermore, they offer a lens through which to examine gender representation in post-apartheid South Africa through material culture. While this paper presents a focused interpretation of a single case, the participant was part of a broader doctoral research project. This paper employs life history research methods, prioritising depth over breadth to generate knowledge through interpretive engagement with individuals' experiences. This approach enhances our understanding of how contemporary jewellery acts as both personal expression and cultural commentary.

Data collection

Three forms of primary data collection were applied in this interpretative, single case study: interviews, observation, and artefacts. Written consent was provided for the participation and publication of the interview content, observational photographs, and artefacts presented. The interviews consisted of two sessions, lasting over 3.5 hours. A range of semi-structured questions was developed, based on Kenneth Plummer's (2001: 124-5) narrative question format, which included key themes such as social factors, education, work, and historical events. The interview recordings were transcribed and validated by Fenn; allowing her to review and remove any sections she did not wish to share. This process serves to verify the accuracy of the data and ensure trustworthiness through member checking.

Thematic analysis was guided by the three framing lenses introduced earlier and focused on the visual features of the brooch series. Codes were initially developed inductively, generated from the interviews, observational notes, and artefacts, then interpreted through a feminist reading. This process aligns with Gadamer's (2006) hermeneutic process, which advocates for a fusion of the authors' perspectives and Fenn's contemporary jewellery practice through iterative reflection.

Observations and artefacts

In life history research, the role of observation varies depending on the study's purpose and focus. Johnny Saldana (2016: 45) emphasises the significance of field notes during the observation process, stating that they should include the researcher's personal and subjective reflections. Consequently, the main author has relied on field notes and photographs as visual supports for her observational notes, which were taken at Fenn's studio, providing a holistic understanding and context of the artefacts.

Artefacts not only reveal the social function of the objects but also provide insights into broader societal contexts, acting as a window into the practitioner's culture (Margolis and Pauwels 2011: 6). Plummer (2001: 17) refers to these as "documents of life", highlighting how

they reflect personal expressions while mirroring social and cultural worlds. In this research, artefacts include journals, drawings, practical experiments, materials, and photographs of the brooch series.

Ethical considerations and positionality

In this qualitative paper, ethical guidelines are essential for ensuring research integrity, particularly when working with participants and exploring their life experiences in the realm of contemporary jewellery. To address these concerns and align with the qualitative nature of this study, the main author has adopted the criteria developed by Yvonna Lincoln and Egon G. Guba (1985: 300), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability, to ensure trustworthiness.

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data triangulation, and member checking, ensuring the findings accurately reflected Fenn's experiences. Transferability was achieved through thick descriptions that provided detailed contextual insights. Dependability was ensured through consistent and systematic processes, such as data triangulation and the maintenance of audit trails. Lastly, confirmability was reinforced by using audit trails, triangulation, and reflexivity to minimise researcher bias.

As a white South African woman and a practising jeweller, the main author's positionality intersects with that of Fenn. This shared disciplinary background enables the main author to understand the intricacies of her process and the material language of her work. Through ongoing reflexivity, the main author recognises the interpretive implications of this insider position and its influence on data generation, analysis, and representation. This transparency contributes to the ethical rigour and interpretive depth of the study.

Contextualising the *Pin-Up Girl* brooches

Fenn's contemporary jewellery practice is grounded in personal connection, often incorporating materials for their sentimental value. This relational focus intersects with a feminine perspective, positioning her jewellery as narrative objects. For Fenn, jewellery embodies an intimate relationship; it is given from one person to another to commemorate special occasions or to carry family history. Alongside her sentimental inclinations, Fenn identifies as a feminist, a theme frequently expressed in her work. The brooch series, *Pin-Up Girl,* illustrated in figure 2, serves as an example. Crafted in 2024 for the Lisbon Biennial collective exhibition, *Madrugada – Jewellery and the Politics of Hope*, these brooches feature silver and alternative materials, including images cut from vintage tins, trade beads, glass beads, plastic charms, shells, a pearl, and gemstones attached to the frames.

The interpretation, informed by the theoretical framework, recognises how Fenn's lived experience is expressed through the symbolic use of theme, title, format, and materials in the series. These elements are examined through a feminist material culture lens, where they converge to express feminist values, identity, and wearable forms of resistance.

Figure 2
Geraldine Fenn, *Pin-Up Girl* brooches, 2024, silver, glass, vintage trade beads, glass beads, plastic charms, shells, gemstones, pearl, printed tin, and silk, photograph by Sarah de Pina (source: courtesy of G. Fenn).

Feminist underpinning and thematic approach

Fenn's feminist orientation was informed by her relationship with her multilingual paternal grandmother, whom she described as "extremely smart, very intellectual". This early influence left a lasting impression, contributing to her feminist perspective and sense of intergenerational identity. hooks (2000: 7, 24) highlights the importance of fostering feminist awareness and sisterhood; in this context, Fenn's grandmother becomes a formative figure in her early engagement with feminist thought, which helped shape her identity. Female identity, according to Braidotti (2003: 44, 46), is culturally constructed with factors such as religion, nationality, language, and ethnicity playing integral roles in shaping a fluid and evolving sense of self. This concept of fluid, dynamic identity construction aligns with Fenn's experiences, contributing to the ongoing development of her identity. Thus, her feminist viewpoints are not separate from her identity but embedded in her lived experiences and expressed in her creative practice through her visual and material decisions.

Fenn expressed her annoyance at the inherent sexism in institutions and language. It is often assumed that doctors are men rather than women, and historical quotes are frequently presented from a male perspective, as seen in phrases like "and he who does this". She critiques fairy tales, where women are typically passive and must constantly be rescued. Furthermore, she explains that art history is full of examples of women who were never credited for their work. Fenn believes that this situation has not changed and that much more needs to be done to achieve a gender-equal society.

While working as a bartender during her studies, a sexist dress code was imposed on the female waitrons. Uncomfortable with this expectation, she chose to remain behind the bar

instead. This experience informed her critique of gender dynamics, influencing both her professional and creative practice.

Addressing GBV through language

Through her creative expression in the *Pin-Up Girl* brooch series, Fenn engages with feminist discourse as a form of visual culture, embedding references in her work. She acknowledges that she "played a lot with words", reflecting her conscious engagement with narratives and framing her intent. The title references a pin-up girl, typically depicting scantily clad, idealised women in provocative clothing, reflecting a hyper-feminised and objectified portrayal of women.

For the brooch series, Fenn employs ironic titling to subvert patriarchal constructs through visual satire, similar to her earlier work. A notable example is her first solo exhibition for her Master of Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2003, titled *Marriage Material*. This exhibition was inspired by her personal narratives and reflects a similar thematic approach in her subsequent works, including a series of trophy-themed pieces. Typically awarded for achievements, trophies are subverted in works such as *Trophy for Women's Work No. 1: Shopping* and *Trophy for Women's Work No. 2: Ironing.* These titles draw attention to traditional gender roles from a man's perspective, where a woman's worth is often associated with her desirability or domestic responsibilities.

Her use of the trophy format satirically questions whether women internalise these expectations, seeking validation through gendered norms. This internalisation of expectations is substantiated by Butler (1999: 7), who addresses this tension, arguing that patriarchy has constructed a "generally shared conception of 'women'" that remains difficult to displace. However, Butler also contends that women's cultures should exist independently of subservience to masculinist constructs.

Fenn extends her critical use of language and visual references in *Pin-Up Girl* by numbering the brooches in this series, framing her conception of women through patriarchy, as described by Butler (1999: 7). The enumeration, for example, *Pin-Up Girl I*, implies that gender-based violence is not an isolated experience but part of a systemic, ongoing crisis. This numerical reference echoes how women are often reduced to statistics in the reporting of GBV, reinforcing the dehumanising effects of gender inequality.

Format as a reference to gender

Beyond language and titling, the format and materials of the *Pin-Up Girl* brooches further embed Fenn's reflection of gendered power structures. The title of the *Pin-Up Girl* series immediately suggests a feminist critique by referencing the objectification of women and the physical format of the brooch itself. Traditionally, posters of pin-up girls were displayed or pinned up on walls, much like a brooch is pinned to the body. In this series, Fenn adopts the format of a medal, an object typically awarded to heroes and a symbol of gendered power, recognition, and honour. This format was deliberately chosen by Fenn, as it is a wearable object pinned on the breast and visible to the viewer. Through this critical engagement with format, Fenn infers honour and achievement in her series.

This strategy of subverting the medal format is also evident in the work of South African contemporary jeweller Marlene de Beer (2012: 348), who reinterprets medals as a form of micro-resistance to patriarchy and as a means to elevate women's value. In doing so, she illustrates how the symbolic connections to wearable forms can be reimagined from a feminist

perspective. The subversion of the medal format aligns with hooks' (2000: 7) argument that meaningful change in patriarchy can only be achieved through feminist consciousness. In Fenn's work, this consciousness is realised through the thematic content, reinforced by the appropriation of the medal format.

The medal format of the *Pin-Up Girl* series allows for multiple interpretations: as a visual representation of feminist awareness, a critique of misogyny, or even a form of satire suggesting that, as a society, we adorn ourselves with medals while remaining complicit in patriarchal structures. This satirical suggestion creates a layered dialogue between the object, the wearer, and the viewer, expanding its meaning beyond Fenn's original intention.

Women imagery as GBV narrative

While her subversion of the medal format underscores her feminist critique, Fenn also incorporates figurative imagery as a strategy to reinforce her narrative on gender dynamics. Central to each *Pin-Up Girl* brooch is a woman's face, serving as a recognisable and representative link to GBV. These faces were cut from vintage tins, which aligns with her broader creative approach, where found and sentimental materials form the foundation of her work.

Historically, images of women have been featured in jewellery as a means of political empowerment. Women from the upper social class have been portrayed in cameos and carved gems, aiming to popularise their image (Gołyźniak 2020: 209). Fenn engages with this visual culture by subverting the intent and using the faces of the graphic depictions of women cut from vintage tins. By offering these images, Fenn creates a visual narrative that is a representation of women who are affected by gender inequalities, offering them the same status of political power as their historic counterparts.

The imagery predominantly features European women, reflecting Fenn's cultural, historical, political, and social positioning. Her family's heritage includes German, British, French, and South African influences. While the faces partly reference her cultural heritage, they also serve as a feminist framing. hooks (2000: 16-7) argues that "sisterhood is powerful", fostering a bond among women through shared experiences of patriarchal oppression. However, she also cautions against allowing any single race or class to dominate feminist discourse. Although the faces used by Fenn are not racially inclusive, she employs them symbolically to express solidarity and to address the gender dynamics underlying many issues of GBV. Braidotti (2011: 186) supports this interpretation by noting that the sameness of gender generates a collective political position despite social and cultural differences.

Fenn further intervenes by defacing the women's images with a black cross placed over their mouths. This action serves as a direct visual reference to the suppression of women's voices, particularly within contexts of institutionalised patriarchy and GBV. Oparinde and Matsha (2021: 2) confirm the role of language in both perpetuating and challenging GBV, noting that it is a powerful tool for activism and resistance. Resistance, in the form of a feminist visual strategy, is described by Berglund *et al*. (2023: 196) as a subtle practice that challenges dominant representations of gender, power, and societal norms. These strategies shape a more inclusive and collective feminism through imagery to question, undermine, or reconfigure societal expectations and promote feminist perspectives. In the contemporary jewellery practice, resistance might not always be explicit but can be implied semiotically through materials and visual images.

Fenn asserts both resistance and agency by applying bold, disruptive marks over the faces, using visual expression to challenge the silencing of women. This act creates a powerful

visual and conceptual dissonance, evoking the discontent linked to being silenced. The crosses over the mouths can be interpreted in various ways, either as a symbol against the silence surrounding GBV or as a critique of complicity in that silence. This multiplicity of interpretations deepens the understanding of the crosses' meaning in relation to GBV.

Materials incorporating personal narrative and cultural references

In support of the format and imagery, which establishes the feminist underpinning of the series, the use of alternative materials enhances their sociocultural context and her feminist commentary. Paul Derrez (Astfalck *et al*. 2005: 13) notes that contemporary jewellery can generate new aesthetics and meanings through the choice of materials. The materials in the brooch series include collected found objects, gemstones, and beads.

As a collector, Fenn draws constant inspiration from ornate objects, which often serve as the foundation for her designs. Despite the extensive nature of her collection, she emphasises during interviews that what matters most to her are not the valuable items, but those that connect to a place or a person. Many of these objects were gifts, imbuing them with narratives that link them to specific locations.

The alternative materials used in the *Pin-Up Girl* brooches primarily consist of found objects, including vintage tins, shells, a pearl, gemstones, and plastic items. While these objects serve as decorative elements, they also hold sentimental value for Fenn. For example, the faces cut from vintage tin, plastic bow and flower charms featured on *Pin-Up Girl V,* shown in figure 3, not only enhance the piece's aesthetic but also reinforce its feminist strategy by highlighting themes of femininity. The sublime formats of the charms sharply contrast with the harsh defacing of the faces.

Figure 3
Geraldine Fenn, *Pin-Up Girl IV,* 2024, silver, glass, printed tin, plastic charm, gemstone drop beads, and resin, photograph by Sarah de Pina (source: courtesy of G. Fenn).

The use of the vintage tin, plastic and resin charms in *Pin-Up Girl IV* echoes the concept of kitsch, which Fenn explored in her contemporary jewellery practice. Kitsch refers to art or objects considered to lack artistic value, often characterised by overly sentimental or superficial qualities. These artefacts are frequently linked to low culture, and their use in artistic practice

raises questions about the artist's intentions—whether kitsch is employed ironically or with a serious artistic purpose (Kovalčik and Pašteková 2023: 229, 234).

When asked about the origins of the kitsch concept, Fenn explained that it was a topic she studied in art history, focusing on low culture and consumerism. Through her inclusion of kitsch, she aims to disrupt the traditional aesthetics of jewellery, while also serving as a feminist intervention regarding perceived worth. She approaches kitsch in her work not from a perspective of cheap mass production but from a more nuanced viewpoint. She explains that using unusual materials in jewellery is about "disruption" and challenging perceptions of what is considered precious. She connects her material strategy to the broader critique of material value, which is often explored in contemporary jewellery practice:

> Preciousness can be something else. I think that's where the kitsch came in. It was about preciousness and what is truly precious. And is the idea precious? The connection with the wearer is precious. It's not just about the materials.

For Fenn, preciousness is linked to the historical and sentimental association between the wearer and the jewellery, not to materiality. From this perspective, an individual would wear a *Pin-Up Girl* brooch due to their connection to the meaning it portrays. This disassociation with materiality further establishes how contemporary jewellery can become a wearable form of adornment to visually highlight gender inequalities associated with GBV.

Other brooches in this series contain trade beads and glass beads. This bead use relates to her practice, as beads are often added to her work, mainly to accentuate the frames of her pieces. When asked whether they are incorporated for the underlying message of the material or purely for colour, Fenn explained that it is more about the narrative. While Fenn shares experiences that reflect her cultural heritage, she admits that she feels "more African than European". From this self-reflective perspective, Fenn incorporates bead elements, using them as a motif of cultural identity. Beads generate the cultural connection and "sameness of gender", previously noted by Braidotti (2011: 186), and therefore position her work and message within a South African context.

The interpretation of the *Pin-Up Girl* brooch series, which examined its theme, imagery, format, and materials, illustrates how Fenn's personal experiences shape her identity as a feminist and her creative practice. As wearable objects, the brooches became a visual form of resistance and activism, layered with meaning for the viewer. Therefore, the series can be regarded as an "activist object", following the definition provided by Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson (2016: 168), due to its connection to feminist material culture. The interpretation revealed that the theme, title, format, and materials in the series were symbolically employed in contemporary jewellery as a means of social and political resistance.

Conclusion

The article explored how Fenn's *Pin-Up Girl* brooch series expresses a feminist critique of gender dynamics related to GBV in South Africa, using an interpretative framework of life history, feminist theory, and hermeneutic phenomenology.

Contemporary jewellery extends beyond mere adornment, serving as a critical form of narrative expression and historical and social critique, engaging with broader political, cultural, and social contexts. Additionally, contemporary jewellery addresses external influences, such as gendered power dynamics and feminist perspectives, often expressed through design choices that resonate with social and cultural identities. Contemporary jewellery practice in South Africa is influenced by the country's diverse natural, cultural, social, and political landscapes, fostering personal connections and social cohesion in a society marked by historical divisions.

Since the end of apartheid, this practice has evolved to more authentically reflect the sociocultural identities of its jewellers, providing a richer interpretation of identity and place. Furthermore, contemporary jewellery allows South African practitioners to express personal narratives and collective experiences, exploring gender dynamics from both individual lived experiences and cultural perspectives.

Through the *Pin-Up Girl* brooch series, Fenn creates a wearable object for feminist political dialogue, influenced by her biographical context and lived experiences. Her critique of institutional sexism and gender roles, shaped by personal encounters such as a sexist dress code while bartending, informs her creative practice. The series uses irony and satire to subvert patriarchal constructs, with the title referencing the objectification of women and the numbering of brooches highlighting the systemic nature of GBV. Employing a medal format traditionally associated with honour, Fenn challenges conventional representations of women, creating a layered dialogue between the object, the wearer, and the viewer. Each brooch features a woman's face cut from vintage tins, linking to a historical tradition of women's imagery in jewellery while employing fictional faces to reflect her European heritage. Defacing these images with a black cross over their mouths symbolises the suppression of women's voices, disrupting dominant representations of gender and fostering a collective feminism that promotes resistance and agency. Fenn incorporates personal narratives and cultural references through alternative materials, valuing emotional connections over monetary worth, and using found objects to reinforce feminist themes within a South African context.

The series functions as a visual form of resistance and activism, embodying layered meanings that critique gender inequalities and align with feminist material culture. By materialising GBV discourse through her practice, Fenn addresses the silencing of women in GBV situations by marking bold crosses over the faces of women cut from vintage tins, symbolising the role of patriarchy and gender dynamics often associated with GBV. The title, numbering, and brooch format, which mimic that of a medal, further highlight the feminist underpinnings of the series. By employing irony and satire in referencing "pin-up girls", Fenn subverts traditional objectifications of women and exposes the normalisation of violence against them. From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, the brooches, as wearable adornments, invite interpretation as both a personal reflection and a collective statement, creating a dialogue between the wearer and viewer on sociopolitical issues and feminist critique. This dialogue suggests that the meaning is not fixed; rather, it varies based on the positionality of both the wearer and the viewer, along with their cultural, social, and political contexts. Fenn's *Pin-Up Girl* series significantly contributes to feminist material culture through the materiality, form, and symbolism of feminist objects, fostering greater awareness, understanding, and resistance to GBV in South Africa.

This paper addresses a crucial gap in scholarship by providing a scholarly interpretation of contemporary jewellery as a medium of feminist artistic activism. Fenn's creative practice is deeply rooted in her lived experiences, which have shaped her practice into a form of meaning-making and self-expression. In this context, the wearer and viewer play crucial roles in interpreting and sharing its message within the South African cultural, social, and political landscape.

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Interview with Geraldine Fenn by N Newman. Johannesburg, South Africa, 23 May 2024.

Interview with Geraldine Fenn by N Newman. Johannesburg, South Africa, 27 June 2024.

Nina Newman is a jewellery designer, lecturer, and doctoral candidate at the Tshwane University of Technology, where she has been employed since 2000. Her work engages with identity, gender, and cultural narratives, emphasising jewellery as a medium for self-expression and social commentary. She supervises postgraduate students focused on contemporary jewellery practice and evaluates creative outputs and research for various institutions. Additionally, she is a member of faculty committees on research, ethics, and creative outputs, and serves on the Design Education Forum of South Africa \DEFSA). Nina has published articles on contemporary jewellery and the ethics of commercial jewellery design. This article, part of her doctoral research, is co-authored with her supervisors, Prof Anne Mastamet-Mason and Prof Nalini Moodley-Diar. Nina continues to investigate how jewellery can reflect, question, and reframe lived experiences, especially within the South African context.

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A comparative study of Loyiso and Arivu: Male music artivists against Gender-Based Violence

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This paper examines the role of music as a form of artivism and explores how male musicians engage in combating gender-based violence (GBV). The study adopts a comparative lens, focusing on Arivu of the Casteless Collective in Tamil Nadu, India, and South African Afro-Soul singer-songwriter Loyiso Gijana. Arivu's *Snowlin*, part of the *Therukural* (voice from the streets) series, memorialises the deaths of Snowlin, killed during environmental protests in Tamil Nadu, and Asifa, an eight-year-old victim of gang rape and murder in Kashmir. Similarly, Gijana's *Madoda Sabelani* (*Men Must Answer*), sung in isiXhosa, directly confronts South Africa's femicide crisis, blending Afro-Soul and gospel to create a personal and political call for accountability. Methodologically, the paper employs virtual ethnography, analysing YouTube circulation, lyrical testimony, and visual narratives to understand how these songs resonate across digital platforms and generate affective publics. Drawing on feminist theory, hegemonic masculinity, and cultural resistance frameworks, the analysis shows how both artists use music to mourn victims, resist patriarchal impunity, and mobilise collective consciousness. Findings suggest that male musicians can play a pivotal role in rethinking masculinity and challenging GBV, not only through lyrical protest but also through the creation of digital memorials that foster solidarity and remembrance. The study concludes that music artivism transcends entertainment to become a weapon against silence and systemic oppression. It recommends greater recognition of male allyship in feminist struggles and calls for integrating artivism into broader strategies of social justice and GBV prevention.
Keywords: femicide, gender-based violence, music artivism, rethinking masculinity.

லொயிசோவும் அறிவுவும்: பாலின வன்முறைக்கு எதிரான ஆண் இசைச் செயற்பாட்டாளர்கள்
இந்த ஆய்வுக்கட்டுரை, பாலின வன்முறைக்கு எதிராகப் போராடும் ஆண் இசைச் செயற்பாட்டாளர்களையும் கலைச் செயற்பாட்டின் ஒரு வடிவமாக இசையை ஆராய்கிறது. தமிழ்நாட்டைச் சேர்ந்த அம்பேத்கர் சித்தாந்தத்தில் வேரூன்றிய காஸ்ட்லெஸ் கலெக்டிவ் குழுவில் இருந்து பாடகர் அறிவு மற்றும் தென்னாப்பிரிக்காவைச் சேர்ந்த ஆஃப்ரோ-சோல் இசைக்கலைஞரும் பாடலாசிரியருமான லொயிசோ கிஜானா ஆகியோரின் பாடல்களை ஒரு விமர்சன ஒப்பீட்டுப் பார்வையின் மூலம் இது ஆராய்கிறது. காஸ்ட்லெஸ் கலெக்டிவ் குழுவின் "தெருக்குரல்" வரிசையில், அறிவு மற்றும் ஓஃப்ரோ ஆகியோரால் பாடப்பட்ட "ஸ்னோலின்" என்ற தமிழ் பாடல், காஷ்மீரில் கூட்டுப் பாலியல் வன்முறைக்கு உட்படுத்தப்பட்டு கொல்லப்பட்ட அசிஃபா என்ற எட்டு வயது சிறுமி மற்றும் தமிழ்நாட்டில் சுற்றுச்சூழல் காரணங்களுக்காக நடைபெற்ற போராட்டத்தின் போது கொல்லப்பட்ட ஸ்னோலின் என்ற இளம் பெண் ஆகியோரின் துயரமான மரணங்களை நினைவுகூர்கிறது. இதேபோல், தென்னாப்பிரிக்காவில், கிஜானாவின் "மடோடா சபெலானி" (ஆண்களே பதிலளிக்க வேண்டும்) என்ற கோசா மொழிப் பாடல், அந்த நாட்டின் பெண் இனப்படுகொலை நெருக்கடியை நேரடியாகக் கையாள்கிறது. ஆஃப்ரோ-சோல் மற்றும் கோஸ்பெல் இசையை இணைப்பதன் மூலம், கிஜானா ஆழமான தனிப்பட்ட மற்றும் அரசியல் சார்ந்த உணர்ச்சிப் பெருக்கத்தை உருவாக்குகிறார். இந்த இரு இசைச் செயற்பாடுகளும், ஆண்கள் இசையைப் பயன்படுத்தி பாலின வன்முறை பிரச்சினைகளை துயரப்படுத்தவும், எதிர்க்கவும், சமூகத்தை ஒன்று திரட்டவும் முடியும் என்பதைக் காட்டுகின்றன. நிகழ்நிலை இனவரைவியல் முறையைப் பயன்படுத்தி, இந்த ஆய்வுக் கட்டுரை, யூடியூப் போன்ற தளங்களில் இந்த பாடல்கள் எவ்வாறு பரவுகின்றன, மக்களுடன் தொடர்பு கொள்கின்றன, மற்றும் சமூக உணர்வுகளை எவ்வாறு உருவாக்குகின்றன என்பதைக் கண்டறிய முயல்கிறது. உணர்ச்சிபூர்வமான வரிகள், காட்சிகளில் உள்ள உணர்வுபூர்வமான அதிர்வுகள், மற்றும் பொது நினைவுகூர்தல் ஆகியவற்றின் மூலம், இசை வெறும் பொழுதுபோக்கு கடந்து,

மௌனத்திற்கும் தண்டனை கிடைக்காமைக்கு எதிரான ஒரு சக்திவாய்ந்த ஆயுதமாக மாறுகிறது.
முக்கிய சொற்கள்: பெண் இனப்படுகொலை, பாலின வன்முறை, இசை செயல்பாடு, ஆணாதிக்கத்தை மறுசிந்தனை செய்தல்.

ULoyiso noArivu: Abadlalisi bezomculo abangamadoda ngokuchasene nenkohlakalo esekelwe kubulili

Esi sithuba siphanda ngengoma njengendlela ye-artivism, kunye nabadlalisi bezomculo abangamadoda abalwela ngokuchasene nenkohlakalo esekelwe kubulili (GBV). Ngokusebenzisa indlela yokuthelekisa ngokunyanisekileyo, kugxilwe kwingoma kaArivu evela kwibhendi yaseTamil Nadu, *Casteless Collective*, esekwe kwinkolelo kaAmbedkar, kunye nomculi-ongumculi waseMzantsi Afrika, uLoyiso Gijana, ongumculo we-Afro-Soul. Ingoma ye*Casteless Collective*, ethi *"Snowlin"* ngesiTamil, yadlalwa nguArivu noOfRo njengengxenye ye-*Therukural* (ivoti evela kwizitrato). Le ngoma ikhumbula ukufa okuzumayo kukaAsifa, intombazana eneminyaka esibhozo ebulawa emva kokuhlaselwa ngokwesini eKashmir, kunye noSnowlin, intombazana eyabulawa ngexesha leprotesti yoluntu eTamil Nadu ngokuchasene nemisebenzi yezoshishino ngenxa yezemvelo. Ngokufanayo eMzantsi Afrika, ingoma kaGijana ethi *"Madoda Sabelani"* ijongene nengxaki yokubulawa kwabafazi elizweni, idibanisa i-Afro-Soul kunye ne-gospel ukwenza ibango lomntu ngamnye kunye nelombutho lezopolitiko. Zombini ezi zenzo zibonisa amadoda esebenzisa umculo ukukhala, ukumelana, kunye nokunyanzelisa uxanduva kwimicimbi yeGBV. Ngokusebenzisa indlela ye-virtual ethnography, esi sithuba sijonga indlela ezi ngoma ezisakazeka ngayo kwiinkundla zedijithali ezifana neYouTube, indlela ezivakala ngayo, kunye nendlela ezivelisa ngayo uluntu olunemvakalelo kwi-intanethi. Ngokusebenzisa amagama obungqina, ukufikelela kwemvakalelo kwizibheno, kunye nenkumbulo yoluntu, umculo uba sisixhobo sokulwa nokuzola kunye nokungabanjwa uxanduva.
Amagama angundoqo: Ukubulawa kwabafazi, inkohlakalo esekelwe kubulili, artivism yomculo, ukucinga kwakhona ngobudoda.

Music has been part of human life since evolution. Music has been used to communicate, entertain the community, signal key information, preserve identity, share emotions and feelings and transmit stories via the sound and songs for generations (Stein and Abebe 2021). When music or songs are used in protest movements or embodies a social or political message within it, then it is called music artivism or miktivism. Thus, music becomes a form of expression in resistance, awareness, healing and transformation.

Artivism is the blend of art and activism creating a mix from the essence of both these elements. Activism within art uses fine art, songs, dance, music, poems, theatre and cinema in communicating powerful messages to the world (Funderburk 2021). Protest movements using artistic elements such as protest songs or anthems, performances such as dances or street plays, painted placards and banners are all art within activism. Teresa Sanz and Beatriz Rodriguez-Labajos (2021) highlight the key role of artivism in enhancing movement strategy and organisation, promoting inclusivity across diverse groups, encouraging education and social cohesion, raising awareness of social, political and environmental issues, and empowering youth-led justice movements through creativity. In this article, the researchers comparatively and critically analyse two such songs of artivism: *Snowlin* and *Madoda Sabelani* which tell a story of gender-based violence in India and South Africa.

Casteless Collective is a music band of casteless musicians from Tamil Nadu inspired by Ambedkarite ideology. The band produces songs against caste oppression and brings out the issues of Dalits with *gaana* (local music of the marginalised and Dalits of Chennai) and Tamil rap genre of music (Leonard 2022). As part of the *Therukural* (voice from the streets) series, singer and lyricist Arivu writes and sings a song in Tamil from the voice of Snowlin in *Snowlin*. Snowlin is a young woman who was killed in a police shootout during public unrest during an environmental protest against a copper smelting factory in Thoothukudi in 2018. In the song,

Snowlin, after her death, meets Asifa, an 8-year-old girl who was gang raped and killed in Kashmir in the same year. In South Africa, Loyiso Gijane, an Afro-Soul musician, frustrated with the femicides in South Africa, writes and sings a song in isiXhosa *Madoda Sabelani* (Men need to answer) in tribute of 23 females who were killed in South Africa. The death of his friend Uyinene Mrwetyana who was raped and killed during her visit to a post office, stirred him to produce this tribute song (Mlamla *et al.* 2021). Both artists streamed their work on YouTube, while *Snowlin* has 438k views in August 2025 after 6 years, *Madoda Sabelani* garnered over 4.2 million views after 5 years.

The research focuses on how male music artists have adopted artivism, feminism and rethought masculinity in lending their voices for women who have been violated and killed. Music artivism is a powerful mechanism in challenging systemic oppression, discrimination and social injustice. S. E. Ngcobo (2024) recommends music artists to focus on men and use their voices to combat GBV issues. In this paper the researchers look at how two songs are used in challenging and healing gender-based violence in India and South Africa. Music, in this context, becomes not just a form of expression but a mode of digital resistance and a tool for social awareness against gender-based violence and systemic oppression.

Understanding music artivism

Stein and Abebe (2021) elucidate that artivists use their creativity and weaponise the pen, brush, the stage or the film roll to challenge injustice and oppression. Music artivism or miktivism uses music or voice to touch people's emotions and create awareness, healing, and mobilisation against social, political and environmental issues. Joey Tan (2019) highlights that music has historically played a vital role in civil rights and protest movements. Music has the power to communicate solidarity and emotional connectedness not just to their active audience but beyond. Juliet Hess's (2018) study showcases that music artivists perceive music as a platform to engage, express and create identity politics. Francis Howard (2023) considers that music potentially influences youth activism creating justice-oriented cultural citizens. Some famous artivist songs from the past are Eddy Grant's 1988 activist song *Gimme Hope Jo'anna* that critiqued apartheid and called for freedom in South Africa. Bob Marley's 1974 iconic song *No Woman, No Cry* carried hope, resilience, and comfort for the women who endured the tough times of Trench Town in Jamaica. Bob Dylan's 1962 influential song *Blowin' in the Wind* was an anthem for anti-war and civil rights movements.

Art, artivism, and historical lineages of musical resistance

The distinction between art and artivism has gained prominence in recent scholarship as a way of identifying artistic practices that explicitly align themselves with social and political activism. However, within the South African context, such a distinction is historically unstable. Music has long functioned as a mode of political expression, collective memory, and resistance, particularly under apartheid, where cultural production often operated as a surrogate public sphere. As Gwen Ansell (2004) demonstrates, jazz and popular music were deeply embedded in political life, mobilising affect, solidarity, and critique. The use of Abdullah Ibrahim's *Mannenberg* at United Democratic Front rallies during the 1980s exemplifies how music exceeded aesthetic function to become a tool of mass political identification and mobilisation. These practices were not retrospectively labelled as *artivism*, yet their activist intent and social impact are undeniable. Situating contemporary music practices within this lineage allows for a historically grounded understanding of how artistic expression has repeatedly intersected with political struggle in South Africa.

Problematising artivism in the Global South

While *artivism* is often treated as a contemporary category that distinguishes politically engaged art from supposedly autonomous or neutral art, such a separation risks obscuring the historical and material conditions under which art is produced, particularly in the Global South. In societies shaped by colonialism, racial capitalism, and structural violence, artistic practice is rarely detached from social realities. As scholars of postcolonial and cultural studies have argued, art produced under conditions of subjugation inevitably carries political meaning, whether explicitly articulated or not (Ansell 2004). The term artivism does not signal a departure from historical artistic practice, but rather names a continuity in which art is consciously deployed as a tool of political engagement. In contexts such as South Africa, where artistic production has long been shaped by resistance to structural violence and inequality, artivism functions less as a separatist category than as a contemporary articulation of an established tradition of socially engaged art. This study therefore approaches the works of Loyiso and Arivu not as departures from artistic tradition, but as continuations of long-standing practices where music functions as social commentary, resistance, and ethical intervention—particularly in addressing gender-based violence.

Methods, methodology and research focus

Patriarchy, gender inequality, and toxic masculinity are widely recognised as central structural factors contributing to gender-based violence in society (Russo and Pirlott 2006). This paper argues that rethinking masculinity and challenging systemic patriarchy through feminist-oriented cultural interventions, including artivism, can function as critical tools in confronting gender-based violence. The article examines two case studies of music artivism by male artists who publicly responded to instances of femicide, using music to foreground the interconnected roles of toxic masculinity, patriarchal norms, and structural oppression in sustaining gender-based violence. Robert Yin's (2014) multiple case study approach is particularly appropriate for this research, as the application of a consistent analytical framework across more than one case enables comparative insight and strengthens the robustness of the findings, while also supporting methodological efficiency.

The first author has lived experience in both India and South Africa which provides a unique curve to this research. In terms of data collection, the study employs virtual ethnography as a qualitative research method suited to examining cultural practices situated in online environments. Virtual ethnography is an established methodological approach that adapts ethnographic principles to digitally mediated spaces, enabling the systematic study of meaning-making, representation, and social interaction as they occur online (Hine 2000, 2015). As both *Snowlin* by Casteless Collective and *Madoda Sabelani* by Loyiso Gijana were released and circulated primarily through YouTube, the platform functions as a critical site of cultural production and dissemination. The analysis therefore draws on the lyrics, visual aesthetics, and performative elements of the music videos as digital cultural texts, allowing for an examination of how artivism operates within networked publics to challenge dominant narratives around masculinity and gender-based violence.

Feminist and artivist approach to combatting GBV

This paper adopts a multi-faceted theoretical framework to analyse the role of male music artivists in challenging gender-based violence (GBV). Drawing primarily from feminist thought, it interweaves theories of rethinking masculinity, feminist standpoint, and cultural resistance to illuminate how music can function as a potent tool for social change.

At the core of understanding the perpetuation of GBV lies Raewyn Connell's (1995) Hegemonic Masculinity Theory. This theory explains that masculinity is not a singular, fixed identity, but rather a configuration of practices that legitimise how men behave in society and oppress women. Hegemonic masculinity is often characterised by aggression, control, and a suppression of vulnerability, which creates and maintains patriarchal power structures. Within this framework, patriarchy, toxic masculinity, and heterosexism are identified as the direct, interconnected reasons for the pervasive nature of GBV in society. Toxic masculinity is a harmful manifestation of hegemonic ideals, encourages violent behaviours and heterosexism and reinforces gender norms that disempower women and marginalised genders.

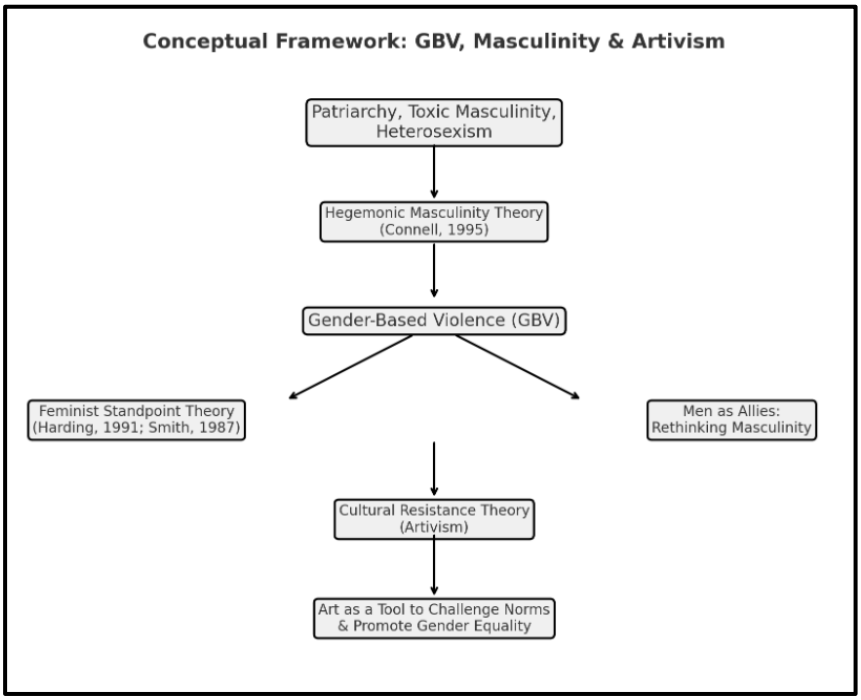

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework: *GBV, Masculinity and Artivism*
(Source: AI generated with Author's Concept).

To critically examine these power dynamics, the paper employs insights from Sandra Harding's (1991) and Dorothy Smith's (1997) Feminist Standpoint Theory. This theoretical lens argues that knowledge is socially constructed and that the experiences and perspectives of marginalised groups (in this case, victims of GBV and those resisting patriarchy) offer a more complete and objective understanding of social realities. By centring the experiences of those most affected by GBV, feminist standpoint theory allows for a deeper analysis of how patriarchal structures manifest and are resisted. It underscores the necessity of dismantling the very ideological foundations that enable violence.

This theoretical grounding then bridges to the practical application of combating GBV through artistic expression. The paper argues for the strategic use of male music artists' songs as a tool to combat GBV. This approach is rooted in Cultural Resistance Theory, which posits that marginalised groups, or those advocating for change, can use cultural forms (like music) to challenge dominant narratives, norms, and power structures (Hall 1980). Artivism, as a fusion of art and activism, becomes a direct manifestation of this resistance. Through testimonial lyrics, emotionally resonant visuals, and public platforms, these songs create spaces

for mourning, resistance, and mobilisation. They directly confront the silence and impunity surrounding GBV, offering alternative narratives and fostering a collective consciousness that challenges hegemonic masculinity and supports feminist objectives. In this way, music transcends mere entertainment, transforming into a crucial force for cultural and social transformation in the fight against gender-based violence.

Loyiso Gijana and *Madoda Sabelani*

In his song *Madoda Sabelani* (*Men Must Answer*), South African Afro-Soul musician Loyiso Gijana (professionally known as Lloyiso) addresses the persistent crisis of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, with particular emphasis on femicide. GBV refers to acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or structural violence directed at individuals on the basis of gender and is widely theorised as a product of unequal power relations embedded within patriarchal social systems (Russo and Pirlott 2006, Jewkes *et al*. 2015). Femicide, a related but distinct concept, denotes the gender-motivated killing of women and girls, often understood as the most extreme manifestation of GBV (Radford and Russell 1992).[1] While GBV encompasses a broad spectrum of violence, femicide foregrounds the lethal outcomes of entrenched misogyny and systemic failure. Situated within a South African context marked by high rates of violence against women and ongoing public debate around masculinity and accountability, *Madoda Sabelani* blends Afro-Soul and gospel traditions to function simultaneously as personal lament and political intervention. Through direct lyrical address, Gijana challenges male silence and complicity, urging men to assume responsibility and actively intervene in cycles of violence, as articulated in refrains such as "Hey Men, Share" and "Hey Guys, Stop."

Figure 2
Cover photo of song *Madoda Sabelani* on YouTube
(Source: Lloyiso. 2020. Madoda Sabelani – Igwijo by Loyiso https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAN6Dv3KSWw).

With over 4.3 million views on YouTube**,** *Madoda Sabelani* has become a catalyst for public conversation around how men should engage with women — with respect, care, and responsibility. The comments section sparks vital discussions on how men can actively

[1] South African Human Rights Commission. 2018. *Report on gender-based violence and femicide*. Johannesburg: South African Human Rights Commission.

contribute to ending GBV, offering a counter-narrative to traditional forms of masculinity that often perpetuate violence. As part of the broader movement of male music artivists**,** Gijana's work exemplifies the intersection of music, activism, and masculinity, challenging societal norms while promoting healing and social change.

Lyrical analysis of Madoda Sabelani

The song starts with the words *Madoda Sabelani* (*Men Must Answer*) in the powerful and soulful voice of Loyiso Gijana. The researchers analyse each line which is repeated several times in the song to understand the core message of the song.

Lyrics	***Interpretation***	***Theoretical / Analytical Lens (Feminist–Artivist Reading)***
Hey Men, Share / Men Must Answer	This is a direct call to men to speak out and take responsibility for the GBV issues in the nation.	This line operationalises feminist critiques of male silence and complicity, shifting masculinity from passive bystanderhood to ethical accountability. Drawing on feminist masculinity studies, the lyric reframes responsibility as collective and gendered, positioning men as agents of intervention rather than observers (Connell 2005, Russo and Pirlott 2006).
Hey Guys, Stop	Urges men to stop their violent behaviour and rethink masculinity.	The lyric performs a deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity, aligning with feminist interventions that challenge violence as a socially learned masculine norm. As artivism, it moves beyond representation to direct address, using imperative speech to interrupt normalised masculine behaviour (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).
Women cry	This highlights the emotional and physical suffering of women due to GBV	Rather than evoking sympathy alone, this line foregrounds gendered affect as political evidence. Feminist theory has long argued that women's pain is rendered invisible or normalised; here, emotion is mobilised as testimony, transforming suffering into a demand for recognition and justice.
We prayed to God while they were being raped	This exposes the helplessness of relying only on faith. Rather it is us who need to start taking action.	These lyric critiques moral deferral and social inertia, resonating with feminist critiques of patriarchal institutions that displace responsibility onto spirituality or fate. Artivistically, it reframes GBV as a social failure requiring structural and communal intervention, not passive belief.
They were killed crying for their lives	A brutal truth about ignored pleas for help by the victims of GBV.	The line functions as a counter-narrative to state and societal indifference, echoing feminist critiques of how women's voices are systematically unheard. The lyric transforms victimhood into accusation, implicating society and institutions in the violence through omission and silence.

Get involved!	A powerful command for action and solidarity by men.	This lyric enacts artivism by collapsing the distance between art and action. It aligns with feminist praxis that views cultural production as a catalyst for social intervention, urging men to move from awareness to embodied political practice.
This is the danger	Warns that silence, inaction, and complicity are the real threats for the perpetuation of GBV.	Silence is theorised here as an active form of violence, consistent with feminist scholarship that identifies inaction as structural complicity. The lyric reframes danger away from individual perpetrators alone toward social systems that enable violence to persist.

Visual analysis of Madoda Sabelani

The visual presentation of *Madoda Sabelani* is in a simple setting of a house studio, with the singer singing the song into a microphone. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly transformed work structures, compelling individuals and organisations to adapt to rapidly changing conditions (Balu and Durai 2023). Within this context, Loyiso responded to the constraints of the pandemic by utilising social media to disseminate his music from his home to a global audience, demonstrating how digital platforms enabled creative labour to continue beyond physical limitations. The video portrays the photos of 23 females, ranging from children to women, who were victims of femicide in South Africa during the COVID 19- pandemic. Even though the visuals were simple, the voice of Gijana amplifies the issues of GBV and the imagery of the female victims paints the horrific reality of GBV in South Africa. Overall, the song emphasises the need for men to join the fight against GBV.

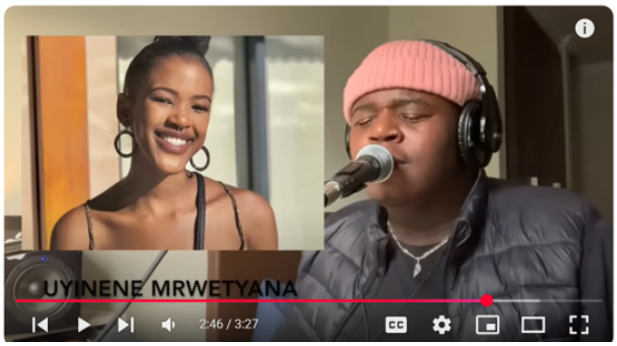

Figure 3
Visual presentation of the song with singer singing and tribute photo of Uyinene Mrwetyana
(Source: Lloyiso. 2020. Madoda Sabelani – Igwijo by Loyiso
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAN6Dv3KSWw)

Arivu, Casteless Collective and *Snowlin*

The Casteless Collective, an artivist band grounded in Ambedkarite ideology, employs music as a form of political resistance against caste-based and gendered oppression in India (Leonard 2022). Ambedkarite thought, derived from the writings and activism of B. R. Ambedkar, critiques the Hindu caste system as a structure of social violence that institutionalises inequality, exclusion, and dehumanisation, particularly of Dalits and women

(Ambedkar 1936). Central to this ideology is a commitment to social justice, constitutional equality, and the rejection of caste hierarchy—positions that stand in tension with dominant Hindu nationalist narratives associated with the current political dispensation in India. The Collective's song *Snowlin*, featuring Arivu as vocalist and OfRo as composer, exemplifies this ideological stance by foregrounding the systemic oppression of women at the intersection of caste, religion, and state power. The track forms part of their *Therukkural* series—literally "voice from the street"—a deliberate wordplay on the *Thirukkural*, a revered classical Tamil text. This reworking situates the song within a lineage of ethical critique while grounding it firmly in contemporary protest, transforming music into a site where Ambedkarite politics, feminist resistance, and artivism converge. Arivu is a Tamil rapper who writes and sings artivists songs on issues of caste, gender and social injustices. As his family was rooted in education and social service, he engaged in Ambedkarite ideology from a young age. His song with singer Dhee, *Enjoy Enjaami* (2021) retold the story of Tamil landless labourers and went viral with over 500 million views on YouTube. Arivu joined The Casteless Collective in 2017 and now writes and sings rap songs for Tamil cinema for leading artists.

Snowlin immortalises the tragic deaths of a young female and a child, each victim of state sanctioned violence and societal apathy. The song draws parallels between the killing of Snowlin, a young woman shot by police during the Sterlite Protests in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu (an industrial contest for environmental reasons). In the incident, 12 others were killed and 102 were injured (Karmegam and Mappilairaju 2021) and Asifa, an eight-year-old girl who was gang-raped and brutally murdered inside a temple in Kashmir (Nigam 2019). This abhorrent act was intended to assert power against Kashmiri Muslims, with alarming involvement from a government official and four policemen. By weaving these two narratives, *Snowlin* exposes a grim reality of gendered violence compounded by political and communal motives. The song evokes parallels with events such as the Marikana massacre in South Africa, where state forces killed protesting workers.

Figure 4
Cover photo of song *Snowlin* on YouTube
(Source: The Casteless Collective. 2019. "Snowlin | Arivu x OfRo | Therukural" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSDu_aS6C1c).

With nearly half a million views on YouTube, *Snowlin* serves not only as a digital memorial but also as a widely resonant call for accountability and justice, ensuring that the narratives of Snowlin and Asifa continue to challenge silence and systemic violence.

Lyrical Analysis of Snowlin

The lyrical composition of *Snowlin* is profoundly impactful, opening with the chilling audio footage of a reporter confronting a police officer about the shootings, only for the officer to nonchalantly deny involvement, setting an immediate tone of impunity and state sanctioned denial.

Lyrics	***Interpretation***	***Theoretical / Analytical Lens (Feminist–Artivist Reading)***
This is Snowlin speaking, my sister Asifa is with me.	Snowlin meets Asifa beyond the grave in a macabre heaven. Even though they lived in regions thousands of miles apart, they were both victims to the crime of GBV and state sanctioned violence.	The lyric constructs a transnational feminist solidarity, collapsing spatial and national boundaries to emphasise the structural nature of gendered violence. By placing both women in a shared posthumous space, the song reframes GBV as systemic rather than isolated, aligning with feminist critiques of global patriarchy and state power.
Snowlin: do you hear me? You shot me, and left my mother in tears.	Snowlin asks the perpetrators if they hear her. She asks them how they could shoot her dead and leave her mother in tears. This exhibits the agony of the community that lost their family members and friends during the shootout.	This line operates as counter-testimony, a feminist strategy that restores voice to silenced victims. It implicates both perpetrators and the state, transforming personal loss into collective indictment and challenging narratives that normalise police violence and collateral grief.
Asifa: You touched my body and kissed me after my death. Are you well? Are your children well?	Asifa tells her murderers: all of you violated me even after my death. She asks them if they are well and if their children are well. The innocent voice of Asifa questions the unguilty behaviour of men who raped and killed her, asking them if they don't have children at home. How could they do this to a child?	The lyric exposes necrophilic and patriarchal entitlement over women's bodies, extending feminist critiques of sexual violence beyond life itself. By invoking the perpetrators' children, the song destabilises masculine respectability and confronts intergenerational hypocrisy within patriarchy.
I am not angry. However, I am not a coward. I don't want revenge by killing you back as you	Both Snowlin and Asifa say they are not angry or want to revenge their killers, because the perpetrators of violence did not consider Snowlin or Asifa. It was the result of systemic oppression and ingrained	This articulation shifts the focus from punitive justice to structural critique, aligning with feminist approaches that locate GBV within entrenched systems of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. Artivistically, the refusal of revenge reframes resistance as ethical and transformative rather than retaliatory.

are not my enemy.	behaviour of patriarchy and toxic masculinity that legitimises the violation of women.	
Why are you crying my father, is it wrong that I was born a girl?	Asifa asks her father, why he is crying and mourning her death, whether it was a crime that she was born a girl. This showcases the reality of how women are treated within society.	The lyric lays bare gendered precarity, highlighting how female existence is rendered vulnerable from birth. Feminist theory situates this as evidence of structural misogyny, where mourning becomes a reflection of social failure rather than personal tragedy alone.
In case if I was a cow, this country would have stood up for me, right?	In the context of beef ban and cow protection in India, Asifa says she would have been better off if she were a cow, as those political issues receive more attention in society than GBV issues.	This line functions as intersectional feminist critique, juxtaposing nationalist animal protection politics with the neglect of women's lives. It exposes how gender justice is subordinated to ideological priorities, revealing the hierarchies of value within patriarchal nationalism.
The bullet hit Snowlin, Snowlin falls, Asifa weeps, Arivu writes	The narrative of the song culminates with the powerful play of the words which explain the agony of Snowlin and Asifa during the moments of violence against them. The bullet hits Snowlin and she falls dead. Asifa weeps in pain when she is raped and murdered. Arivu the lyricists writes this song on behalf of the victims.	This meta-lyrical moment foregrounds artivism itself: the artist positions songwriting as an act of witnessing and resistance. Feminist art theory recognises such gestures as cultural labour that speaks on behalf of silenced subjects while acknowledging mediation and responsibility.
What happened in the sanctum of God?	These words question faith and religiosity like the GBV song *Madoda Sabelani: We Prayed to God While They Were Raped.* What was God doing, when Asifa was raped and killed within the premises of a temple?	Echoing feminist critiques of religion as a patriarchal institution, the lyric interrogates moral deferral to faith. It reframes GBV as a social and institutional failure, rejecting spiritual consolation in favour of accountability and action.
She suffers in agony in the last moments. The monster laughs in the dark	They both die an agonising death. A death of horror in their last moments. The monster of systemic oppression laughs in the death while Snowlin and Asifa lost their lives.	The "monster" functions as a metaphor for structural patriarchy, rendering violence impersonal yet persistent. Feminist theory interprets this not as individual cruelty but as the endurance of systems that thrive on silence, fear, and impunity.

Visual analysis of Snowlin

The visual landscape of Snowlin is as potent and evocative as its lyrics, serving to amplify the song's core message of injustice, sacrifice, and the enduring spirit of the victims. The directorial choices imbue the video with a profound sense of urgency, despair, and an unwavering call for justice.

Central to the visual narrative is the evocative use of Christian religious iconography, specifically the crucifix, the figure of Mother Mary, and Jesus. The crucifix immediately brings to mind themes of immense sacrifice and suffering, aligning the victims' plights. The image of Mother Mary resonates with maternal mourning, drawing empathy for the mothers and families left behind. Similarly, the presence of the statue of Jesus with open arms invokes ideas of unconditional love and martyrdom, framing the victims as pure and undeserving of their fate. The song Snowlin in her memory, showcases a Christian heaven, however the symbols embody a deeply unsettling sense of macabreness which elevate the individual tragedies to a universal spiritual plane. Even though one was Christian and other was Muslim, the state of the women are similar.

Figure 5
Visual presentation of *Snowlin* Song
(Source: The Casteless Collective. 2019. "Snowlin | Arivu x OfRo | Therukural" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSDu_aS6C1c).

Further enhancing this gravitas are the black and white photographs and paintings of Snowlin and Asifa. This stark aesthetic immediately signifies loss and memorialisation, serving as a direct and unvarnished tribute to the lost lives. Contrasting with this is the poignant

imagery of candles in the dark, which powerfully symbolise that despite their physical absence, the spirits of the victims are still alive. These flickering lights become beacons of remembrance and a quiet defiance against the extinguishing of life. Finally, the image of blood splashing serves as a visceral and horrifying depiction of the "violation of the sacred." This visual element directly confronts the brutality of the acts. Through this powerful amalgamation of religious symbolism, stark memorialisation, and visceral representations of violence, the visuals of *Snowlin* create an unforgettable and deeply affecting experience that resonates long after the song concludes.

Discussion

The selection of Loyiso Gijana's *Madoda Sabelani* and Arivu's *Snowlin* from the Casteless Collective for this comparative analysis is not arbitrary, but rather strategically driven by their capacity to illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of music artivism against gender-based violence (GBV) across distinct yet related global contexts. This comparative lens allows for a nuanced understanding of how such artivism operates, resonates, and challenges patriarchal norms in postcolonial societies marked by unique socio-political complexities.

Both songs emerge from postcolonial states – South Africa and India – which share histories of systemic oppression, though manifested through different mechanisms (apartheid and caste/communalism). In both nations, GBV is not an isolated issue but is inextricably linked to broader structures of race and caste, which intersect to create intensified vulnerabilities. By analysing these songs, we can explore how artists grapple with GBV that is embedded within and often exacerbated by these specific societal hierarchies. The songs thus offer insights into how music addresses GBV in societies grappling with the legacies of colonialism and ongoing struggles against deep-seated social stratification and patriarchy within society.

A crucial aspect of this selection is the involvement of men singing against GBV. This challenges the common perception that advocating against GBV is solely a women's burden and highlights the vital role of male allyship for feminist efforts in dismantling patriarchal norms. The linguistic diversity, with *Madoda Sabelani* in IsiXhosa and *Snowlin* in Tamil, provides a rich comparative ground for examining how indigenous languages and cultural forms are leveraged for activism. Furthermore, both artists are prominent streaming artists with significant presence on YouTube, demonstrating the power of digital platforms in amplifying messages globally and creating virtual affective publics. The songs also gained considerable traction during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period recognised globally for an alarming increase in GBV incidents, making their emergence and resonance particularly timely and significant.

The chosen songs also present interesting genre variations that enrich the analysis. *Madoda Sabelani* blends Afro-Soul and Gospel, imbuing its message with elements of prayer and mourning, creating a deeply personal and spiritual outcry. This contrasts with *Snowlin's* Tamil Rap style, which functions more overtly as direct artivism, using sharp social commentary and direct address. Both, however, serve as powerful tributes to victims, transforming individual tragedies into collective calls for action. The diversity in musical approach allows for an exploration of how different genres can effectively carry and convey urgent social messages against GBV.

Finally, the visuals accompanying these songs, particularly the use of photo tributes, are integral to their impact. They transform abstract statistics and distant tragedies into tangible, human experiences, fostering empathy and remembrance. The visual narratives complement

the lyrical content, creating a holistic artistic experience that amplifies the call to action and ensures the victims are not forgotten.

In essence, *Madoda Sabelani* and *Snowlin* are compelling case studies because they offer a unique cross-cultural lens to examine how male music artivists utilise diverse genres, digital platforms, and powerful narrative techniques to confront GBV, deeply embedded within the specific socio-political landscapes of postcolonial South Africa and India.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated the profound and multifaceted role of music artivism, particularly by male artists, in confronting and challenging gender-based violence within complex postcolonial landscapes. By analysing Loyiso Gijana's *Madoda Sabelani* and Arivu's *Snowlin* from the Casteless Collective, we have seen how powerful artistic expressions can become pivotal instruments of social change.

The theoretical framework, drawing on Connell's (1995) Hegemonic Masculinity to pinpoint patriarchy, toxic masculinity, and heterosexism as root causes of GBV, was complemented by Harding's (1991) and Smith's (1997) Feminist Standpoint Theory. This allowed for a critical examination of power structures through the lens of lived experience, illuminating the imperative for systemic dismantling. The integration of Hall's (1980) Cultural Resistance Theory provided the foundation for understanding artivism itself – how cultural forms, particularly music, can serve as vital tools to challenge dominant norms and mobilise resistance.

The selection of these two songs was deliberate, offering a comparative insight into how music artivism functions in distinct yet historically interconnected postcolonial states grappling with issues of race and caste. The fact that these are male artists singing against GBV is significant, highlighting the crucial need for men to understand feminism, rethink traditional masculinities, and become active allies in promoting gender equality. Their accessibility as streaming artists, amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscored the far-reaching potential of digital platforms to foster affective publics and disseminate critical messages globally.

Through detailed lyrical and visual analysis, we observed how *Madoda Sabelani* offered a heartfelt prayer and mourning, alongside a direct call for men to take responsibility and actively intervene against femicide. Similarly, *Snowlin* employed Tamil rap as a potent form of artivism, using testimonial lyrics and macabre visuals to expose state sanctioned violence and communal apathy against women, refusing silence, and demanding accountability. Both songs utilised powerful photo tributes and emotionally resonant visuals to humanise victims and foster collective remembrance.

Ultimately, these male music artivists transcend mere lamentation; they actively embody cultural resistance. Their work demonstrates that music can be a weapon against silence and impunity, fostering solidarity, challenging harmful patriarchal norms, and contributing to the vital project of rethinking masculinity. Women have been forced to be protectors of patriarchy towards history, it is high time men return the favour by adopting feminism to build gender equality and combat issues like GBV. Further, this study affirms that by weaving together artistic creativity with a deep understanding of feminist principles, music serves not only as a spiritual and emotional refuge but also as an undeniable force for justice and social transformation in the global fight against gender-based violence.

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