

**UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN-WESTVILLE**

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**THE PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE CHARACTERS**

**IN**

**SELECTED ZULU TEXTS**

Submitted for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the Department of IsiZulu

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**THE PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE CHARACTERS  
IN SELECTED ZULU TEXTS**

**BY**

**HENRY SIFISO GUMEDE**

**A Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements**

**For the Degree MASTER OF ARTS**

**In the Department of Isizulu**

**University of Durban-Westville**

**Supervisor: Prof. N.N. Canonici**

**Date: January 2002**

## DECLARATION

I, HENRY SIFISO GUMEDE, do hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work in conception and execution, and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by means of references.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'H.S. Gumede', is written over a horizontal dotted line.

H.S. GUMEDE

## **DEDICATION**

**This work is dedicated to  
Two very special people in my life**

**My daughter**

**THABILE**

**and**

**My brother**

**BONGANI**

*(MAY HIS SOUL REST IN **PEACE**)*

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**Mr E. and Mrs E. Gumede, my daughter Thabile, my brothers, S.T. and B. Gumede.**

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*(Ikhiwane Elihle by L. Molefe)*

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## ABSTRACT

The condition of women in African societies has always been object of intense discussion. The present research takes its move from an analysis of four main literary works in Zulu, and a number of supporting texts, to monitor, as it were, the development of attitudes towards women during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Literature is considered, in fact, a mirror of society.

Traditional Southern African society is strongly patriarchal and conservative. A woman's role is generally viewed as the life-giver and the nurturer of the new generation of her husband's offspring. She is in charge of the gardens, where she grows the family food, while her husband is busy with his wars, cattle-raiding ventures and politics.

Patriarchy may reach severe forms of women oppression through the systems of *ilobolo* (bride-wealth) and of polygamy, but is also expressed by the exclusion of women from the economic, artistic and legal fields. Forms of freedom – of movement, or sexual or economic - allotted to men are never considered for women.

Each of the four chosen texts emphasises one or more aspect of women oppression by the male dominated society, as reflected in popular life at the time of writing.

So *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi*, written in 1956, is a manifesto for freedom in the choice of a life partner, which is generally obstructed by the father's greed for *ilobolo* cattle and his ambition to be recognized among the notables of the district. *Inkinsela YaseMgungundlovu* (1961) fights for women's equal rights in the financial field. *NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo* (1982) is a desperate cry in the face of abuses in polygamous families. And *Ikhiwane Elihle* (1985) fights aspects of the new morality that accepts sexual freedom for women, since men also claim such freedom.

The thesis is topical, and, to render it even more so, it often avails itself of ideas of feminist writers and critics, although such theories have not touched the nerve of the Zulu public as yet.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTORY PERSPECTIVE

#### 1.0 Introduction

This study intends to investigate how male authors portray female characters in selected Zulu narratives. It examines the language used in four literary texts: *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* (Fear of frowns) by J.K. Ngubane (1956); *Inkinsela Yase Mgungundlovu* (The Pietermaritzburg tycoon) by C. L. S. Nyembezi (1961); *Amawisa* (Knobkerries) by D. B. Z. Ntuli (1982), with a special focus on the short story *NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo* (This is Mbuthuma indeed); *Ikhiwane Elihle* (The beautiful fig. Or: All that glitters is not gold, (1985) by L. Molefe.

The reason for the selection of the above texts is that, while the authors faithfully and realistically describe possible, if fictional, events with the care of thoughtful chroniclers, they also look at the incidents and the dialogues with a detached eye that is both saddened and amused: saddened by the attitudes of traditional males towards women, as men try to hold on to the privileges afforded by the patriarchal system and to ensure their dominance over women; and pleasantly amused at the reaction of the female characters who, in spite of centuries of traditional subservience, feel that the time has come for them to stand on their own, or at least to stand up for their rights as human beings and women. The fictional works therefore demonstrate the evolution in women's thinking about their role in society, thus undermining many long-held notions about their social status

I have selected works by male authors on purpose, because they reflect the general trends in a society that has, for far too long, taken women for granted and has not paid much attention to their outstanding social contributions. This often appears in the language used, in the dialogues, in various episodes which are realistic enough to demonstrate that the authors clearly reflect the wholesale

system of patriarchy, and yet create women characters that react in a novel way and thus stand out of the mass.

Literature is a mirror of society, and has the task of preparing the way for social re-thinking and therefore for social change. It is in fact the product of supposedly the best thinkers in society, be they poets, novelists or social commentators. While a text reflects the way people generally think, the subtle reader should be able to discover the goal to which the writer intends to lead us; that is, while we read about the past, a good writer should be able to open our vision to what the future holds in store. Thus the description of the cruel abuse of women in *NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo* or in *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* is intended to make us realize that such a situation can no longer be condoned, and that Bajwayele, the outcast of the family because of her 'subversive' ideas, is in fact the heroine leading an army of women towards a new dispensation of equality and freedom. In the same way, MaNtuli of *Inkinsela YaseMgungundlovu* is considered as dim, too outspoken and irresponsible by her husband Mkhwanazi, but the author demonstrates that she is the only one who is able to appreciate the dangerous situation in which both her family and the entire village are, and to avert a complete catastrophe.

My discussion of various points of Zulu traditions regarding the social status and role of women will lead to the abandonment of a number of stereotypes generally banded about. This is because I believe that traditional society could not have survived without the valid and intelligent support of women, the mothers of the family and the molders of the future generation. Their status could not have been as terrible as it is often described. Modern society, with its western approach to many problems, has definitely misrepresented the situation, in order to paint the traditional past with the dark colours of barbarism and ignorance. The careful observer of customs and traditions will find many aspects of deep respect and even veneration for women, as mothers, as life-carriers, as spouses and life companions. They even emerge as heroines and political leaders, as is the case

with Princess Mkabayi, sister of Senzangakhona and Shaka's aunt, the kingmaker to whom the Zulu nation owes much of its very being and identity.

The present introductory chapter deals with the general framework of my research, the problems it wishes to discuss and resolve, the significance the study may have in the context of social, historical and literary analysis, a review of available literature and of the theoretical bases on which the study is founded.

### **1.1 Aims and objectives of the study**

As stated in the title, I aim to illustrate the manner in which my chosen authors portray women in the selected texts. This will take place against the background of a tradition that, while glorifying exceptional women as possible heroines and leaders, and respecting ordinary women as mothers, wives, companions and lovers, still holds women down in the social scale. My study will therefore illustrate various contradictory aspects of the Zulu social traditional society, as exemplified in the chosen narratives, so as to be able to better understand and value their role in the present world.

My objective is to devise a methodology of reading literary texts so as to uncover their deepest meaning levels, especially with regard to what the authors say in relation to the role of women. This will involve looking at texts as multivocal and multilayered productions, such as the narrative level; the deep structure level; from the author's point of view; from the reader's perspective; from the events narrated and the language used. In my endeavour I shall make use of techniques that form part of formal analysis, in connection with plot, theme, style, etc.

## 1.2 Definition of terms

The topic investigates the portrayal of female characters in selected Zulu texts. It attempts to analyse the social background uncovered by literature with regard to perception of women's changing role in Zulu society.

Some of the terms used in the thesis are defined and explained here.

**Sex:** The biological characteristics of male or female organisms as supplied by nature, and used for the reproduction of the species.

**Gender:** This is defined by feminist writers (Cf Parsons, 1951:82) as "socially constructed male or female roles, not necessarily based on nature but on culture."

**Femininity:** for Freud (1992:52), being feminine means showing the traits characteristic of the female sex.

**Feminism:** For Toril Moi (1987:29), feminism is a doctrine advocating the granting to women of the same rights and privileges as are granted to men. In other words, the advocacy of the equality of the sexes.

**Patriarchy** (from the Latin *pater*, 'father'): Engels (1968:82) sees patriarchy as a specific form of male dominance, since it implies the almost absolute power of the 'patriarch', or male family head. The use of the term ought to be confined to the Old Testament-style pastoral nomads from whom the term comes. It describes a system of society or government ruled by men and with descent rights through the male line. In traditional African societies one could find both 'patriarchal' and 'matriarchal' social systems.

**Polyandry:** A system whereby a woman can take more than one husband.

**Polygamy:** A system whereby a man may concurrently take more than one wife. This system was the generally accepted one in South-Eastern Ntu societies.

**Sex/gender system** (Rubin, 1980: 75): A set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into characteristic products of human activity to restrict each group's functions and spheres of influence.

**Ilobolo:** The Zulu term for the dowry paid by the bridegroom to the woman's parents in order to obtain the woman as a wife and to have the right to her

offspring. It's a form of compensation for the transfer of a productive member of the clan to another clan.

### 1.3 Statement of the problem

Many male writers in most cultures tend to follow stereotypes in their description of women. Young, attractive and unattached women are looked upon as possible lovers, and their features and movements are described in glowing terms: they are graceful, beautiful, cheerful, loving, attentive, intelligent, and a lot more. Women in their early mature years are praised for their beauty and their ability to add to the family's name: good common sense, ability to work hard, industriousness, and especially fruitfulness, when they are surrounded by children and have fulfilled the primary role for which they were married. But at this stage one may also find the beginning of a suspicion of what woman really is: her ability to bring forth life, to bear children, is viewed with immense awe by a traditional society which has the extension and preservation of life as its most central aim. What cannot be easily explained becomes suspected of magic and an object of fear. Woman is thus viewed as a possible sorceress, *umthakathi*, to be kept at arms length, especially in an exogamous marriage society, such as the Zulu, where she comes from an outside clan, and is viewed as a stranger that might harbour hostile plans.

Later in life, when the bearing of children has taken its toll on the external appearance of women, and men have got used to both their virtues and their faults, women might be taken for granted, and hardly noticed around the home. The woman's task is to work the fields, to cook for her husband, to rear the children. Any time she raises her voice, she might be considered a dangerous witch. But by this time the fruit of the woman's natural and social functions begin to appear: her children are growing up, her sons are her pride and joy, her daughters are the continuation of herself, getting ready to bring her influence into new homes. So, while the husband might become indifferent, and at times even

thoughtless and cruel, her children are her crown of glory, able to sing her praises in words and deeds.

Then the migration out of the *umuzi* begins: boys establish their own household, and girls marry into other families. The elderly mother becomes the magnet that attracts back her children and grandchildren, the force that keeps the fire of love and respect glowing, the warm-hearted person in which the grandchildren can confide and from whom they will always receive an entertaining story or some good advice.

And when her face begins to look like the dry earth she has tirelessly cultivated and harvested, her partly blind eyes remain fixed on a point beyond the horizon, with the wisdom proper of the dreaming old people, who do not see the immediate, but are able to contemplate what is far away. Her words are diamonds of wisdom, her touch an indication of the path to follow, her love a treasure that will leave indelible marks in those privileged enough to enjoy it and store it in their memory. This is why when she finally passes away, her grave becomes the place to pause at, to remember, to reflect, and to learn; the spring from which life still flows, fresh, pure, unadulterated, because in the fountain that gurgles one can still hear her voice. This and a lot more is woman in the Zulu tradition: a saint or a possible witch; a mother, a lover, a friend, a confidante; the giver that gives in an unobtrusive way, so quietly in fact that proud men tend not to notice her contribution, and perhaps even despise it, afraid that, by praising her, their own praise be belittled, while they should know that praise of greatness generates more greatness, and greater praise.

In spite of such lofty social and emotional roles, women are often described, in Zulu narratives, at that stage of life as wives and mothers, when they might have lost their early attractiveness, but expect to be respected as people, because of what they have contributed to the family and to society. If, however, one looks at



the ways in which they are portrayed in many Zulu texts, one notices that several authors are guided by a certain amount of bias. Nussbaum and Glover argue that:

If we study the stereotypes of authors towards women, the sexism of male critics and the limited roles women literally play in history, we are not learning what women have lived and experienced, but what men have thought women should be. (1995:101)

The above quote assumes therefore that men have internalized socially preconceived ideas and perceptions of women's roles, and these are reflected in the fictional literature. It can also be stated that most Zulu texts fail to challenge the reader's critical thinking. They tend to portray men as the dominant gender and in so doing maintain the patriarchal status quo. Meaning is socially constructed, and one should be aware of how an author can manipulate meaning to construct an ideology. For example, when an author speaks in the context of his historical or cultural background, his women characters are portrayed in completely passive roles, as expected by a male-dominated society.

The problems is therefore how to reconcile the essential role of women in Zulu society and the often cavalier and negative perceptions of male writers that describe the social situation.

#### **1.4 Significance of the study**

Literature is both a mirror and a mold of social attitudes. The writing and studying of literature is significant because, by representing the past, literature offers guidelines for the present and the future.

This study intends to identify in the literature, and to illustrate, some contradictory aspects of the Zulu social tradition with regard to women, and the problems



women had to face in order to fulfil their role in traditional society, so as to better understand the value and status of women in the present world.

Just as the reader participates in the production of the text's meaning, so the text shapes the reader. On the one hand it "selects" its appropriate reader, projects the image of such a reader, through its specific linguistic code and its style.  
(Nussbaum and Glover, 1995:117)

It should be noted that the theories that are mainly used to analyze these texts are based on white cultures. Interestingly enough, such theories seem to have a tremendous impact on African culture and literature.

### **1.5 Delimitation of the study**

The study is limited to four literary texts by male authors that portray interesting women characters in their narratives. It must be stressed that this research is not a feminist criticism. Points of the feminist theory have been occasionally employed to strengthen my argument. The texts were selected simply because they tacitly reflect some evolution in the status and role of women during the last forty years or so of Zulu writings.

The research is not expected to present a complete panorama of woman in Zulu society, or even of all the seasons of a woman's life. But it deals with that very special period of her youth, when she blossoms in beauty and becomes the person that every man dreams to have as a companion. A woman should be appreciated for herself first, before being seen as a complement of men for the continuation of the species. The promise of her fruitfulness may unfortunately become a bargaining chip between her father and her proposed husband, who often disregard her feelings on the matter of her own life. Once the choice is made and she gets married, what kind of life can she expect? Is she going to be respected as the queen of the homestead, or simply acknowledged as cook, dishwasher, food

provider, or a baby-maker? Is she going to end up in a monogamous or in a polygamous marriage? With the new social and sexual freedom acquired during the last few decades, is her choice of multiple lovers in a supposedly liberated relationship going to make her happy?

It would have been interesting to extend the research with some fieldwork, to find out how rapidly are social attitudes changing. Such an analysis would create a much better understanding of the function of literature when it challenges sensitive and critical issues that affect our daily lives, for instance, different perceptions that people have about women.

It is hoped, however, that reading works by different male authors, written at different times, will serve as an indication of shifts in widely spread social attitudes. A fascinating alternative would have been to analyse fictional works by women writers, such as Violet Dube, Jessie Joyce Gwayi, N.N. Makhambeni, to understand women's attitudes to the changing social horizon. This aspect is left as a possible future field of study.

## **1.6 Hypothesis**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed a tremendous improvement in the social condition of women in most parts of the world. As a result of urbanization, health care, education, industrialization, also Zulu society has, since the 1950's, undergone a major shift in the outlook and perception about women's social roles. My hypothesis is that this shift is reflected in the literature written mainly by male authors. One sees women occupying important social positions and trying to re-identify and re-define their own destiny, their rights, their freedom and their status in society.

In a thoroughly researched work, Carol Pottow (1990:74) investigates the problems faced by women in traditional Zulu society. She quotes sources

describing how forced marriages oppressed women, the miserable lot many married women had to endure, and the inferior status into which they were forced..

Pottow (1990:74) quotes Harriette Ngubane, who clearly defines the meaning of marriage in Zulu culture:

“The word ‘marriage’ is not translatable into Zulu, because its indigenous meaning is not that of a contractual union between the spouses as in the case of the English term. A Zulu woman ‘goes on a long journey’ (*enda*), this action being known as *umendo*. A man, on the other hand, takes or receives a wife into his patrilineal home (*thatha*) where she is expected to be productive and continue the descent line of her husband’s patrilineage.”

Although Zulu literature has been mostly directed to the school market during the *apartheid* period, feminist literature has only marginally influenced the Zulu literary world, particularly in the change of attitudes towards women, also showing women themselves fighting for their rights, thus producing a number of “free spirited” women. The portrayal of female characters in other literatures, such as English, has also played a part in changing people’s perceptions.

The question now arises: were (and are) women really discriminated against in African societies? If yes, in which ways? This research should provide some answers to these questions, as it probes the hypothesis of wholesale exploitation and subservience of women in Zulu society..

Speaking about patriarchal African societies, it is taken for granted that women are considered as less significant than men, or even unimportant. These perceptions still prevail, although to a lesser extent. This assumes that, in spite of the practical fact that women are the engines that move the social fabric forward, they cannot participate in, or contribute to the development of our society,

because men are the only ones that can act in public, while the women's place is in the kitchen. This study attempts to deconstruct these assumptions as they are reflected in our literary texts.

### **1.7 Zulu women in history: a brief presentation of Mkabayi, the great Zulu Princess, and other women.**

In his 1996 publication, *Izingwazi ZaseAfrika, African Heroes*, C.D. Zondi writes:

*Akukho okwakwenziwa inkosi ebusayo kungazange kwabikwa kwinkosazana uMkabayi. Ukuhlonishwa kukaMkabayi abesilisa nezinduna zamakhosi kukhombisa ukuthi empilweni yakwaZulu kwakungekho ukugqilazwa kwabesifazane. Lokhu yinto eyenzeka sekufike abamhlophe. (1996:3)*

Nothing was done by the king without the consent of Princess Mkabayi. The respect given to Mkabayi by males and by the king's *indunas* (headmen) shows that there was no oppression of women in Zulu life. This came after the arrival of the Whites.

Such oversimplified views spell the need for a clearer exposition of woman's position in traditional African Zulu society.

C.D. Zondi further argues that:

*Sekuvamile ukuthi uma kuxoxwa ngomlando wethu thina abansundu kuthiwe isifazane sakithi yinto engazange yanakwa ngaphandle kokuba ilime amasimu izale abantwana. Yebo abangazange bawulandelisise kahle umlando wakithi bayokuvuma lokhu okuvamise ukuqhamuka kubeLungu abafunda izincwadi ezabhalwa abeLungu bokuqala abafika lapha. Labo abawanakisisayo amasiko akithi futhi bawulandele kahle umlando wakithi ngeke bakhohlwe ukuthi oKhwini baseNgilandi bengakaziwa njengamakhosikazi abusayo sasesinabo abantu besifazane ababusayo nabanamandla okwenza umbuso uhambe ngendlela eqondile (1996:5)*

It has become common, when people talk about our history as Black people, to say that our women were never valued, except that they had to till the fields and bear children. Yes, those who do not really know our history will say this, but it usually comes from the Whites who read books

written by the first Whites who came here. Those who carefully follow our history and our culture will know that, when in England there were no female rulers, we already had women wielding the power to set the kingdom on the right direction.

Such sweeping statements are rather gratuitous when taken out of context. They prove, however, that in any situation, however depressing, there is the possibility of finding shining exceptions. In fact, among the great women in our history, two stand out in a very special way: Mkabayi, daughter of King Jama, sister and advisor of King Senzangakhona, aunt of King Shaka, remembered as a great leader and founding member of the Zulu nation; and Nandi, Shaka's mother.

Mkabayi has captured the imagination of historians and fictional writers because she took responsibility for the small Zulu kingdom when her father Jama had practically given up the will to live, after his wife's death. Mkabayi convinced the king her father to re-marry, and a male descendant was thus ensured in the person of Senzangakhona. On her father's death, Mkabayi assumed the role of regent for her young brother, a position very unusual for a woman and bitterly resented by the council of elders. According to African tradition a woman should never exercise power over men. The nation was stunned by Mkabayi's act of calling *ibandla* (assembly of men) and addressing them. This was unheard of in the history of the Zulu nation. But Mkabayi demonstrated that she could easily overthrow the rule of tradition. She distinguished herself for her wisdom, cunning and strength of character, and her leadership qualities were eventually recognized and praised.

She remained the power behind the throne during her weak brother's reign, and the small kingdom prospered under her leadership. Her power was so great that she was able to have Senzangakhona's illegitimate son, Shaka, appointed to succeed his father, in spite of serious opposition from the noblemen of the nation. Shaka soon showed that he was his own man, and did not need Mkabayi's advice. He reshaped the army, made it a powerful force able to withstand the most

powerful in the land, and systematically set about extending his tiny kingdom to the whole of modern KwaZulu-Natal. He also went after those who had been cruel to his mother Nandi and to his protector, King Dingiswayo. Mkabayi could not bear the thought of being sidelined, and eventually hatched a plot to have Shaka assassinated by his brothers Dingane and Mhlangana. Shaka's death marked the beginning of the real fall of Mkabayi. Unfortunately for her and for the kingdom, Dingane turned out cruel, suspicious and inefficient, and was eventually defeated by the Boers and by his brother Mpande. The latter sent Mkabayi to Vryheid, out of the way, and there the once powerful princess died, regretting Shaka's regicide as the greatest crime against the kingdom she had worked so hard to build and to make great.

Mkabayi is often referred to as a kingmaker, for the part she played with Jama, Senzangakhona, Shaka and Dingane. Her name is intimately linked to that of the Zulu kings in their *izibongo* (praise poems). Mkabayi's own praises are modelled on those of the kings, and extol her powerful deeds. They are thus masculine in nature. She is praised as one of the great heroes of her time.

Here are *Izibongo zikaMkabayi kaJama*, with some comments, drawn from Canonici's 1993 book: *Zulu Oral Poetry*.

*Usoqili! Iqili lakwaHoshana,  
Elidl' umuntu limyenga ngendaba;  
Lidl' uBhedu ngasezinyangeni,  
Ladl' uMngoyiyana ngasemaNgadini,  
Ladl' uBheje ngasezamusini.  
Ubhuku lukaMenzi,  
Olubamb' abantu lwabenela;  
Ngibone ngoNohela kaMilo,  
Umlilo ovuth' intaba zonke,  
Ngoba lumbambe wanyamalala.  
Inkom' ekhal' eSangoyana,  
Yakhal'umlomo wayo wabhoboz' izulu,  
Yeziwa nguGwabalanda,  
Ezalwa nguMndaba kwaKhumalo.  
Intomb' ethombe yom' umlomo,  
Zase ziyihlab' imithanti ezawonina.*

*Umthobela-bantu izinyoni,  
Bayazibamba usezibuka ngamehlo.  
Uvula-bangene –ngawo-onk' amasango,  
Abanikazimuzi bangena ngezintuba.  
Umncindela kaNobiya,  
Umhlathuz 'uzawugcwal' emini.  
Imbibakazan 'eyaqamb 'imigqa kwaMalandela,  
Yathi ngabakwaMalandela,  
Ithi yikhona bezoqananaza ngazo zonk' izindlela.*

Mkabayi is addressed as a male (*Usoqili* = “The male trickster”, or “Father of tricks”) because she held the kind of power that is normally exercised by men, and used it in an unscrupulous, cunning and sometimes cruel manner, as men do. She is described as *Iqili lakwaHoshoza*, “the trickster of the Hoshoza people”, interpreted as “cunning like a snake”.

This extraordinary strength and ability she put at the service of the political growth of the Zulu nation, to the point that she chose to sacrifice her womanly instincts towards family and children in order to devote herself completely to the national interests. The women criticized her for it: *Intomb'ethomb' yom'umlomo / Zase ziyihlab' imithanti ezawonina* (The girl that matured, but her mouth was dry / And the old women criticized her).

Her cunning becomes unscrupulous treachery, which cannot be easily forgiven in men, and much less in a woman. This is particularly criticized in the context of her plot to have Shaka assassinated: *Elidla umuntu limyenga ngendaba* (“The trickster that destroys a person by tempting him with a story”, referring to the promises she made to Mhlangana and Mbopha before Shaka’s death, promises that were soon betrayed and the two were killed).

*Ubhuku kukaMenzi / Olubamb'abantu lwabenela* (Menzi’s bog, which caught her enemies and finished them off): This again refers to her cunning and treachery,



that entices people and then destroys them, with the fury of an all-devouring fire on the mountains: *Ngibone ngoNohela kaMlilo / Umlil' ovuth' intaba zonke*.

It is as if no major event may take place in the kingdom without her approval. But while her deeds would be praised, if they had been carried out by a king, they attract satiric criticism when done by her, because she is a woman, a person to be praised for beauty and warmth rather than cold-blooded planning. Her place – it is implied – should be with the other women, doing household chores, and not with men, or taking an active role in the affairs of state.

As Mkabayi gets older, she assumes the revered role of mouthpiece of the ancestral spirits (*amadlozi*), a role that puts her above everyone else in the community. This is a perfectly normal situation among Africans for a person of Mkabayi's age to be accepted as “*idlozi*” – a shade, ancestor, to command considerable respect and influence in all sectors of the community. A person is accorded this status because of the vast experience, knowledge and wisdom that he or she possesses.

Mkabayi, together with her twin sister Mama, encouraged Mthaniya to marry their widowed father. Since Jama's death Zululand has been known as the land of Mthaniya, “*Kwelika-Mthaniya*”. Princess Mkabayi was the advisor to kings. Up to this day a king may call on royal female elders for advice in decision-making. At particular celebrations in a Zulu homestead, women do not do the cooking. They sit in one of the huts, while food and meat is cooked and served by men.

Married Zulu females maintain their maiden names, i.e. uMaNzama (daughter of Nzama), uMaZwane (daughter of Zwane). Married females do not address the husband and the in-laws by their first names. Sons do not utter their mother's name. It is well known that Shaka named a river *Amanzimtoti*, rather than the more current *Amanzimnandi*, out of respect (*hlonipha*) of his mother. This is how



Bourquin recalls the event in “*The Natal Mercury*” in his article *Amasiko AkwaZulu* in 1986:

On one of Shaka’s expeditions, he rested on the banks of a river and asked his servants to bring him some water to drink. Being close to the sea, he expected the water to be brackish, which, however, it was not. He registered his surprise by exclaiming: “But this water is sweet.” In order to *hlonipha* his mother’s name he could not use the current Zulu word for sweet (*mnandi*), but said: “ *Kanti la manzi amtoti*”. So ‘*toti*’ became *hlonipha* word for ‘*mnandi*’, and the river *Amanzimtoti* got its name.

It is a known fact, however, that Nandi was not popular at Senzangakhona’s court. Her praises that have come down to us (Cf Canonici, 1993) are far from complimentary, as she is addressed as *Usomqeni* (Father of laziness), and described as sexually promiscuous: *Umathanga kawahlangani / ahlangana ngokubona umyeni* (She whose legs are never closed, except at the view of her husband); *Uxebe woMhlathuze* (The flirt of the Mhlathuze valley); stubborn and loud voiced at court: *Ugedegede twasenhla nenkundla* (Loud-voiced one from the upper part of the court); long limbed and ungainly: *Mfazi ontongande zingazandoda* (Woman whose limbs are as long as those of men). It is understood that praises composed at any stage in life are never modified, even when the person described assumes important roles in society. Thus Nandi is stigmatized for ever, in spite of her becoming possibly the most famous Zulu woman, because of her son Shaka.

In Zulu culture an unmarried man may not voice any views amongst married men, as he would be immediately commanded to keep quiet. “*Thula wena. Wazini?*” (You keep quiet! What do you know? Or: What can you tell us?). By the same token, married women cannot express their ideas in public: They must be represented by their men. However, some married men get many of the ideas they use in public gatherings from their wives or female elders.

## 1.8 Women in African society: Centrality of marriage, life-giving, and the male lineage.

Adam Kuper, in his 1982 book, *Wives for Cattle*, explains (1982:11):

Agriculture, which is the preserve of women, is more important as a source of food than are pastoral activities. . . . But pastoralism (the preserve of men) is more prestigious and ceremoniously important.

Southern African tradition is thus unashamedly patriarchal, because the men's task, pastoralism and its cousin, going to war to raid other people's cattle, is considered more prestigious. Women provide the daily food from the gardens, as well as the children to perpetuate the male's blood-line, but are seen as completely different from, and inferior to men. In fact, they can be acquired by means of material goods (cattle, animals, farming implements) in order to fulfil the main function of a traditional society, that is, the continuation of life and the survival of the species. Being 'outsiders' to the clan, they are expected to observe taboos, rules and boundaries that are not applicable to the in-mates of the group, i.e., the men. Bryant (1949) analyses the unequal treatment reserved to women:

"Daughters and wives...were considered as merely property of their fathers and husbands. In former days... it was the practice of a father occasionally to 'give' his daughter away in marriage, without consulting her, to any aged man or ugly young one willing and able to pay the stipulated bride-price, whose drudge she became for the rest of her days... The Zulu system, like that of ancient Greece, ordained that the women be kept constantly depressed in their lowly and helpless state..." (Bryant 1949, in Pottow, 1990: 75)

It is widely recorded that the aim of a traditional society is its own preservation. Woman, as the natural life-giver, was therefore assigned this essential task, which included: getting onto the 'marriage journey' (*umendo*), produce children for the husband's family, look after gardens and children, which were her responsibility. Eventually, through her sons, she became the grandmother-educator, and thus achieved the status of queen of the *umuzi*, and a certain amount of freedom.

Bryant's description of a traditional patriarchal society shows women kept oppressed and subordinate, either to their fathers or their husbands. It was impossible for wives and daughters to oppose the head of the family. Like any social system, patriarchy must have some positive aspects, but power in the hands of a privileged few tends to corrupt and to produce abuses.

Thus the patriarchal system degenerated into the habit of forced marriages, arranged by the males for their own interests rather than in respect of the woman's wishes; the fixing of *ilobolo*, or bride-wealth; polygamy, where a woman would be considered one of the man's many possessions; a woman's permanent legal minority status; etc.

Furthermore, as a stranger who joins the clan from outside, a bride is viewed with the suspicion reserved for all strangers: she may be an agent of evil, sent by an enemy clan to destroy life and its sources (family and cattle). While a man can be a sorcerer, and 'command' evil forces for his own purposes, women can only be 'witches', transformed into instruments of external evil powers.

Qunta sadly reflects on the traditional status of women:

The African woman emerges as a victim of the African male and of traditional customs and practices. The African woman of the rural areas is portrayed as little more than a slave, who goes about her task with silent acceptance. She has no past and no future, given the inherent backwardness of her society. Her consciousness about her oppression is awakened only when she comes into contact with western women, and she is surprised by their comparative freedom. (1987:11)

Qunta makes some important points here:

- a. Traditional customs and practices render the woman 'a little more than a slave' of the African male. This is still prevalent in rural areas, where life flows to a traditional rhythm.
- b. Marriage gives her a secondary and oppressed status, because she is an 'outsider', a suspected stranger. Even child-bearing, her greatest asset, is only in function of her husband's lineage. Thus she 'has no past and no future', no

personal identity, no personal value (except for the number of cattle that her husband has paid to obtain her). Furthermore, she has no escape.

- c. Contacts with western women make her realize the limitations of her status, because they appear to have comparative freedom.

A society is as good as its women because they give the real tone to life. While men have their friends and relatives, the woman is a stranger who cannot directly establish intimate contacts with anybody, and has no share in the wealth, life, religious practices of the household except vicariously as the mother of a child.

Many feminists state that a woman becomes the tool of man's pleasure in marriage. They believe that, especially in a polygamous society, she spoils the husband with choice morsels that he may be kind to her and her children, because through the children she will be able to assume the role of a grandmother – the queen of the household. Qunta explains present day attitudes in this way:

We live in a man's world and men are considered superior to women. As daughters and as wives we must respect and listen to our brothers and husbands and it is only right that we should seek their permission before we do anything or go anywhere. (1987: 436)

## **1.9 The development of feminist criticism**

Feminism is a specific kind of political discourse that looks at life, customs, practices, people and events from the women's point of view. Since in many parts of the world this point of view is never considered, feminism becomes a critical approach based on theoretical principles that have been gradually devised, especially in the U.K., the U.S.A. and in France, during the past two centuries. The theoretical approach is committed to the struggle against those forces that have kept women down through history, in particular, patriarchy and sexism. Patriarchy is, of course, the domination of the male members of the family over the women. Male domination extends to the fields of economic control of

property and its means of achievement; to equality of opportunity in education and employment; to universal suffrage and sexual freedom.

Feminist criticism of social life and literature can be roughly divided into three main stages:

- a. Reaction to the **patriarchal system** that pervades all aspects of civilization, and subordinates women to men in all domains: religion, family, politics, economy, society, law, art, etc. Woman was described, during this period that goes from about 1790 to 1940, as [ - man ], defined according to the male qualities she supposedly lacked.
- b. Distinction between **sex and gender**: sex is determined by nature, gender by culture. The French writer Simone de Beauvoir investigates a large number of attributes that were traditionally assigned to men and women, and finds that only a minimal number are based on nature, while the majority are culturally conditioned, and can therefore be dispensed with.
- c. Analysis of **sexist language and literature** (from about 1968). Writers of this recent period have tried to de-construct language, and many works of literature, to identify sexist assumptions based on stereotypes, cultural assumptions, and not on nature. Even the greatest writers were found to unwittingly use sexist language and expressions that tend to either stereotype or to marginalize women. Women are thus encouraged to abandon the attitude of passive acceptance even in reading works of great male authors. Instead of being passive and receptive, women must fight and become producers of literature and meaning, to see that the exercise serves the purpose of placing women on the same level as man in every sphere of society.

Parsons (1951), an anti-feminist sociologist, argues that for the family to function effectively there must be a sexual division of labour, in which adult males and females play different roles. He believes that men tie the family unit into the wider social system. Men must therefore be 'instrumental' in orientation,

manifesting qualities of drive, ambition and self-control. Women instead, whose task is the internal functioning of the family, must be supportive of children and adult males, and further be 'expressive', that is, gentle, nurturant, loving, and emotionally open. If men and women become too similar in family function and orientation, competition between them will disrupt family life, weakening the family's vital role in upholding social stability.

Lengermann and Nieburgge-Brantley (1960) argue that two themes characterize the theories of gender inequality. First, men and women are not only differently, but also unequally situated in society. Thus women get less of the material resources, social status, power and opportunities for self-actualization than the men who share their social location – be it a location based on class, race, occupation, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or any other socially significant factor. These are the traditional notions and stereotypes that this research is trying to uncover in Zulu literature. Because the selected texts were written in different periods, it is possible to produce a reasonably accurate comparative analysis on the status and position of women in society and at home.

Secondly, this inequality results from the organization of society, not from any biological or personality differences between men and women. Although individual human beings may vary somewhat from each other in their profile of potentials and traits, no significant pattern of natural variation distinguishes the sexes. Instead, all human beings are characterized by a deep need for freedom to seek self-actualization. Oakley maintains that:

In early upbringing, in education and in their adult pre-occupations, males and females are socialized by society into different moulds, and it is not surprising that they come to regard their distinctive occupations as predetermined by some general law... despite the way in which other cultures have developed gender roles quite different from our own that seem just as natural and as inevitable as ours do to us. (1987:156-7).

While early feminists concentrated on the short-coming of patriarchy, modern feminism goes beyond that. It also challenges dominant discourses in literary

practice that look at women in terms of what makes them different, and inferior, to men. It challenges the idea of judging women negatively by applying to them the standards of men, and then stating that women are less capable or less accurate than men. It also challenges generally accepted gender roles traditionally assigned to males and females by custom rather than by nature.

Feminism also questions the use of language when it favours the dominant class. It argues that non-sexist language can be used in literature neutrally. Hellinger (1984:136) suggests that language merely reflects social patterns such as sex-role stereotypes. Research in linguistics and social psychology has shown that these are in fact facilitated and reinforced by language.

The semantic role that is responsible for the manifestation of sexism in language can be stated simply. Dale Spender argues that there are two fundamental feminist categories, “plus male and minus male”. He further says:

To be linked with a male is to be linked to a range of meanings that are positive and good: to be linked to a minus male is to be linked to the absence of those qualities. (1980: 29)

Showalter (1979:25) divides women into two distinct varieties. First, she takes 'women as readers'-as the consumers of male-produced literature and with the way in which the hypothesis of a female reader changes our comprehension of a given text. This includes the images, stereotypes and misconceptions about women in male-constructed literary history. The second type is concerned with 'women as writers'- women as producers of textual meaning.

Parsons (1951) maintains that different sex roles are essential. When one looks at *Inkinsela YaseMgungundlovu*, for instance, one realizes this when Mkhwanazi silences his wife MaNtuli and says that women's (MaNtuli and Nomusa) place is in the kitchen. Mkhwanazi therefore supports the traditional view that the women's role is to cook, as if this role depended on nature rather than on tradition

and custom. It is well known, in fact, that men can be excellent cooks, but it is very unusual to find a man cooking regularly for his wife and children at home.

Marxists have a common premise that literature can be properly understood within the larger framework of social reality. They argue that literature cannot be treated in isolation, divorcing it from the society and history of the society in which it is set. For Lukac's the reflection model sees literature as reflecting reality: "Reality is indeed out there before we even know it in our heads, but it has shape." (1962:65)

For Toril Moi (1987) feminist criticism is characterized by its political commitment to the struggles against all forms of patriarchy and sexism. Moi suggests that women should come together in a form of sisterhood and oppose patriarchy. Thoko in *Ikhiwane Elihle* exemplifies an economically empowered and sexually free woman. She challenges the social norm that women are not allowed the opportunity and the privilege of dating more than one man. In the African tradition a woman gets negative and derogatory names if she has more than one lover.

Feminists have criticized the Marxist theories for focusing only on the exploitation by the upper classes on the lower classes. They argue that within those exploited classes, there are women who are doubly exploited, first by those in the upper classes and secondly by those with whom they share the same class.

#### **1.10 Are there feminist manifestations in Zulu literature?**

As it has been stated earlier, most literature written in African languages during the 20th century was geared at the school market, and avoided many of the socially burning issues that were becoming common in writings in international languages. Among the social issues left dormant was the vociferous vindication of women's equal rights. Some writers probably felt that this would be too



sensitive a problem to touch, because some traditional customs, such as polygamy, arranged marriages and *ilobolo*, female witchcraft, and similar ones, were shielded jealously as part of the African heritage that was threatened by the advancing wholesale westernization.

In spite of this cultural protection wall, some authors tried to present a feminine point of view in their works, or at least have shown particular interest in reflecting women ideals. For example, B.W. Vilakazi, in his 1945 poem *UMamina*, represents poetic inspiration as a goddess, a combination of the Greek muse and of the Zulu Mkabayi, that is able to open the gate of traditional culture, knowledge and feelings that can form the basis for truly inspired poetry.

A very careful novelist, Jessie Joyce Gwayi, produced three historical novels in the 1970's to present powerful women who played key roles in Southern African history. This is not to be considered feminist writing, but a strongly positive position in favour of women and their world and approach to life.

In her 1973 novel *Bafa Baphela*, Gwayi presents a female counterfoil to Shaka and Moshoeshoe, Queen Mantatisi of the Tlokoa tribe, who lead her people from victory to victory, while trying to ensure the Tlokoa throne for her minor son, Sokonyela. While male writers would concentrate on Mantatisi's military exploits, Gwayi constantly points out the way the queen cares that her people have enough to eat, and do not suffer the devastating consequences of the *Difaqane* turmoil.

In 1974 J.J. Gwayi produces another historical novel, *Shumpu!* (an ideophone that describes the noise a head makes when chopped off). Here Gwayi revisits the historical period preceding Shaka's reign, and describes the fights for supremacy between Zwide of the Ndwandwe and Dingiswayo of the Mthethwa. She accepts the view that Dingiswayo is a peace-loving prince who plans to incorporate all the Nguni tribes under his paramountcy to be able to defend them from the oncoming

invaders from Maputo and from the Cape. Zwide however is bloodthirsty, and wants to obtain supremacy by chopping off the heads of all his opposing chiefs, helped in this by his witch-mother, Ntombazi. Contrary to the views expounded by several historians, Gwayi does not present Ntombazi as the all-engulfing monster that orders her son into bloody battles: it is Zwide himself who is cruel, and his mother is only helping him to achieve his goals by her witchcraft.

Gwayi's third novel, *Yekanini* (1976), deals with another great woman: Shaka's mother, Nandi. Rather than describing the well-known events that marked Shaka's reign, Gwayi concentrates on the suffering of young Shaka and his mother, on the period that was characterized by darkness, pain, persecution, in preparation for the day of recognition and glory.

Another author that described with feminine eyes the golden period of Zulu history is Chris Themba Msimang, in his 1982 historical novel *Buzani kuMkabayi* (Ask Mkabayi). In this thoroughly researched and beautifully written work, the epic battles that shaped the Zulu kingdom do not take place on the plains of Zululand, but in the heart of this woman, whom fate has thrown onto the stage of history: a woman tremendously capable, and yet often frustrated in her vision; an all-powerful politician at one time, and a hopelessly limited spectator of history at other times. A person who sacrifices her life for the greatness of the kingdom, and then, when the kingdom has grown and needs a period to stabilize itself, she commits the unpardonable crime of regicide, thus removing from the scene the only one who would be able to stir the ship of state into the tempestuous waters that lie ahead. Mkabayi is thus the virgin queen, the mother of the nation, but also the sorceress that caused its eventual downfall.

### 1.11 Conclusion

Both traditional African society and literature ascribe to women a subservient role. This is borne out by my research in my selected texts written by male

authors, who, however, often try to describe the better side of the coin by identifying strong and leading female characters in their works. The choice of male writers was done on purpose, because there is a definite possibility that they would generally reflect social trends in an unquestioning way, since women's perspectives do not affect males directly. Nor are they particularly worried about emphasizing the part played by women in the development of the social fabric. In fact, for too long men have tended to ignore the world of women, or to describe it as unimportant. This is often reflected either in the language used or in some episodes that mirror the patriarchal domination in our literature.

My choice may contain some problems. For example, do the chosen texts represent a wide enough spectrum of opinions as to serve as a serious social basis for discussion? Furthermore, can one really judge society from what appears in fictional writing? It might be true that there is often more truth in fiction than in historical writings, but this would require a mature core of authors directing themselves to a sophisticated audience, which is not always the case in African literature in indigenous languages, which is mainly directed to a school public.

Aspects of western feminist criticism will, in some way, be useful in the following discussions, to provide a comparative analysis with African notions about the status and role of women. This comparative work should open the possibility of drawing some interesting conclusions.

The problems raised in this introductory chapter will be discussed extensively in the following chapters, especially in the literary analysis in chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6. In fact the following chapter mainly deals with the research methodology adopted in this study, which forms the foundation of the whole project. The methodology described includes the historical method, the descriptive method, the research techniques and the procedures adopted during the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter introduces the research methodology employed in the present study, first the theoretical orientation and then its applications.

Van der Walt et al (1982:160) explain the importance of outlining what the research methodology involves, in as far as choosing appropriate methods and techniques, and in the way it facilitates the analysis of the selected texts.

The present work is based on a body of Zulu literary texts, therefore the appropriate method of research must begin with a thorough study of the texts, which will be treated as primary sources. A simple reading, however, does not necessarily uncover the full meaning of the text, and one is forced to make use of material that can guide one's literary analysis by highlighting important factors of which the researcher must be fully aware. Such additional material is referred to as 'secondary sources'.

The critical evaluation of the primary and secondary readings is based on a philosophy of the research process. This involves the assumption and values that serve as a rationale for the research, and the standards or criteria the researcher uses for interpreting the data and for reaching appropriate conclusions.

#### **2.1 Research methods**

Research methods are the tools or techniques employed to gather data. This study makes use of two main methods: the historical and the descriptive methods.

### 2.1.1 The historical method

In his 1996 book, *Zulu Oral Traditions*, Canonici points out that the study of setting is essential for a proper understanding of a text, be it oral or written. He further explains (1996:170) that setting, or *milieu*, consists of the physical place, the historical period (the period of the events and that of the writer), and of the cultural background of a work. In literary analysis it is important to keep in mind these parameters of the narrative, but especially its historical period. This means that I must describe both the period during which the fictional events are supposed to have happened, and the period during which the author is writing. This background should prove useful to identify the social problems and the social circumstances literature brings to the fore. For example, in Nyembezi's *Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu* we are presented with the situation of women in a rural society during the 1940's. In spite of the traditionalism in-built in such society, women are not afraid to express their opinions and to fight for the interests of their families and children. *Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu* presents a situation of widely accepted monogamous marriage, where a wife is an almost equal partner of her husband, and the children are her pride and support, without undue interference from her mother-in-law. The consequences of such momentous social changes are not discussed by the author, but simply shown in the prevalent social practice.

Physical setting is also extremely important in a reading of Zulu literature. In fact, it seems as if cultural evolution has taken place on two separate, and often conflicting, gears: the slower gear of the rural areas, and the faster one of the urban areas. Conflict between traditional and modern, Western and African, educated and illiterate, *amakhohwa* and *amabhinca*, often constitutes the very heart of Zulu literature (Cf Canonici, 1998).

J. K. Ngubane's novel, *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi*, was published in 1956, a time of profound renewal and reflection on all aspects of culture generated by liberation movements throughout Africa. Among the aspects that he deals with are the consequences of the *ilobolo* practice on men and women, the position of women in a polygamous family, the lack of freedom in the choice of a spouse (equivalent to arranged marriage or forced love), and the tyrannical rule of the family patriarch. To illustrate these problems Ngubane chooses a rural setting (Buthunqe) for his novel, but with frequent comparisons with life in urban areas, such as Durban and Benoni.

Sibusiso Nyembezi's *Inkinsela YaseMgungundlovu* was published in 1961, but it deals with life in the peri-urban area in the mid- 1940's. The problem of polygamy and *ilobolo* are not mentioned at all: they seem to have become irrelevant. But the contrast between rural and urban is described with new colours: Nyanyadu is a rural village, but within reach of town. It has a railway station, a school, a church and its young men go to college. Africans can be well educated, or can pretend to be so, as Ndebenkulu does. North and South come to blows in the person of Ndebenkulu, a westernized African who has only the colour of his skin to identify him as African, but who tries to take advantage of this in order to dupe his own people. And the main problem concerning women is no longer *ilobolo* or polygamy, but the new mature role of men's equal partners that they want to assume and which the men are not prepared to grant them.

### **2.1.2 The descriptive method**

This implies the highlighting of relevant factors as one comes across them in the reading of the selected texts, and the explanation of the events to show their relevance to the chosen theme of investigation. It further involves a reflection on the aspects of the way of life, the customs, the attitudes one witnesses around oneself, so as to be able to compare them to the parallel manifestations in the literature being investigated.

A given state of affairs is therefore described as fully and carefully as possible. Thus the general behavior of women, their actions and roles in modern society were observed in order to make a comparison with the role and status of women as found in the texts that are being analyzed.

## **2.2 Research techniques**

These are tools or aids used by the researcher to observe a particular situation. It is important that these tools are valid and reliable.

According to Bailey (1987: 79) research techniques are divided into survey research techniques and non-survey research techniques. Survey research techniques will not be dealt with here because they are irrelevant for my purpose. Non-survey research techniques are document studies, experiments and observations. These were used in the present study, and can be described as follows:

- (a) Documents, books (journals, articles, conference papers, etc.) provided the researcher with new ideas and approaches.
- (b) Literary theories and literature analysis assisted the researcher in evaluating his efforts by comparing them to related efforts by others.
- (c) The non-survey research technique assisted the researcher in historical and associational perspective and in relation to earlier and more primitive approaches to the study of literature.

In this study, documents, journals, articles, conference papers and books were studied. These were divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources involve the actual literary texts that are selected for this study, and the secondary sources involve the general feelings of people about the topic, what has been said and written about the role and status of women in the African tradition.

In qualitative research, the literature should be used in a manner consistent with the methodological assumption, it should be inductive so that it does not direct the questions asked by the researcher. One of the reasons for conducting a qualitative research study is that the study is exploratory, i.e., when not much has been written about the topic on the population being studied. Little, if anything, has in fact been written so far about this topic, especially with regard to Zulu literary texts. This makes this study exploratory and inventive. The fact that these texts were written and produced in different periods makes it more interesting, because it enables one to look at the role and status of women in different periods.

As with the use of theory, however, the amount of literature varies by type of qualitative design. In theoretically-oriented studies such as ethnographies or critical ethnographies, the literature on the cultural concept or a critical theory from the literature is introduced by researchers early in their study plan.

In grounded theory, case studies and phenomenological studies, literature will be less used to set the stage for the study. The two fundamental ideas – the inductive process of research and the variation in use of literature by design type – raise the question of where one should plan to use the literature in a qualitative study.

Literature in a research study accomplishes many purposes: it shares with the reader the results of other studies that are closely related to the study being reported (Frankel and Wallen, 1990). It also relates a study to the larger on-going dialogue in the literature about a topic, filling in gaps and extending prior studies. There has always been an on-going dialogue and debate about Zulu literature as advocating and encouraging gender and sexual divide with regard to the portrayal of characters. This study seeks to uncover these assumptions. Attempts are also made to critique any stereotypes that authors may have when they portray their female characters. Literature in a research study also provides a framework for establishing the importance of the study as well as a benchmark for comparing the results of a study with other findings.



Qualitative studies include a substantial amount of literature to provide direction for the research questions on hypothesis. A greater amount of effort by the researcher was used to acquire as much information as possible with regard to literature to strengthen the arguments, the analysis as well as to substantiate the findings. In planning a qualitative research study, literature was often used to introduce a problem in the introduction – the literature review. Literature review usually takes several forms and no consensus exists about which form is preferable. Cooper (1984: 48) suggests that literature reviews can be integrative where they are simply summaries of past research. A second form recommended by Cooper is a theoretical review, wherein the researcher focuses on an extant theory that relates to the problem being studied.

### **2.3 Procedures and techniques adopted during the study**

The research methodology used in this research was briefly outlined in the previous section. The present section deals with the actual techniques that were employed in this study. The following are the techniques that were selected for this study.

In this research study literature was used mainly as the basis for the selection of research methodology and the theoretical framework. Different documents and books were scrutinized. Documents that were used are as follows:

- a) Primary sources
- b) Secondary sources
- c) Books.

The types of documents utilized are now described.

### **2.3.1 Primary sources**

Primary sources refer to the actual literary texts on which the research was based. These are the novels *Inkinsela Yasemgungundlovu* by Sibusiso Nyembezi (1961); *Ikhiwane Elihle* by Lawrence Molefe (1985); *NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo* (from *Amawisa*) by DBZ Ntuli (1982); and *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* by Jordan K. Ngubane (1956).

### **2.3.2 Secondary Sources**

These consist of a selection of what has been written about the role and status of women in the African tradition. These were complemented by the inclusion of literary theory books, journals about African literature and some literature related books that were considered useful to the study. Conference papers were also consulted.

### **2.3.3 Books**

Books have been consulted as secondary sources to build the foundation for the research methodology and its theoretical framework. Although many books were consulted, few actually served for the purposes of this study.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter serves as the foundation of the whole research, as it shows the methods and procedures employed in doing the work. The following chapter deals with the critical analysis of *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi*, illustrated with selected examples.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A GIRL'S FREEDOM OF CHOICE IN *UVALO LWEZINHLONZI*

#### 3.0 Introduction

This chapter presents some of the ways women were disadvantaged in traditional Zulu society when it came to the choosing of a life partner. It does so by analyzing a number of points raised by J.K. Ngubane in his 1956 novel, *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* (The fear of frowns). The title idiomatically describes the fear of the father's authoritarian anger, manifested by the frowns on his forehead, caused by the danger of a thwarting of his financial and political interests. Such interests were bound to clash with the girl's demands for freedom to choose whom to love.

In traditional practice, throughout rural society a woman was forced to marry her father's chosen one, whether he was single or a polygamist; an old man or a young stallion; an ugly pretender with financial means or the son of a bankrupt family. This practice also undermined the girl's freedom to advance in the economic and educational spheres. She had no freedom to plan and choose her future; not even any freedom whether to have children or not. The chapter will also examine other literary works, either to explain or to re-inforce Ngubane's points.

Written during the 1950's, when the African élite was valiantly fighting for recognition of its cultural heritage by the newly empowered *apartheid* government, the novel throws some water on the fires of enthusiasm about Zulu traditions, especially with regard to the social status of women and their freedom of choice. It is not the tradition that young people and women must *hlonipha* (show respect towards) the elders and the males in the family that Ngubane

criticizes, nor the practice of *ilobolo* (bride's dowry) per se, but the intolerable abuses, imposed by force (frowns on the father's forehead), taken for granted by the men, and deeply resented by many women who are becoming aware of their value as women, and of their right to freedom as human beings. Change was definitely in the air, already in the 1950's, and only fools could expect to enforce obedience and respect by using crude force and even unjustifiable violence. *Kuhlonishwana kabili*, 'Respect is reciprocal', as the Zulu proverb says. If a father expects to be respected or obeyed by his daughters, he must respect them and listen to them as well.

After a summary of the novel, the chapter examines the most pressing traditional ideas, practices and problems debated in Ngubane's work, with brief reference also to parallel fictional works that deal with similar topics.

### **3.1 Summary of *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* (The fear of frowns, 1956)**

The setting of this novel lends itself to the conflict of urban and rural, of modernization and tradition. The story is set in Buthunqe, a rural village in Zululand, but begins in Durban, where proud Zulumacansi works in the kitchen of a white lady, to earn the money to buy his *ilobolo* cattle, through which to gain the hand of beautiful Bajwayele at Buthunqe. He thus accepts a servile position in the white society in order to obtain a leading position in his own village.

In the rural area of Buthunqe, where the major events of the story occur, families still live mainly off the soil, the cattle, etc. Buthunqe is also the home of Manamuza, Bajwayele's greedy father, another prominent figure in the story. From such rural place the story moves to another urban area, Benoni, where Bajwayele escapes, to lose herself in anonymity in order to prove her freedom. These two settings give rise to an interesting plot, because they reflect the very different types of behaviour that people practise in these two spheres.

The main character in the novel is Bajwayele, because all the events in the story revolve around her. Bajwayele loves Potolozzi, but her father, Manamuza, is not interested in this poor fellow: he intends to continue accruing wealth by handing out his beautiful daughters to the highest bidder in cattle, since this will increase his wealth and lift his social status. Bajwayele's mother, kaMemunce, initially encourages her daughter to follow her father's command, but when she realizes that the girl would be absolutely miserable and is very determined to stand up to her father, finally sides with her and strongly objects to Manamuza's plan to arrange the marriage to Zulumacansi against Bajwayele's wish. Eventually the forceful father compels Bajwayele to stay with Zulumacansi, but she soon finds a way to escape and to disappear in Benoni. Manamuza goes to look for her, driven by the fear of having to return the beautiful cattle paid by Zulumacansi. When he eventually finds her and brings her home, the girl escapes for the second time and disappears for good. There is even a hint that she would rather share her life with prostitutes than be forced to marry Zulumacansi, a man she dislikes as a heartless bully.

### **3.2 *Inhlonipho \ ukuhlonipha, obedience and ilobolo***

In very many cultures the elders of the clan, and the men, are object of respect due to the fact that they are either older and have earned the respect by their life and work, or that they represent the lineage, and are related to the ancestors of the group. This last point also involves the concept of religious mediation in cultures where the ancestors are also the family tutelary spirits: the oldest male is also the family priest. The socio-political and religious structure of the clan is then copied and expanded at the levels of district and nation, where local chiefs and national leaders take on the widened responsibilities of the family patriarch. In matriarchal societies, however, the situation would be reversed, and the females of the group hold the highest position in the social and religious hierarchy. The system of respect is called *inhlonipho* or *ukuhlonipha* in Zulu.

Marriage, procreation and continuation of the lineage are the main aims of life in a traditional setting, because these guarantee the survival of the unit. Parents naturally like to see their children well settled in life, that is, properly married, with a congenial partner, in a family reasonably wealthy and healthy. The *ilobolo* (bride's dowry) system developed from the tradition of giving gifts to the bride's family in gratitude for producing and then parting with such a valuable woman. It became the means to ensure the parents' control over the regenerative processes of society. *Ilobolo* in Zulu society has several additional functions: to demonstrate that the intended husband is able to acquire the means of sustenance for himself, for the bride and for their future family; to exchange the good will of the ancestor spirits of the two clans, since the cattle are the property of the family spirits; and possibly other meanings and functions as well.

To set a limit to excessive parents' demands, in the 1850's Sir Theophilus Shepstone fixed the maximum rate of *ilobolo* at 11 cows plus one (for the bride's mother). This rule has stayed, but it has been applied with a certain amount of elasticity, depending on the wealth of the groom's family, the status of the bride's family, her education, her beauty, her recognized abilities, etc. A bride still feels that if her future husband pays little, he does not value her much.

In the same way that the request for absolute respect, followed by obedience, can be used abusively by power-hungry parents, so too is the case with the dowry. Fathers often look forward to their daughters' wedding in order to replenish their *isibaya*, and are anxious to select the highest bidder, rather than the most suitable, or the best loved, of a daughter's suitors. In spirited conversation a father would often refer to his daughters as his *izinkomo*, his cattle.

The terrible situation of an unfeeling and greedy father is depicted in *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi*. But it is not passively accepted or even tolerated by Bajwayele, the main character and heroine, who represents an army of women who want to stand up and challenge the long held customs and traditions that prejudice women and

severely limit their freedom of choice. While J.K. Ngubane does not openly condemn the custom of *ilobolo*, he allows his characters to freely discuss its pros and cons. Manamuza, Bajwayele's father, expects his daughter to respect his instructions and to consent to marry Zulumacansi, who offers the best cattle. According to him and his belief in the Zulu traditional system, a child must not challenge her father's decision. Bajwayele's actions and affirmation of her right to a free choice are deemed wrong and disrespectful.

The connected *hlonipha* custom also deserves some examination here. It requires women (and children) to avoid the use of words and syllables contained in the male lineage's names, surname and praise names. Some authoritative personalities maintain that this is a good custom, and that women should 'hlonipha' throughout their lives. In practice, however, once a woman's sons are married, she becomes the senior partner in the homestead and the rules no longer apply so strictly. Dowling maintains that:

*Hlonipha* is viewed as an important custom in so far as it persists into a woman's old age when she will have gained much more status within the community. Its particular symbolic significance to people who do not adhere to its rules is not, however, afforded sufficient attention. There are people, living in both rural and urban areas, who give up the custom for a number of reasons, but who will nevertheless endorse it as being essentially desirable and correct. (1988:30)

A newly married woman (*umakoti*) is not allowed to treat this custom lightly and is subjected to public shame if she ignores the rules laid down for her. The forces exerted by public opinion are a very powerful deterrent in upholding these rules, for one may be ostracized from one's community.

### **3.3 The status of women in pre-capitalist times**

The freedom of choice advocated by Bajwayele in Ngubane's novel has not been possible in Zulu society for many decades, although women have been fighting

for their rights for a very long time, as is demonstrated by some oral narratives, such as the following.

In a folktale on the widely known theme of *Intombi ishada inyoka* (A girl marries a snake) found in Canonici (1993:62, and 1996:127), titled *uMamba kaMaquba*, two sisters are searching for a marriage partner. The first one, a traditionalist, accepts all forms of humiliation, by the elders, the handicapped and the snake's (the intended groom's) mother, in order to prove her suitability, and eventually marries the snake and bears him a child. The second sister, a rebel, refuses to accept the humiliations and returns home, unmarried. The snake husband is burned by the girls' relatives, and rises from the ashes as a handsome prince, who marries the first girl. The point of the story is a vindication of the right of a woman to choose: either to marry or not to marry; and, in case, whom to marry.

King Shaka organized women's regiments, to serve especially for the cultivation of the king's gardens, the production of food for royal festivals, the up-keep of the royal residences, and to be always at the ready to dance and entertain royal visitors. This custom empowered the monarch to permit the marriage of a senior regiment of men to a regiment of much younger women, as a reward for the men's bravery in war. Women were not consulted about this whole affair, and probably there was deep resentment, as it was demonstrated in 1878, when the girls of the *Ingcugce* regiment refused King Cetshwayo's order to marry the older men of the *Indlondlo* regiment. The king and his councillors felt that this was an affront to the king's authority and to the traditional core of the nation, and the slaughter of some of the girls ensued. The event is powerfully dramatized in M.A.J. Blose's 1974 play, *Uqomisa Mina-nje Uqomisa Iliba* (By marrying me you marry the grave).

This refusal can be characterized as women's uprising against an unfair traditional custom. The uprising threatened essential features of state power and organization, and the wellbeing of the nation as perceived by those in authority.



However, it was an uprising, not a revolution: women were not resisting marriage, but marriage to certain men arranged by an extraneous third party. In the background there was the fact that they had already chosen their lovers. Resistance to specific acts of gender oppression in no way denies the fact that women participated in the process as a whole or indeed supported it as fervently as any other member of those pre-capitalist societies.

It is difficult to imagine anything but qualified resistance in a system where a quality so inalienable as the reproductive capacity was of such social importance. It is probably here that we have to locate the most significant social difference between pre-capitalist and capitalist societies. But now, of course, the value creating cycle at the centre of Southern Africa pre-capitalist societies has been destroyed. Its social marks, bride-wealth, fertility, deference to men, the expectation that women should labour outside as well as within the home, might all continue to exist, but they now operate in a changed situation, in which the socio-economic system draws on different external production forces.

### **3.4 Bravery and courage in women**

Some women characters in our literature, such as Bajwayele and, to some extent at least, kaMemunce, set a very good example as courageous agents of change. The drama *Ngiwafunge AmaBomvu* by L. Molefe, for example, contains a clear demonstration of this. The play challenges the notions of subjectivity and socio-cultural constraints. It is a model of how oppressed people speak out and break the shackles of their oppression, setting an example for future developments.

This drama further presents a shift in woman character portrayal. The author makes Thulisile his foculiser – the person through whom events are seen. Most Zulu texts have men act as foculisers. Thulisile is presented as a woman who is able and willing to voice her feelings and to stand up for her rights, in a situation where traditionally a woman would have to accept her fate and go to her

unwanted husband. She has, in fact, been chosen as a wife by the king, in spite of the fact that she already has a boyfriend, Zaba, whom she loves dearly. Society expects Thulisile to obey the king's orders, but she refuses, showing extreme courage in challenging king Mgidi's position and powers. This act also constitutes a challenge to the social ideology that privileges the king to determine and control the lives of his subjects. In this drama Thulisile questions the right of the king to force her to marry him, thus running contrary to generally accepted custom. The author evidently wants to present a model of a free and empowered woman.

As if to render his message clearer, Molefe also introduces Thulile, Thulisile's sister, who has also been chosen as the king's wife and readily accepts the offer, regardless of everything. She does not refuse or even object when she is forced to marry the king. Thus Thulile's character is one of a submissive, subordinate woman who accepts and conforms to the status quo – that the king has absolute powers over his subjects. One would have thought that Thulile and Thulisile would have the same attitude to marriage, since they are twins. Twins usually have common taste in things, share common ideas etc., but this is not the case with these twins. Traditional culture empowers the king to choose whichever girl he pleases as his wife. Thulisile, however, has already made her choice, Zaba, and intends to stick to her choice, in spite of the fact that her closest friends, Khonzeni and Nokufika, warn her that her defiance of the king would endanger the lives of them all, as the king has powers to put to death his opponents. Thulisile insists that she would rather die than be forced into a loveless marriage. The dramatic situation intensifies when Thulisile refuses to eat her food and to be pleasant to the king. The king notices Thulisile's behaviour and orders his herbalist to work on her. Thulile advises her sister not to challenge the authority of the king. Zaba, Thulisile's boyfriend, is also not prepared to let go of his girlfriend. The king knows nothing about Zaba.

Thulisile falls pregnant and the king wrongly thinks he is the father of the unborn child. A paradox arises when the king appoints Zaba as his informer as a reward

for his father's loyalty. The king eventually finds out that the child is not his and that Thulisile has a boyfriend. Zaba's mother MaGubeshe, Thulile, Thulisile, Nokufika and Khonzeni are all brought into public trial for betraying the king.

The king states that they are going to be killed. Zaba tells the king that he is prepared to die for the girl he loves and requests the king to let the others go. Also Thulisile reiterates her point that: "*Ukugcagca nomuntu ongamfuni kufana ncamashi nokufa*" (To be married to someone you do not love is the same as dying). The king is impressed by their bravery and declares Zaba and Thulisile husband and wife. Zaba is then promoted and becomes a king's officer.

This drama clearly illustrates how brave a woman can be when fighting for her right to choose her marriage partner, even when the person of the king is involved. The king's privilege to choose any wife he desires may entail the violation of someone else's rights and this means not taking into consideration the woman's feelings. This is an outright violation of women's rights and open oppression. Thulisile stands as an example of a woman who believes that change is necessary as far as the position of women is concerned. She is prepared to sacrifice her life rather than submit. There are many similarities between this work and B.W. Vilakazi's 1943 novel *Nje Nempela* (Yes indeed), as well as other fictional narratives. This shows that the problems discussed here are widely and deeply felt.

### **3.5 Religion either empowers or silences women**

In *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* we find the traditional figure of a Zulu man, Masovenyeza, who uses the stick, *Usabisabafazi* (The wives' scarer), to rule over his wives and to punish them severely if they do not do his bidding. Since his wives claim some sort of personal freedom in the name of Christianity, Masovenyeza forbids them to attend church.

Christianity is regarded as a liberating force for any person, because it professes that all people are created equal, as children of the same God. There should be no difference between men and women in front of God. Any person challenging this basic tenet acquires the negative connotation of being *ibhinca*, a raw heathen. Zulu literature presents, however, a large number of short stories, novels and plays in which either church ministers or teachers take advantage of their position of leadership and trust in order to have their ways with women and even with school children, who are often helplessly vulnerable by people in authority.

Church ministers, women and religion are often associated in fictional narratives. For example, D.B.Z. Ntuli, in his 1988 *Izizenze* (Battle axes), writes about the strained relationships between Rev. Mthembu and his daughter Nomusa. The preacher tries to use his family and church position to change his daughter's decision to marry a polygamist, Sibanyoni. Nomusa, however, forcefully challenges her father: "*Ngingafa nokufa*" (I would rather die!). And yet her father is trying to shield her from a bad life choice, because he knows that she will not be happy in a polygamist family, since she is an educated girl, brought up as a Christian. But Nomusa professes to have a deep love for Sibanyoni, although she is aware that her religious affiliation does not allow her to marry the person she is infatuated with. Hers can only be a youthful infatuation. Nomusa breaks the rules and marries Sibanyoni, without her father's blessing, and with disastrous results. Here Mthembu does not merely stand as a church minister, but also as a father, trying to do what is best for his daughter. We know, however, that children often wish to break away, show their independence, break their parents' hearts, and thus make a mess of their lives. Fortunately for them, their parents love them unconditionally, and are always prepared to welcome them back home.

Polygamy might have had a meaning in the past, as has been said earlier. But it is a system that can easily degenerate into the oppression of women, because they must fight for their husband's favours, for themselves and their children. How a

well-educated woman can accept a polygamous situation is beyond modern-day understanding.

Some churches appear to have taken over the father's responsibility in the choice of marriage partners, as either parsons or church councils decide who should marry whom. This practice is meant to avoid marriages of mixed religious affiliation, which could constitute problems for the couple as well as for their children. The implication here is that church officials are afraid that by allowing mixed marriages they could lose their members to other churches. Which means that they are not convinced that their church education reaches very deeply in a person's conscience.

First stage feminist criticism involves a rejection of the abuses of the traditional patriarchal system, which has stereotyped female oppression and second-class citizenship. Therefore any practice that allows external forces – be they parents, brothers, churches – to determine a woman's choice of life style, of marriage partner, of whether to have children or not, is placed under discussion. And this is what J.K. Ngubane does, at least in part, in *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi*. Bajwayele rejects her paprents' choice of Zulumacansi as her marriage partner, and thus rejects her father's authority to determine her future, to tell her to marry, to accept the *ilobolo* settlement. She rejects the notion that women are inferior and cannot be allowed to make a life choice, even of whether they want to get married or not. Her flights to Benoni are symbolic of her effort to break out of her oppressive cocoon, of the traditional patriarchal system, in order to claim that freedom of choice that should be rightly hers as a human being.

The liberation struggle from the 1960's opened up new horizons for women, as they achieved new possibilities of freedom, and of being equal to men. National liberation became synonymous with gender liberation. Adam Graves (1986) argues that African literature has, up to now, largely misrepresented African women, their contribution to social and political development. It is high time that

a woman's position in every sphere of society, and her contribution to the development of family and country, be fully recognized also in literature, as an integral part of what Africa is going to become:

The nostalgic songs dedicated to African mothers that express the anxieties of men concerning mother Africa are no longer enough for us. The black woman in Zulu literature must be given the dimension that her role in the liberation struggle next to men has proven to be hers, the dimension which coincides with her proven contribution to the economic development of our country. (1986:3)

Critical attention must be given to the absence of a feminine perspective or the stunted characterization of women in our literature. One need not defend the conscious and unapologetic commitment that underlies the inspiration of most Zulu writers, especially women. By the same token, the current efforts to redress the relative omission in the criticism employs methodological approaches that are consciously and unapologetically devoted to the social, political substance of women's presence in literature.

### **3.6 The concept and tradition of *Ilobolo***

Ngubane's novel presents a frank discussion of the abuses of the *ilobolo* custom in Southern Africa. The author never states that *ilobolo* is a bad practice and must be abolished. But he objects, through the statements of his women characters, to the way the custom is being used by greedy fathers in order to enrich themselves, regardless of the feelings of their daughters.

According to Kuper (1982:12), *ilobolo* is the establishment of a symbolic, religious and physical relationship between two families, by means of the exchange of a woman for cattle. This exchange has deep symbolic significance. The woman is traditionally seen as the source of life and as the custodian and nurturer of the family, especially of the children and the family gardens, therefore of the means of subsistence of individuals and groups. Cattle, on the other hand, are an extension of the mother's role, the property and wealth of the clan, of the

living and the living-dead (Cf Canonici, 1996:220). They nourish and protect life through their milk, meat and hides. They are used as sacrifice to the ancestors at the most critical or significant stages of a person's or a clan's life. The transfer of cattle therefore implies that the ancestors of the cattle-sending clan will now be kind on the receiving clan (Kuper, 1982:14). The transfer of a woman means that her ancestors will have a foothold in the new clan, as the children to be born of this union will have some of her ancestors' blood flowing in them.

“Zulu marriage transfers a woman's fertility absolutely to her husband's agnatic kingroup, and an essential element in the contract is that she have children. (Gluckman in Radcliffe-Brown, 1950:189)

Hammond-Tooke comments as follows on the influence of *ilobolo* not only on the legitimization of the offspring, but especially on the aspect of marriage stability:

The fear of losing cattle, if a wife left her husband for reasons of mistreatment and the court found that she was justified in so doing, acted as an important brake on the actions of a heavy-handed husband. The fact that divorce was so rare in these societies is ample proof of the effectiveness of the institution. (Hammond-Tooke, 1993:129)

*Ilobolo* has therefore the function of stabilizing the marriage relationship, of demonstrating that the man is able to look after his wife and children, as he has been capable of earning his cattle. It further shows appreciation to the bride's family for providing and nurturing such a splendid sample of humanity. Among the negative aspects: the bride's father often makes unrealistic demands on the young man, as if he was at a public auction of his daughter. The father is quite prepared to ruin financially his future son-in-law, and to allow his daughter to have to scrounge in poverty, as long as he gets his price, thus enhancing his wealth and social status. It is therefore quite difficult, at times, for the young man to meet all the demands of *ilobolo*, and as a result many young couples live together for years and have children, but are never completely secure about their future, as their commitment has not been formalized and has no legal strength.

Furthermore, young women resent having to marry men chosen by their fathers out of self-interest rather than out of concern and affection for their daughters. The world is thus full of young 'live-in-lovers', as well as of ditched older women with a string of fatherless children in tow, who constitute the tragic 'left-overs' of the marriage game. All this adds to the ever-increasing crime rate in our country.

### **3.7 *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* analysed**

The novel shows a cultural and social conflict between men and women in the face of the problem of freedom of choice of a marriage partner. Women do not want to give themselves completely to a man they cannot trust and do not love. But fathers do not intend to change what they consider a legitimate tradition that gives them all the advantages, in order to listen to the reasons of the heart of their daughters in the question of marriage. Women challenge men's conservatism and strive for change, because tradition is heartless and exposes them to horrible abuses.

In Ngubane's novel *kaMemunce* strongly challenges this tradition. From the beginning she complains about the way some husbands do not want to work in order to gather wealth, but they simply wait for the *ilobolo* for their daughters. Manamuza has been spoiled by this practice, as he has grown rich and has acquired social status by marrying off his daughters to wealthy men of outstanding families.

No wonder then that he wants to do the same with Bajwayele, his youngest daughter. The following utterance confirms his determination, as well as the sad fact that he thinks his daughter's personal happiness does not enter the marriage equation at all:

*Nodadewemu balalela engibathuma khona. Namuhla bahleli kahle.*  
(1956:42)



Even your elder sisters obeyed and went where I sent them. Now they are happily married.

Manamuza seems to be concerned only about his status in the community and not about his daughter's feelings for Zulumacansi.

*...iso wayeselibekile kuZulumacansi, esebona ukuthi uma ethathe intombi yakhe uBajwayele, lokho kuyolikhweza phezulu kabi igama lakhe eButhunqe. (1956: 16-17)*

...His attention was now on Zulumacansi, knowing that should Zulumacansi marry Bajwayele, his position would shoot right up at Buthunqe.

But Ngubane seems to say that the idea of *ilobolo* has somehow lost its original significance because women challenge the custom when they see it as a means to sanction male arrogant dominance. Although Bajwayele seems powerless when she challenges her father's instructions, protesting that Zulumacansi is too old for her and that she does not love him at all, Manamuza does not listen to any excuses, because they touch his financial interests:

*Thanda uZulumacansi kusukela manje. Bopha yonke imithwalo yakho. Ngizokuphelezela. Uyogana kwaBhekokwakhe (1956:43)*

Love Zulumacansi as from now on. Pack all your belongings. I am going to accompany you myself to the Bhekokwakhe's.

Manamuza's treatment of his daughter proves a cruel disrespect for Bajwayele's freedom of choice. To make sure that she obeys him fully, Manamuza even decides to break with tradition and to accompany her to her new home, a practice that goes against custom because it is considered undignified for a father to witness his girl's sobbing as she leaves home. It looks as if Manamuza's only concern is for the cattle he is going to accumulate and nothing else.

The role that kaMemunce, Bajwayele's mother, plays in this regard is quite obvious. She does not want to entertain the idea of 'giving away' her last daughter to a man Bajwayele does not love. She now says that *ilobolo* dehumanizes people

and makes them forget about the needs of the heart. She even feels that *ilobolo* should be abolished because it has caused more harm than good in the lives of her own daughters. She says:

*Ukuba kuya ngami ngabe seliyafa nya nalo leli lobolo.  
Wonke lo monakalo ophakathi kwezwe ubangwa yilo. (1956:38)*

If I had my ways, this *lobolo* business would have been abolished long ago. All the present corruption in our society stems from it.

KaMemunce affirms that this custom is rotten and the increasing number of fatherless children is directly caused by it. She maintains that *ilobolo* is often too heavy for the boy, and girls become demoralized by their fathers' unfair demands. KaMemunce light-heartedly proposes the abolition of *ilobolo* to solve the problem. Bajwayele's aunt, Bajabulile, who lives in Benoni, also emphasizes the need for a change in attitudes with regard to *ilobolo*. She also hates the practice:

*Kufuneka afundiswe amadoda lawa ukuthi thina bantu besifazane asizona izimpahla zokudayiswa. Singabantu nje nathi okufanele sikhethe esikuthandayo, sale esingakufuni. (1956:90)*

Men need to be taught that women are not possessions or livestock to be sold. We are indeed human beings who have the right to choose what we like and reject what we do not like.

KaMemunce is very strong and positive in her position against *ilobolo*. She bravely faces her husband about this matter, but Manamuza insists that he is the head of the family and does not want any challenge to his decisions.

Bajwayele is forced to obey her father to go to stay with Zulumacansi, but she soon finds the way to escape, without money or anything else, and to disappear. Zulumacansi is humiliated and furious, and naturally demands that his cattle be returned, or that Manamuza finds Bajwayele and brings her back. Manamuza, the arrogant bully in front of his women, cowers in the henkop when he sees Zulumacansi approach armed with a sjambok. He pleads with kaMemunce to save the situation, but she catches her moment of revenge:

*Ngikhulume naye, ngangikhona yini lapho umnika umntanami?*

*Ingani ngangengqaba mina. Wathi wena, Lisiko! (1956:51)*

Me talk to him now? Where was I when you gave him my child against my will? You silenced me by saying it was the custom.

It is a young grandchild that saves the situation by standing up to Zulumacansi. What a shame for the proud Manamuza! Soon afterwards, he sets off on the most hilarious journey, to Johannesburg and Benoni, where he is even able to lecture urbanized people about Zulu customs, he who knows only their exterior application but does not understand their spirit. Benoni looks like a den of iniquity to him, but is a haven of freedom for Bajwayele, who is even introduced to the world of the “ladies of the night”, where she could earn a living if matters got really bad. Unfortunately Manamuza manages to get hold of his daughter and to bring her back to Buthunqe. But the smell of freedom has a strong appeal for her, and she sets off again soon, this time taking care that her traces are completely lost, although her boyfriend, Potolozi, probably knows where to reach her.

KaMemunce shows great courage by standing between Manamuza and Zulumacansi. To handle such an affair with the person of the temper of Zulumacansi requires bravery. There are a number of men at Buthunqe who would not dream of standing in the way of Zulumacansi, let alone confronting him in person. In another instance kaMemunce shows that she does not fear Zulumacansi. When Manamuza had gone in search of Bajwayele and had not returned home for quite a long time, the pain in kaMemunce’s heart becomes unbearable. She goes straight to Zulumacansi to demand the return of her daughter and her husband. Zulumacansi was entertaining a group of men. KaMemunce, without even greeting the men in the yard, burst in asking about the whereabouts of her husband:

*We Zulumacansi...uphi umyeni wami nomntanami? (1956:67)*

Hey, you Zulumacansi...where are my husband and my child?

Bajwayele, by virtue of the fact that she is a child, has to conform to her father's authority. She is of course obedient and often shows great respect for her father, but about Zulumacansi's proposal she shows great courage and an independent mind. Because her father is forcing her to marry Zulumacansi, she decides to escape. The journey to Johannesburg is risky but she is determined to escape whatever the consequences, and eventually reaches her destination. Some weeks later she is discovered by her father who brings her back home. She again refuses Zulumacansi, maintaining that, that would only happen over her dead body:

*Ngangifuna ukwehlukana noZulumacansi. Namanje angisoze ngahlala naye. Kulokho nje ngizimisele. (1956:96)*

I wanted to part with Zulumacansi. Even now I will not stay with him. I am determined in this.

This shows how determined Bajwayele is in revealing her position against Zulumacansi. The fact that she had no money with her when she eloped is proof that she was really determined, no matter what the obstacles were. She tells her mother that, although she knows that Johannesburg is very far from Buthunqe, she is prepared to go there on foot, if necessary, or even to face death if her attempts at running away should be thwarted. She says:

*Uma ngehluleka kulokho engikusophile, ngase ngilindele khona kanye ukufa. (1956:97)*

Had I failed in my attempts, I was prepared to die.

Bajwayele's reason for not marrying Zulumacansi is that she does not love him, as she is in love with and intends to marry Potolozzi. This young man is however, not in Manamuza's plans for his daughter, as he is not rich enough to pay him a handsome dowry. Thus the forceful father conducts the negotiations his own way. Bajwayele very courageously faces both her father and her 'husband', Zulumacansi, in spite of his very short temper. She knows that they will beat her

if she runs away, but she takes her destiny into her own hands, defying her father, Zulumacansi, and the whole of Buthunqe.

### 3.8 Women's submission in a traditional marriage

Manamuza insists that kaMemunce and her daughters obey his orders, as he is the master of the house. Masovenyeza, one of Manamuza's sons-in-law, is a polygamist, and he expects his wives to be thoroughly submissive to him, even allowing him to abuse them. He knows that the divisions among co-wives caused by jealousy give him free rein to treat them as he pleases: their weakness and divisions are his strength. He even makes use of the knobkerrie, *Usabisabafazi*, the women threatener, to obtain whatever he wants and to prove that his word is final. As Manamuza is just as crude, no wonder that his daughter Bongani, who is married to Masovenyeza, never comes home to complain about the ill-treatment she receives from her husband. She has been able to internalize and to accept it, as she is used to abuse since childhood. Plant comments on the behaviour of men towards women:

A man found himself tacitly allowed ...authority as absolute in its limited sphere as was that of a king in the wider realm of the nation, so much so that if any of his wives or children refused obedience to his authority, and in his righteous indignation seized a thick stick and broke an arm or a head, there was nothing to interfere with this...(1905:64)

The only relief to Masovenyeza's wives comes when he loses a court case against Zulumacansi, to whom he still owes some cattle as *ilobolo* payment for Zulumacansi's sister. After this incident he allows his wives to burn the *Usabisabafazi* and to attend church if they so wish. He also abstains from the traditional way of life and starts frequenting religious classes in the evenings. He even says:

*Lowo nalowo othanda ukukholwa akholwe. Sengibonile ninezinhliziyi ezinhle. Yimina abafowethu bangempela.* (1956:30)

Anyone of you who wants to be a Christian can go to church. I have realized that you have a good heart and you are my brothers indeed.

This announcement by Masovenyeza changes the social life in his family a great deal. On the other hand, although Manamuza shares similar characteristics with Masovenyeza, he is scared of other males. Manamuza fears Zulumacansi more than he fears a deadly snake. He always shifts the responsibility to his wife when things go wrong. When he sees Zulumacansi driving cattle in the direction of his home Manamuza thinks that Zulumacansi is in fighting spirits and shifts the responsibility to kaMemunce. He says to his wife:

*Nakhu sengibona lesi siphoxo siza nezinkomo.  
Khuluma naso wena, mina ngigula kabi. (1956:106)*

Here comes that fool driving the cattle in this direction.  
Talk to him yourself, for I am sick.

From what he does, shifting the responsibility on to a woman, one may agree with Randal: Women are not powerless. They have their own means of exercising power (1982:15).

This novel constitutes a clarion call for change, especially on the question of women's choices of a partner and possibly of way of life (whether or not to marry). If this message was modern, relevant and somewhat revolutionary in the 1950's, it is still relevant today, because great strides have been made in this field, but complete freedom and equality has not been achieved yet. Furthermore, the abuse of women and children has become a national tragedy. Parents should begin to act according to the momentous socio-political changes that the country is experiencing. They should contemplate changing their attitudes towards some traditional customs. *Ilobolo* is not wrong, and can be a force to guarantee the stability of the marriage institution. But it must not be used to greatly limit a girl's informed freedom of choice. Women have the right to choose with whom to spend the rest of their lives as their husband, companion, lover, and father of their children. The choice must not be guided by the fathers' interests, but by guidance, understanding and cooperation. Manamuza is the opposite of such a caring and understanding parent, as he is guided by blind greed. He would rather receive cattle than keep the affection of his daughter and possible grandchildren.



During the excruciating Benoni experience, which should have forced him to reflect, he has learned nothing. He hurries to take Bajwayele back to Zulumacansi, without even asking her why she had eloped, and what she intended to do. And yet, the marriage ceremony had not taken place yet, and both the girl and the man were free to agree or disagree to the marriage contract. But Manamuza had his eyes filled with the cattle, and there was no room to see his daughter and her needs.

### 3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has established that a tradition had developed whereby a woman could legally claim no freedom in the choice of her marriage partner. This was in violation of her human rights. While it is understandable that parents tend to interfere with a girl's choice, supposedly for her own good, when this interference becomes institutionalized, governed by the state, or by a father who accepts no compromise, the person of the woman is completely disregarded and trampled upon: she is bought and sold as a soul-less baby-making machine, who has no value once her productive cycle comes to an end.

The novel *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi*, although it was published in 1956, is still very relevant. It shows how a father uses his patriarchal powers to choose a husband for his daughter for the accumulation of his wealth and the elevation of his social status. Although most people agree that the custom of *ilobolo* helps to stabilize a relationship and offers a guarantee to the girl's parents and to the couple's children, it has been badly abused by too many fathers. At the time of publication the novel constituted a daring challenge to the patriarchal *status quo*, prevalent in Zulu society.

In fact, it subtly criticizes the patriarchal approach of the dominance of men over their womenfolk, especially crucial when the woman needs to open herself to the love of a man in order to fulfil her life-giving mission and to start a family. It

looks at the failures of this system because of the greed of parents, their lack of respect for the sources of life, the immaturity of young people who are driven by infatuation rather than by reason in the most important decisions of their lives. The *ilobolo* system has partly lost its original power because of the fathers' greed. The traditional Zulu *hlonipha* custom is still held in high esteem, but it can be easily abused by parents, church ministers, teachers, members of government. Dowling states:

As a custom *hlonipha* will continue to exist because of its historical authority and legitimacy. Research that has been conducted indicates that for many people its survival is desirable and important. Apart from what people desire and consider important, however, there are other considerations involving factors such as political change, imported values syncretism, the implications and effects of which are as yet not entirely predictable. (1988:58)

The novel shows that women are discriminated against and oppressed, unable to choose freely the way to run their own lives, and to decide on what to do with their sexuality. This is a political factor in the sense that it involves 'power-structured' relationships, arrangements whereby one group is controlled by another. In our societies, sex and class marginalize women. Social status is determined solely by males, and loss of males entails loss of status, since a woman without a man cannot expect to maintain her place in a society in which domestic and reproductive functions alone are assigned to her. *Ilobolo* is an expression of such lack of freedom, as well as a source of endless unhappiness among women and of the cruelty of men to their daughters and wives.

Women are subordinated to men first of all in the home. Ideological pressures force them to devote their energies to the family. These functions, it is believed, are central to the reproduction of society, yet the authority of generations is invested in the male 'head of the family'. The unequal treatment and opportunities of women are grounded in an assumption of their inferior status that has, historically, gone largely unchallenged, based as it is on supposedly invariable physical and psychological factors held to derive from women's biology.



The following chapter demonstrates how, as a consequence of the patriarchal system, a mature woman who has contributed to the success of the family (wealth, status, children), is still voiceless and powerless when it comes to the administration, use and disposal of the family wealth. This is revealed in an analysis of C.L.S. Nyembezi's novel *Inkinsela YaseMgungundlovu*.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WOMEN'S ROLES IN A CHANGING SOCIETY (C.L.S. Nyembezi's *Inkinsela YaseMgungundlovu*)

#### 4.0 Introduction

This novel of Nyembezi's maturity is set in a peri-urban area. Nyanyadu, near Dundee, differs from Buthunqe because it is served by a railway station, has a church and a primary school. The people are westernized agriculturalists and pastoralists, and are ruled by a chief. Change has therefore taken the form of a switch to a money economy, to school education and to Christianity. Ladysmith and its city life are not very far, but it could be hundreds of miles away for all the local people care.

Into this idyllic environment suddenly plunges the whirlwind of Ndebenkulu, who introduces himself as an *Isikhwaya* (Esquire) and *Inkinsela* (V.I.P.), who immediately sets the aims of change by a comparison with the standards of white people. He says, in fact, that he is known by many respectable whites: he speaks their language, and possesses several cars. He has close business ties with them, and he offers to put them at the service of the local people who are rather distressed by the Government's Land Rehabilitation Act of 1945. The Act requests black farmers to limit their livestock in order to avoid soil erosion. The prospect of reducing their cattle, which constitutes the core of their wealth, is viewed with extreme consternation. Ndebenkulu ('Big Lip') proposes to sell the cattle for R160 per head – an extraordinary price for the 1940's – and to make all the Nyanyaduans very rich. After long discussions, Mkhwanazi (Ndebenkulu's host) and the men of Nyanyadu agree to the sale, in spite of the objections of MaNtuli (Mkhwanazi's wife) and other women and young men who mistrust Ndebenkulu. Mkhwanazi's son, Themba, brings in a detective, who recognizes Ndebenkulu as a conman and a trickster that has been active in several parts of the

country. The conman is arrested as he is about to board the train to Pietermaritzburg with Nyanyadu's cattle.

The salvation of Nyanyadu is affected by the intelligence, courage, vision and outspokenness of MaNtuli, a wife who is constantly told by her husband that her place is in the kitchen. She represents change that is taking place in Zulu society: from a strict patriarchal home system to one of co-operation between equal partners; from forms of oppression and abuse, to a life of respect and attention to the other person's opinions.

#### **4.1 General perspective on change**

Karl Marx (cf Abrams, 1988:218) maintains that social change is always driven by changes in the means of wealth production; in the present case, from a cattle-centred economy to a market economy.

Social change entails a point of departure and one of arrival. Here I mean departure from the traditional position of oppression and stereotyping, and arrival to a situation of mutual respect and equality. Women are at the vanguard of change because they are in a situation that urgently demands change, especially with regard to their rights, their role in society, and the position of their children.

Men will put obstacles in the way of change: they have got the most to lose. But those men that understand will find a much better, healthier and happier society waiting at the end of the process. Prejudices are difficult to identify, and therefore to defeat. And Nyembezi uses his subtle irony to show how people act according to prejudice, how the male-dominated discourse prevails, and how attentive one must be not to be led astray by stereotypes.

The novel can be considered an "élite African story" because it reflects on certain elements of the new African middle class, such as school and college education, -

Themba, Mkhwanazi's son, for instance, goes to college - the houses are built in a western style (e.g. Mkhwanazi's house); money economy has replaced barter, and the people have taken up Christianity. These changes should be reflected also in new attitudes towards women.

Although the times considered in the novel have changed from the times of yore, as has the system of social education, Mkhwanazi can be seen as a typical man, conscious of his rights, and convinced and boastful of his superiority. This is evidenced by his behaviour towards MaNtuli when she tries to advise him about the sale of cattle. He discards her views as uninformed and childish. Furthermore, he believes that the cattle belong to "*Amadlozi*" the ancestors, and it is his right to make decisions regarding the cattle because he is the direct male descendant of the family ancestors.

Literature reflects social conflicts. Family conflicts are naturally at its center. Traditional perceptions dominate the minds and actions of characters, but the way these are utilized in fiction demonstrate the author's social commitment and engagement towards change. Sibusiso Nyembezi demonstrates the need for change by revealing the weaknesses of the patriarchal society.

In the African tradition the status of women is clearly defined. As a stranger who joins a clan from outside, a wife is viewed with the suspicion reserved to all strangers. Therefore, she is forbidden from taking part in decision-making activities. Mkhwanazi attempts to perpetuate this stereotype. He even says that MaNtuli's place is in the kitchen and that she is not supposed to have a say in any financial matters. In a patriarchal or patrilineal society, the woman thus becomes an instrument — a tool — for the continuation of the male's lineage. Qunta maintains that:

Women cannot afford to leave their fate in the hands of males since the male-dominated system has provided men with a status that allows them to abuse women. African women must speak for themselves. They should

decide for themselves who they are, where they are going, what obstacles face them and how to remove these. (Qunta,1987:13)

It is against this background that one finds authors like Nyembezi in *Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu* (1961) and Molefe in *Ikhiwane Elihle* (1985) using characters like MaNtuli and Thoko to portray the protest of women. These characters attempt to break away from the ties of tradition and set themselves up as agents of change. According to the Zulu custom, a woman in the house of her husband is subjected to certain constraints. *Hlonipha*, respect, obedience and humility are the cornerstones of women's expected behaviour. These are emphasised within the family, i.e. respect for elders, and in marriage wives must respect their husbands. The argument between Mkhwanazi and his wife about the sale of cattle is taken as a sign of disrespect on the part of MaNtuli. She is not supposed to argue with her husband according to the Zulu traditional system. And yet, already in 1815 Alberti (in Hammond-Tooke, 1993:126) stated that :

A woman is in possession of that gentle authority which she exercises over her men, and by means of which she obtains influence and standing. This power is undoubtedly based upon respect. . . . A man would never do anything without the wife's approval.

#### **4.2 The author's role in the text**

The relationship between the author and the work he or she produces has been challenged since the 1940s and early 1950s. The challenge is based on the traditional assumption that the author is the originator and producer of a literary work. Our literatures reflect the attitudes, beliefs and assumptions that prevail in our societies. *Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu* clearly shows these assumptions and perceptions of male dominance over females. Men in the traditional Zulu system regard their wives as their properties, and as people who have no say in matters that require a higher intellect. Mkhwanazi's attitude is therefore the result of social culture rather than of the author's originality.

Barthes (1968) argues that it is the language that speaks and not the author. We need to abandon an author-centered approach if we are to realize the full range of meanings contained within a literary text. Nyembezi's work reflects the conflict between tradition and innovation with regard to women's social roles.

MaNtuli in this novel represents the emerging stirrings of powerful women movements to challenge the established male domination system.

Barthes concludes that the "multiplicity" of meanings that make up the text are focused on the reader and not on the author. He says that unity of the text lies not in its origin but in its destination. The author's role in the text is that it functions or serves an ideological purpose. Authors are commonly represented as being at the source of creative talent, genius and imagination. However, they reflect the attitudes and perceptions of where we come from. Nyembezi tries to portray these attitudes and assumptions by showing how his characters feel, act and react when faced by problems or conflicts.

#### **4.3 The Marxist theory regarding women in literature**

As mentioned earlier, the Marxist theory emphasizes that social change is caused by economic production forces which impel the rich classes to come to terms with the working classes. Women form part of the working classes like the men. They find themselves doubly oppressed: by the boss at work and by the husband at home. The initial Marxist approach to women was one of social levelling: they had to be treated like men. This meant that they could not expect any privilege, such as maternity leave, health considerations, or anything like that. In more recent years Marxist scholars have begun to apply to women the same criteria as they had applied to the most oppressed of the working classes, and to consider the need for a better deal for women workers in general.

Marxist critics further maintain that the social situation, the class struggle, the economic status, all can exercise a decisive influence on the writer and his portrayal of characters. It is important to keep this theory in mind when analyzing what is said about women characters. Marxism's primary concern is with the social rather than the individual. In *Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu*, the general society expects certain behavioural patterns from MaNtuli, which involve loyalty to the husband, respect, hard work and humility. These are therefore taken for granted, because the norms and values of the society shape the behaviour of the individual from the womb to the tomb, especially when dealing with a female. A woman is not expected to challenge or go against these norms and values. Our novel tries to uncover and challenge these biases. Nyembezi does this by confronting Mkhwanazi and MaNtuli to expose the shortcomings of the system of patriarchy whereby a man has all the powers and fulfils a leadership role, while a woman has no responsibility and no ability for anything of value.

#### **4.4 A critique of *Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu***

Nyembezi aims to undermine the prejudices that men entertain about the status and the role of women in society, and to foster courageous social change in the spheres of education, law and economy. This is revealed by the attitudes that MaNtuli shows with regard to what Mkhwanazi stands for, and her strong challenge with regard to the sale of the cattle, traditionally regarded as the family wealth and inheritance. She seems to request a re-definition of the division of tasks and labour in the running of the household and the use of economic resources. She is an outspoken person who represents women who voice their dissatisfaction.

Nyembezi introduces a number of arguments with regard to the undermining of the traditional patriarchal system. Firstly, Themba, Mkhwanazi's son, is by no means the "extension" of his father, as is traditionally the case. He has inherited a critical mind from his mother, and has developed it further by his studies.

Traditionally Themba would be expected to back his father over the decision to sell the cattle, but he doesn't, as he takes his mother's side against the sale. He thus becomes part of the challenging party. He also tries to convince his father that Ndebenkulu is a crook that has come to rob them of their cattle.

MaNtuli says, at different stages, that she suspects Ndebenkulu because:

- i. He talks too much, like a trickster, often repeating himself;
- ii. He does not know how to behave in her house, where he is a guest;
- iii. He shows no respect for women;
- iv. He promises too much, which means he is insincere;
- v. He sports a suspicious large tooth, like a trickster.

Ndebenkulu suspects that MaNtuli and Themba might uncover his tricks. He retorts by poisoning Mkhwanazi's mind against his wife and son:

*Kodwa sengiyabona ukuthi kwenza nje umqondo obuthaka womuntu wesifazane, umqondo ongakwazi ukuqikelela ingozi. (1961:44)*

I now realize that it is because of the feeble-mindedness of a woman, a mind that is incapable of seeing danger.

To which Mkhwanazi responds affirmatively: *Impela mnumzane* (1961:44), (Yes, indeed, Sir!). Language is never neutral but illustrates the tendencies of the dominant group. The way these two men speak shows great disrespect for women: it is sexist language. Ndebenkulu uses bitter irony because he has been touched on a raw spot: mother and son know what he is, although they cannot prove it yet. Scorn is the coward's answer when he cannot find a defence.

The assertion that rural women are even less intelligent than women in urban areas might show that oppression is even stronger in rural areas. In the following extracts, the narrator reports what men say about women. Ndebenkulu persists with his general accusation.

*Ehhe, ngiyabazi kakhulu abantu besifazane abanawo umqondo ohluzekile, umqondo ofana nowethu thina madoda, cha abanawo. Baze babe ngcono abantu*



*besifazane basemadolobheni. Laba basemaphandleni bayingozi. (1961:44)*

Yes, I know women very well. They do not have an intelligent mind, like us men. Women in the cities are much better. The ones in the rural areas are dangerous.

This is truly a trickster's ploy to win Mkhwanazi over. Ndebenkulu's stumbling block in his evil mission is MaNtuli, and he wants to discredit and belittle her by all possible means. He makes use of stereotypes against women in order to win Mkhwanazi's confidence and split him from his wife. Mkhwanazi agrees with what has been said by Ndebenkulu:

*UNdebenkulu ungivezele iqiniso nami ekade ngilisola lokuthi abafazi basemaphandleni umqondo wabo ubuthuntu, uphenduka kancane okwesondo lenqola. (1961:48)*

Ndebenkulu has told me a truth that I had long suspected, that rural women's minds are weak. They turn slowly like the wheel of a cart.

Mkhwanazi is happy to be able to belittle his wife: even Ndebenkulu agrees that rural women have little up top! It is surprising though that he should utter such words, as he does not have any contact with urban women. But Ndebenkulu's word is gospel, when it comes to denigrating women who are showing greater acumen than men. Now that Mkhwanazi is sure to be superior to his wife, he might show his superiority with a chauvinistic act: he threatens his wife with physical violence!

*Iyekeleni le nto ngoba niyangithukuthelisa. Ngizothi ngisuka lapha ngibe ngilimaza umuntu. (1961:50)*

Stop that, MaNtuli, because you make me angry. I might begin to harm someone.

The threat to inflict physical violence is a sign of moral cowardice on the part of Mkhwanazi. In such incidents, men usually try to take refuge in their traditional role, and are not afraid to express deep-seated feelings of superiority, of privilege,

of oppression towards women. While women initially react by trying to reason with their men-folk, they later use irony to avoid the catastrophe that men are about to bring on the whole social fabric.

Dialogue can reveal not only the character of an individual but also the emotional tensions experienced in a given situation. MaNtuli says:

*Woshi. Luyavutha impela lolu thando lwakho nesikwaya.  
Usuzakusihlabisa nokusihlabisa. (1961:72)*

Wow, you are really serious about this esquire of yours. You have even thought of slaughtering a ram for him.

MaNtuli is resentful of her husband's behaviour towards Ndebenkulu, when the stranger treats her badly. Mkhwanazi responds by repeating his threat of violence:

*Uthandelani ukuba ngize ngenze into engingayifuni,  
ngikubeke isandla kukhona nomuntu wokuhamba.  
(1961:68)*

Why do you want me to do something I do not like,  
physically punishing you in front of a stranger?

Physical violence against women and children cannot be culturally or legally condoned, and remains a sign of moral bankruptcy: a disturbing everyday occurrence in our society that proves the moral superiority of the victims rather than their guilt. We saw in the previous chapter how in *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* physical punishment was widely used in a traditional setting.

Themba, like MaNtuli, has always been suspicious about Ndebenkulu and feels uneasy about the amount of money he is offering for the cattle. Returning from an errand, he finds Ndebenkulu reviewing the cattle with his father, and realizes that his father is taken in by Ndebenkulu's false promises: *Inyoni isingene esifeni* (1961:114): 'The bird has entered the trap'.

Mkhwanazi confesses to MaNtuli that Ndebenkulu has persuaded him to sell, and he considers Ndebenkulu a saviour. He even says: *Ucilo uwele enkundleni* (1961:125): ('The lark has dropped in the yard'), meaning, "We have been kissed by good fortune." Selling an ox for R160 is a real fortune.

According to Karl Marx, ideological systems are the product of social and economic realities and ultimately reflect the ideas of the dominant class. He further contends that culture, an ideological system, cannot be separated from the historical conditions in which human beings create their material existence. This profound assertion by Marx is exemplified when MaNtuli says:

*Ungazihluphi ngokungibiza, sizobe sikhona noThoko.* (1961:150)  
(Do not bother to call me, we shall be there with Thoko)

*UMaNtuli noThoko basuka baqonda ekhishini bafike benza imisebenzi eqondene nabo yasekhishini.* (1961:151)

MaNtuli and Thoko went straight to the kitchen and busied themselves with kitchen chores.

According to the traditional division of labour, the kitchen is the woman's kingdom. Out of the kitchen she has no saying, no expertise, no authority. And yet there is nothing intrinsically feminine in cooking. In fact most of the famous chefs in the catering world are men. It is just a worldwide custom that assigns women to the kitchen, to be at the men's service. Men have made their dominion the more challenging world of war and hunting, or of politics and business. Matters dealing with the livestock were by tradition dealt with by the head of the family - *uSokhaya* in the Zulu tradition. It is not surprising therefore to observe Mkhwanazi claiming that he has the power to make decisions regarding the sale of "his" cattle. The cattle are the property of the patriarchal lineage, from the ancestors to the present male heir. Women who marry into a family can have no involvement in decisions relating to the cattle. This prevents women from sharing in the power afforded by the main source of family wealth.

When Mkhwanazi plays down MaNtuli's advice that he must consult the chief regarding a tribal meeting, MaNtuli responds:

*Hayi-ke amadoda ahlale ezethemba eyawo imiqondo.  
Elomfazi alithathwa, likhunjulwa sekonakele. (1961:107)*

Men only trust their own mind. A woman's advice is not considered:  
it is only remembered when there is a disaster.

She clearly refers to the bond now established between Mkhwanazi and Ndebenkulu, and the fact that her husband would rather trust a stranger than his own wife, except if some disaster should befall the family. And yet Ndebenkulu himself confesses that the land is no longer safe, and that there are tricksters (like himself) at large.

*Izwe leli, Mkhwanazi, selifuna ukuba umuntu abohlala ewavulile amehlo,  
ngoba seziningi izimpisi lapha phandle, ezihamba zembethe izikhumba zemvu. (1961:15)*

This land is no longer safe, Mkhwanazi. One must keep his eyes wide open all the time, because there are many hyenas dressed as sheep.

Ndebenkulu cleverly plays the role of the black saviour of Nyanyadu, who has come to help them at a very difficult juncture. Most people, even if after many hesitations, fall for him, but not MaNtuli. This is how the trickster addresses the gathered gentlemen of Nyanyadu:

*Muzi waseNyanyadu, siyazi thina esihlala emadolobheni amakhulu  
ukuthi kukhona abantu abaqoqa izimali beziqoqela lowo ohluphekile,  
kanti phinde ngiye kuye, nathi esithi siyasiza sibonakala sinjengabo.  
(1961:11)*

Nyanyaduans! We who live in big cities know that there are people who trick those who are in deepest need by extorting money as if they were going to make a present. Even we, who are helping people, are blamed by the society and identified as tricksters.

Ndebenkulu mystifies his speech by maintaining his connection with white people of the highest social standing. MaNtuli, Thoko and some of the people of Nyanyadu are apprehensive and distrustful of Ndebenkulu, afraid of falling into

his traps. Nyembezi uses dialogue artistically to convey the theme, as in the following example:

*Kubuhlungu kabi mama ukuba yingane ngoba elengane izwi alithathwa noma ingane iveza amaqiniso. Kodwa wena mama awusaboni ngani isizathu esenza lomfokazi abize amanani amakhulu? Awuboni ngani ukuthi wenzela khona lokho ukuba nicabange njengoba ucabanga nje bese nibhajwa esifeni asesicuphe ngobuhlakani nobugebengu obukhulu? Lo muntu ufuna simcabange engumuntu omkhulu kakhulu yikhona sizolala ngqu, asengule kahle-ke. (1961:120)*

It is painful mother to be a child because the child's word is never taken seriously even if the child is speaking the truth. Do you mean to tell me that you do not see the reason for the man's exorbitant prices? Can't you see that he wants you to think like this so that you can be caught in his trap laid with great cunning? This man is a hoax, mother. He is hoodwinking us with his bogus status so that we can become easy prey for him.

Mkhwanazi and Ndebenkulu say that MaNtuli is unintelligent, but she is not. In fact, Mkhwanazi's last sentence in the novel: *Kazi uyothini uMaNtuli?* (What will MaNtuli say?), acknowledges that she was right from the beginning. MaNtuli sees through Ndebenkulu from their first encounter, when Ndebenkulu falls from the ox-cart. Through her children, MaNtuli is able to unmask the trickster. By speaking to other women, MaNtuli spreads her strong suspicions regarding Ndebenkulu and is able to delay the wholesale disaster of Nyanyadu. MaShezi advises MaNtuli to treat her stranger (Ndebenkulu) with respect because she (MaNtuli) does not know where she will land in future, that is, she might become a stranger herself. MaNtuli answers:

*Akazi yini yena ukuthi ithi ingahamba idle udaka?*  
(referring to Ndebenkulu) (1961:12)

Doesn't he know that when one is away from home, one eats mud?

This proverb implies that when one is away from home one should not be choosy. This clearly shows that MaNtuli is resentful and suspicious of Ndebenkulu from

his arrival. MaNtuli's actions have a positive economic repercussion for the family of Mkhwanazi as well as the whole of Nyanyadu.

Nyembezi presents two different settings in this narrative, the rural and the urban setting. In the rural setting the chief is the overseer and the provider for the nation, according to the social system of the Africans. Nyembezi chooses Nyanyadu artistically because Ndebenkulu can easily manipulate the people of Nyanyadu to his own advantage. They are trustful; they still live close to the soil, which they cultivate for food and pasture; the livestock is their wealth. They seem comfortable in the environment. Very few seem to have had any school education. But Themba, a young person who is on holiday from college, is mentioned as better educated than the rest. This becomes an opportunity for Ndebenkulu to exploit the situation. He comes to Nyanyadu with the sophistication of urban life, his alleged status and his connections with the white people, his writing of the letter to Mkhwanazi, as opposed to the oral tradition in Nyanyadu. He mentions the people he has helped and blows his own trumpet, a behaviour that is untypical of a wealthy businessman. He despises the means of transport available at Nyanyadu, the ox-cart as opposed to the many splashy cars he possesses. He says: *Nisahamba ngekalishi? Aphi amabhasi?* (You still travel by ox-cart? Where are the buses?)

The term *Isikwaya*, "esquire", sounds highly respectable to the people of Nyanyadu. But Themba explains to his parents that it is an empty title given out of courtesy. Supposed urban sophistication and the simple ways of life of the Nyanyadu people render it easy for Ndebenkulu to exploit the people and the situation. Themba says:

*Kodwa ukuthi uyisikwaya akusho lutho, Baba. Nami Baba bangangibhalela.* (1961:50)

To call one Esquire, father, does not mean anything. They could write that for me as well.



Mkhwanazi keeps saying that Themba is constantly trying to downplay Ndebenkulu's social status. Mkhwanazi even becomes furious about these remarks. He says:

*Thula; thula. Nx, unawo wona umlonyana wokungibuza ukuthi asidle kanjani kanti nguwe lona ongiholela amanzi ngomsele? Washo uMkhwanazi esondela kuThemba sengathi usefuna ukumthutha ngempama futhi. (1961:163)*

Stop this nonsense. Keep quiet. Nx. Do you have the mouth to ask how we should eat, yet you put me in such a dangerous situation? Mkhwanazi said this moving towards Themba as if he intended to slap him.

#### **4.5 Political and economic position of women in the household**

Bearing and rearing children make it necessary for women to be based at home. Therefore gardening, house cleaning, cooking, sewing, become the kitchen chores for women, while men take charge of what they consider as more important, external and mentally challenging tasks, such as politics and government. In the texts that we are analysing, it would appear that Zulu culture and many other cultures have led women to occupy the lowest rung of the socio-political ladder. While many women have accepted this condition, others haven't. Indeed, this culture does not represent the ideas of women but, rather, those of men.

While MaNtuli and Thoko keep themselves busy in the kitchen, Mkhwanazi and Ndebenkulu discuss matters of economic importance, the sale of cattle. Mkhwanazi poses as the family provider and wields a degree of economic power that can be equalled by no one in the household. On the contrary, his wife is economically powerless, and since wealth and politics are inextricably intertwined, she appears to have no political power at all. This is the situation that our Zulu literary texts reflect, which shows the political and economic powerlessness of women in the household. Nevertheless, it is possible for change to be accepted as long as it is beneficial to the society. That is why in my chosen

novels women come out strongly against such conservative assumptions of male dominance and are not afraid to voice their opinions. Sibiya, a strong critic and a feminist, argues that:

These man-made barriers should stimulate more innovation. Woman in her endeavour for change often has to endure unfair and false accusations that are aimed at making her feel guilty about her achievements, thus demotivating and distracting her from reaching her fullest potential. (1989:3)

Sibiya argues that even if women make attempts to reach their highest potentials in different aspects of life, there will always be attempts by men to discourage them. We have seen that Mkhwanazi thinks that a woman's intelligence is just like that of a child:

*Eka Themba noMaNtuli yibuyisele eceleni, Ndebenkulu.  
Abafazi nabantwana yinto yinye. (1961:151)*

Put Themba's and MaNtuli's issue aside, Ndebenkulu.  
Women and children are the same.

Here Mkhwanazi declares his dislikes for both women's and children's minds. He implies that a woman's mind is not fully developed, and is thus incapable of carrying out higher intellectual exercises. This is one of the reasons why Mkhwanazi decides to continue with the sale of cattle despite MaNtuli's objections.

*Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu* portrays women as an economically marginalized, powerless, and politically repressed group. Perhaps the meeting called by Ndebenkulu to discuss the sale of cattle and his so-called vision of an economically vibrant Nyanyadu is a comprehensive summary of the socio-political status of women in this novel. Interestingly, women are not invited to attend this meeting because they have no cattle and therefore cannot participate in such discussions. It should be borne in mind that this is not to imply that Zulu



literature fosters or endorses gender inequality but it reflects women's socio-political status.

Nyembezi appears critical of the traditional patriarchal system. He puts MaNtuli at the centre of the whole novel and uses her as a key or solution to the whole problem. He reveals the role a woman can play in critical situations. Though MaNtuli is aware of the position of women in Zulu society, she is an outspoken person who challenges these man-made discourses. MaNtuli does not believe that because she is a woman, she cannot voice her feelings. She believes that since she is an important member of the family, it is her right to say what she feels about Mkhwanazi's proposal to sell the cattle. Mkhwanazi believes that what is right for him does not necessarily have to be right for MaNtuli. This is the reason why Mkhwanazi and MaNtuli cannot agree. This division in Mkhwanazi's family becomes Ndebenkulu's loophole and he tries to exploit the situation that prevails between Mkhwanazi and his wife. Ndebenkulu applies the ancient policy of 'divide and rule'. Dale Spender (1980) argues that women have been oppressed by a male-dominated language. If we also accept Foucault's argument that what is "true" depends on who controls discourse, then it is apparent that men's domination of discourse has trapped women inside a male "truth". This has always been the case when one looks at Zulu literature, especially women characters, it appears as if women have internalized and acculturated men's domination over them, accepting it as normal. MaNtuli presents the opposite side. From this viewpoint it makes sense for women writers to contest men's control of language rather than create a separate, specifically "feminine" discourse.

Robin Lakoff (1980) presents the opposite view to that of Spender. She believes that women's language is actually inferior since it focuses on the "trivial", the frivolous, the unserious and stresses personal emotional responses. Male utterances, she argues, are "stronger" and should be accepted by women if they wish to achieve social equality with men. Most feminists, however, consider that

women have been brainwashed by this type of patriarchal ideology that produces stereotypes of strong men and feeble women. Nyembezi attempts to undermine and expose the weakness of this stereotypical ideology. This novel presents a classic example of an intelligent and active woman who is prepared to challenge her husband's decisions.

The feminist psychoanalytic approach to femininity differs greatly from Spender's and Lakoff's. Its point of departure is that of the unconscious. The psychoanalytic approach breaks away completely from biologism by associating the female with those processes that tend to undermine the authority of male discourse. The texts selected in this research clearly show women as agents of change in our changing society. For example, MaNtuli portrays the protest of women. She attempts to break away from the ties of tradition and sets herself up as an agent of change. This protest is visible again in Spender's remark that:

While for men, every appointment of a man as head, as director, as warden, as official, may 'prove' men are the best candidates, for women this constitutes proof that men have set up the system so that it works in the interests of men.  
(1980:51)

#### 4.6 Conclusion

*Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu* presents a clear example of the attitudes of traditional male characters and their perceptions about the role that women are supposed to play within the family. The male perceptions are clearly traditional and conservative, in spite of the tremendous cultural, economic and social changes that have taken place in society. Mkhwanazi represents the patriarchal stereotypes that men have over women. Nyembezi exposes these attitudes with irony and detachment while revealing their weakness and failures, especially at a time of profound transformations.

My analysis has attempted to deconstruct Mkhwanazi's stereotypes by examining phrases and episodes that clearly show their weaknesses. The contrast between the supposedly superior attitudes of the male characters and the 'feeble' arguments of MaNtuli ends in a complete failure for the first and an overwhelming vindication for the second, especially when Ndebenkulu is caught by the police at the station, on the point of causing a major catastrophe for the whole Nyanyadu community. Mkhwanazi finally realizes his foolishness in listening and trusting Ndebenkulu.

The following chapter presents the text *NgumButhuma-ke Lowo*, from D.B.Z. Ntuli's book *Amawisa*. This short story investigates women's position in a polygamous marriage, which opens the way to further manifestations of unrestrained patriarchal abuse.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### WOMEN'S SUBMISSIVENESS IN A POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGE

(D.B.Z. Ntuli's *NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo*)

#### 5.0 Introduction

I have discussed some aspects of polygamy in chapter three, with reference to Masovenyeza's dealings with his wives. In chapter four Nyembezi does not put polygamy into the picture of Nyanyadu at all; he is in fact writing what some critics have called "an élite African novel" that reflects the values of the emerging middle class, for whom polygamy is a retrogressive practice.

David Hammond-Tooke (1993) reports a survey done by a Mr Perrin in the 1840's in an area in the KZN south coast between UMzumbe and the Ifafa river.

Of 201 married men, 52 men have one wife each; 54 men have 2 wives each; 33 men have 3 wives each; 23 men have 4 wives each; 16 men have 5 wives each; 9 men have 6 wives each; 6 men have 7 wives each; 5 men have 8 wives each; 2 men have 10 wives each; 1 man has 13 wives. 201 men have 600 wives. This gives an average of nearly 3 wives to a man. Although 52 have only 1 wife each, yet these are chiefly young men, who in the course of time will have as many wives as their means will allow. (Hammond-Tooke, 1993:118)

Polygamy, however, in one form or another, has not disappeared, as proved by the frequent references to it in Zulu literature during the last 30 or 40 years. In traditional settings, especially rural areas, there is a substantial number of men who still follow the custom. In urban and peri-urban areas the number of men with more than one family (one official and other unofficial and often hidden away) is seemingly increasing at the same rate as wealth and salaries are increased. There is also a substantial number of broken marriages, divorces, and second or third marriages, which are sometimes viewed as subsequent polygamy.

The present chapter takes its move from D.B.Z. Ntuli's short story *NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo* (That is indeed Mbuthuma), from *Amawisa* (Knobkerries, 1982), which I regard as a desperate attempt by the author to warn his readers about the possible inhuman abuses in polygamy, where a man wields absolute power over a number of wives, and is tempted to demonstrate his authority by cruel practices that reveal his cowardice and social incompetence. Women forced subservience is equivalent to slavery, and the chain can only be broken through a serious and concerted effort by the external forces of society.

After a summary of the short story, the chapter introduces a comparison among some family systems in the world. It then discusses patriarchy, as the source of the oppression manifested in polygamy, and highlights the weakness and cowardice involved in the exercise of violence within the family. Women's traditional response is one of compliance and obedience, but modern feminists agree that this should be stopped at any cost.

### **5.1 A summary of *NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo***

The setting of this short story is a rural location. The story deals with Mbuthuma, a polygamist, who has three wives, MaKheswa, MaMfeka and MaHlengwa, over whom he exercises a tyrannical rule. Mbuthuma is annoyed because his wives have left his '*umcakulo*' (traditional eating dish) in the yard. According to him, this shows their laziness and disrespect, for which they deserve severe punishment. After all, a wife is considered the husband's property, and he can do as he pleases with her, and beat her for infidelity, laziness or witchcraft. Mbuthuma is described as an unpredictable and controversial character who expects his word to be law, as is reflected in the short story title: 'This is Mbuthuma indeed!'. His wives are used to severe and cruel punishment. They have no escape or alternative, because their fathers would send them back to their husband rather than return the *ilobolo* cattle, and their mothers and grandmothers would show no sympathy for them, because they accept abuse as the lot of a

married woman. They now tremble in fear of Mbuthuma's punishment: *Kazi sizokwenziwani-ke namhlanje?* (What type of punishment are we going to be subjected to today?). In a previous occasion Mbuthuma punished them by binding them together with a rope and forcing them to walk around the kraal under the threat of his sjambok. Luckily an elderly man from Dlakhohlwe arrived on the scene and convinced Mbuthuma to stop that inhuman treatment. The women were saved just in time. Today Mbuthuma tells them that he is going to punish them by squeezing their breasts to milk them, and then give their milk to his dog. The women cry loudly, and are luckily heard by MaHlengwa's brother, who comes to their rescue. He engages in a fierce fight with Mbuthuma and administers him a lesson he will never forget. In fact after that Mbuthuma never punished his wives again. In the folktales, a brother normally rescues a girl from a marauding *izimuzimu* (Cf Canonici, 1996:95). Mbuthuma is culturally seen as an ogre.

## ✿ 5.2 Free love, monogamy and polygamy

Nobody knows how early in history the organization of the family unit as we know it must be placed. Marx and Engels hold that the core of the original unit was constituted by females, who stayed at home and looked after the children, while the men went away hunting and bonding with their male companions. On their return home the men would not keep to the same sexual partner, therefore the children belonged to the mother, and the system of matriarchy and polyandry prevailed. This theory served as the basis for explaining the supposed struggle between males and females (class struggle is the center of the Marxist theories), to be overcome by free love. And also for the U.S.S.R.'s early policies of discouraging marriage in favour of free sex and of gathering all children in state institutions, where they could be brain-washed in Marxist theories without interference from supposedly reactionary parents. These policies implemented by Lenin and Stalin proved disastrous. Instead of resulting in an increased number of children, which the Soviet Union desperately needed to replace the millions killed during World War One, free love resulted in no pair commitment, and therefore in

no family and no children. Stalin soon realized the error and abandoned the policy and its theoretical framework. The matriarchal system, however, is widely spread in Africa and elsewhere and is practiced among many nations.

The Bible presents the original monogamous marriage of Adam and Eve as the will of God and the ideal for humankind. Polygamy is seen as having been introduced by the line of Adam's reprobate son, Cain, and is therefore considered an imperfect form of marriage. Both late Old Testament and all New Testament texts uphold the idea that polygamy was only 'permitted' in olden times, and that gradual cultural development in humanity has resulted in a monogamous marriage system. Islam, however, allows a man to have up to four wives if he and the community think he is able to deal with them impartially and fairly.

Africa presents the whole spectrum of marriage systems, each recognized in particular cultures and settings. In some sections of the continent there is a dominance of polyandry (several men to one woman), mostly in matriarchal societies. We also find polygamy widely practised, especially in strongly patriarchal and conservative societies, where it is felt necessary in order to ensure the survival of the lineage, especially in the face of wide-spread infant mortality. The number of wives and cattle a man possessed, accompanied by a stout figure, were the marks of a successful *umnumzane* (Cf Canonici, 1996:203). Economic factors, the progress in women's education, the development of a culture of human rights, and the spreading of Christianity, however, have severely curtailed the practice of polygamy.

It is not my place to judge whether one system is better than the other. I can only remark here that, with better health services, the rate of infant mortality has decreased substantially, thus removing the fear that a man should have no offspring to continue his lineage unless he had several fertile wives. The main social reason for taking several wives no longer applies.

Furthermore, better educated women, often influenced by either religious or western cultural outlook, are no longer prepared to accept to share a husband's attentions and love. They see polygamy as a form of suppression of a woman's rights. Since both husband and wife are responsible for the birth of a child, these women see no reason why they should fight with other women to gain a position for their child in the eyes of his/her father. It is the father's duty to fully and equally provide for each of his children.

Women are further gaining their independence in the economic sphere. If they become convinced that their husband is not playing his full part as provider of financial and emotional stability, they are now quite capable to bid him farewell and to set off on an independent way of life. They are not particularly worried about their father having to return *ilobolo*: they did not ask for it, they did not gain anything from it: why should it become a chain round their necks?

The hierarchical system among right-hand and left-hand co-wives; their possible promotion to a home leadership role through their son; strong competition for the husband's favours for their children; the use of witchcraft to win pre-eminence in the *umuzi*, all these aspects are felt as unimportant and outdated, although they are still common in polygamous families.

Ntuli's short story presents the extremely disturbing scene of three co-wives, who are fighting for physical and emotional survival in a situation that is a reminder of an overtaken culture in which the patriarch was an absolute ruler, and even a tyrant if he so chose to. Ntuli is fond of experimenting with writing techniques. This short story, for example, is written illustrating the protagonist's (Mbuthuma's) perspective. This is partly achieved through the utilization of the so-called "free indirect speech", whereby the author descends into the protagonist's mind, reports his opinions, feelings, prejudices, but does not specify that they belong to the character and not to himself.



### 5.3 The patriarchal system and its possible abuses

It is useful to investigate the women's position in different societies to compare it with the position and role of women in the Zulu traditional system. Woman's subordination results not from her physical make up but from social arrangements traceable in history, which may therefore be changed, as it is happening in our South African societies.

Marxist anthropologists maintain that the basis for women's subordination lies in the family, which they see as an institution structured according to a system of dominant and subordinate roles. They explain that key features of the family in western societies are that it centres on a mating pair and its offspring, typically located within a single household. It is patrilineal, with descent and property passing through the male line; patriarchal with the authority invested in the male household head; and monogamous, at least in the enforcement of the rule that the wife has sexual relations only with her husband. The common double standard allows men far greater sexual freedom than women. Within such an institution, particularly when the woman has no job outside the house and no economic independence, women are the chattels or possessions of their husbands, their ornaments and objects of pleasure. This theory forgets, of course, that free marriage is out of love, and that family relationships are generally based on love rather than on class struggle.

According to psychoanalytic feminists, the common model of patriarchy entitles men to subjugate women. This universal system is pervasive in its social organization, durable over time and space, and triumphantly maintained in the face of occasional challenges. Psychoanalytic feminists acknowledge gender differences and gender inequality but do not justify gender oppression. It is possible to be different and to have different roles, but without being necessarily inferior. Mbuthuma treats his wives as the bottom of his properties. They cannot voice their fears or dissatisfaction against his actions.

Radical feminists maintain that all societies are characterized by oppression, whereby one group dominates the other groups on grounds of class, ethnicity, race, age, gender. Gender differences are at the basis of much oppression, especially through the patriarchal system. Through it men learn how to hold other human beings in contempt, to see them as non-human and to control them. This is what is evident in *NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo*. Within patriarchy men see and women learn what subordination looks like. Patriarchy creates guilt and repression, sadism, manipulation and deception, all of which drive men and women to other forms of tyranny. Mbuthuma's wives are kept in control and oppressed by the tyranny and abuse of their husband. They are treated as sub-human, with no feelings, easy to manipulate. One may argue, though, that excesses are not the rule, and that there is much to be said for a reasonable division of tasks and responsibilities within a loving family. Life is never a bed of roses, and there will always be pleasant and unpleasant tasks. Even the latter become bearable if shared and done out of love. If it were not so, no woman would accept to become a mother and to undergo childbearing pains, nor would a man accept the task of sustaining a family.

Feminist critics maintain that women are a uniquely effective means of satisfying male sexual desires. According to the Marxists, they have also become a useful labour force. They can also be ornamental signs of male status and power. As carefully controlled companions to both the child and the adult male, they are pleasant partners, sources of emotional support, and useful foils who reinforce, over and over again, the males' sense of their own significance and power. These useful functions mean that men everywhere seek to keep women compliant.

#### **5.4 Violence as a sign of moral weakness and cowardice**

Mbuthuma finds that he needs to exercise physical violence on his wives in order to demonstrate his superiority as head of the household. The practice seems to be an everyday occurrence. His wives know it too. But violence should be seen as

an admission of defeat by the attacker rather than by the weaker attacked. According to Lakoff (1968), family violence is a sign of intellectual and moral bankruptcy, as well as of a cowardice that shows a tremendous weakness, used whenever men run short of ideas to solve the problem at hand.

Mbuthuma's wives appear to have got used to the systematic abuse, and to send out unspoken messages that they are powerless to resist, thus encouraging the coward to take advantage of them. And yet, one would think that, given their number (three against one), they could overpower him. But when Mbuthuma faces another man, he is readily defeated. Mbuthuma seems quite satisfied in the pride of his superior power to watch his wives suffer and cry. He sees nothing wrong with the cruel and humiliating act of milking his wives and giving their milk, the source of his children's life, to his dogs. It is quite true that, by condescending to animals, one becomes inferior to them. MaHlengwa's brother luckily intervenes and saves the women. The narrator says:

*Usuka lapho uMbuthuma uyatetemuka, uyozihlalela emthunzini. (1982:74)*  
After that Mbuthuma saunters by and relaxes in the shade.

People like Mbuthuma believe that their wives are their property, whom they have every right to abuse and to torture. Physical violence on women is a sign of cowardice because they are physically weaker than men and some are scared to repay violence with violence. Mbuthuma now treats his wives as dirt: he does not want to dirty his hands hitting them any longer:

*Senganitshela-ke ukuthi angifuni ukungcolisa izandla  
zami ngokunishaya. Ngiyabona ukuthi niyadelela. (1982:75)*  
I have already told you that I do not want to dirty my hands  
hitting you. I can see that you are satisfied.

The abuses suffered by these women demonstrate that this kind of behaviour is possible. It is awful to see Mbuthuma place his wives below his dog:

*Awuzwa-ke, ngizowathola amasi kaHleKabanye. (1982: 76)*  
That's it. I will get HleKabanye's sour milk.

These women are tortured, abused and humiliated. Mbuthuma once tied them up like cows and forced them to walk around the cattle kraal. They are therefore his 'cows', and inferior to his dogs. How much lower is he prepared to throw them? He should realize that the lower he places them the lower he descends himself in the ladder of morality and social standing. His 'superior sex' cannot hold him up any longer. This is why even an older man is able to put Mbuthuma to shame, and MaHlengwa's brother can destroy his self respect in his own (Mbuthuma's) home.

The author dare not comment on the inhuman actions of his protagonist. He simply descends into Mbuthuma's conscience and describes the events from his character's point of view, thus revealing the unreachable baseness of a man who allows himself to become so depraved as to torture, humiliate and abuse his women. I have already mentioned that Ntuli achieves this descriptive feat by using the technique of the free indirect speech, which is particularly suitable to the short story. Thus Mbuthuma (and not the author) refers to his wives as: "*isigqala*", "*umvondovondo*", "*imfukumfuku*". "*Isigqala*" is a disparaging term that refers to a cow that produces little or no milk. "*Umvondovondo*" refers to a lanky person who walks clumsily and carelessly. "*Imfukumfuku*" may refer to a big fat female with large breasts. When this person walks, her whole body shakes. These words are all offensive when applied to a human being. Language is, of course, connotative of the attitudes of the dominant group. Thus, for example, traditionally if a man had more than one sexual partner, he would be called an *isoka* (popular lover); but if a woman had more than one lover she would be labelled "*isifebe*" (immoral person or prostitute).

Ntuli's short story provides a terrifying testimony of possible abusive non-status of women in a polygamous society. Mbuthuma does an inhuman and barbaric act:

*Abemcasulile-ke la makhosikazi amathathu. Kunokuba afake induku wathi uzowabophela. Baqala bathi uyadlala, kwaze kwakhala uswazi ezithweni kuMaKheswa, wagijima umntwana wabantu.* (1982:73)

The three wives had upset him. When he brought out a blanket, saying he would tie them up, they thought he was joking; but then he started hitting MaKheswa on her legs with a stick, and she ran.

Tying up the women and forcing them to run around the kraal like cows is inhuman, barbaric and degrading. Women must always be treated with the respect and dignity proper to their life-giving role in society. When the old man from Dlakhohlwe protests against Mbuthuma's actions, he unties his wives. The man's (a stranger) intervention demonstrates that what we are witnessing is extremely unusual, and is considered a disgusting excess by most people. Mbuthuma is evidently an atypical evil exception. The status and treatment of women in this short story is highly exaggerated, possibly to demonstrate the author's disgust and to provoke a deep reflection and discussion by all readers. Any form of physical violence and abuse must be condemned. No Zulu scholar would be able to prove that cruelty to one's wives was ever allowed or readily condoned. But few would state that abuses never took place.

In a traditional Zulu household jobs are clearly assigned to the various members, according to sex, age, health and inclination. Furniture and utensils are also assigned according to the same criteria. Special care is taken of anything that belongs to the family head. Even after his death he is believed to visit the family and to sit on his favourite stool. His eating utensils, his personal items, are broken or buried with him at his death. This is what the *umnumzane* expects, as a sign of respect. When Mbuthuma arrives home and finds his unwashed dish in the yard, he becomes furious, and starts performing like a madman out of control:

*Indaba isuswa umcakulo wakhe. Uthe uma efika  
wawubona uphandle. (1982:74)*

The trouble was triggered by his eating dish. When  
he came home, he found it lying outside.

A man does not wash his dish after eating, as this is the woman's task: she stays at home and looks after everything that relates to the house. Mbuthuma, however, is not justified in severely punishing his wives for such a trivial disattention.

Male chauvinists maintain that their position in the family is God given and untouchable. Women should simply accept this and knuckle down to a life of service. I have stated, however, that nothing in the physique determines that a woman should be subservient to man. The argument of God's will is therefore

untenable. Another argument states that women in rural areas are more oppressed than women in urban areas. This view is probably based on the fact that rural women are attached to family and tradition more than urban women. They have experienced little else, and are thus probably ready to put up with hard work and even abuse for the sake of their children. One should not think, however, that people with little schooling are incapable of being true ladies or true gentlemen in their relationships. School education does not always produce people with better social skills, when these are expressions of the aristocracy of the heart.

The narrator describes Mbuthuma as:

*Ngumdududla wakwabo. Yinkwishela. Izitho amagqikolo.*

*Umkhaba ungaka. Izihlathi zingaka. (1982:73).*

A big fat man, tough and strong. His legs are big and strong.

He has a big stomach. His cheeks are this big.

Being the head of the family, Mbuthuma assumes that everything about himself is positive: his physique is solid, strong and fat, which identifies him as a rich and prosperous man. He appears to be wanting for nothing. Mbuthuma gives himself an attractive and positive description while his wives receive a negative one, such as the following of MaHlengwa:

*Nasi-ke isigqigqi esinguMaHlengwa. Konke zigumbaxa nje.*

*Ngiyagcifiza, ngishikile, amabele bheka, imivingqavingqa. (1982: 73)*

Here is MaHlengwa, a short looking woman. All her body parts are large. She has big legs, a wide backside, heavy breasts and a number of body-folds.

Culture and language play a role in oppressing women. Here we see that what is considered a plus for a man (fat, large limbs, etc.) is considered a minus for a woman. Ntuli wants to conscientize society. He uses the old perceptions of women being shapeless, powerless, submissive and subordinate on purpose, to make people reflect, discuss and change.

### 5.5 Fertility and barrenness

In his 1993 *Izinganekwane, Anthology of Zulu Folktales* (pg 78) Canonici reports a James Stuart tale, *UDumudumu*, in which a king's favourite wife is barren, and envies her co-wives for at least giving birth to crow children for their husband. She is so brokenhearted that the ancestors, under the guise of doves,



take pity on her, scarify her and implant a seed that will grow into a boy and a girl twin pair, to the delight of the mother and the king.

Fertility, and especially the bearing of male children that will guarantee the continuation of the lineage, is traditionally viewed as the main task of a wife, the fulfilment of her marriage commitment, the repayment of the cattle that were paid for her. It was also the main cause of jealousy, envy and attrition among co-wives. A woman, in fact, was married into a clan, to guarantee its survival, and to ensure that the clan's ancestors had children and grandchildren to remember them. Obedience, respect, submission, as discussed in chapter three, were meant to guarantee that the blood of the ancestors would continue to flow. This is evident in Canonici's reading of the folktale tradition, that: "A girl seeking marriage must behave in a submissive and obedient way" (1988:29). Submission and humility in a bride were understood as making herself open and available for the task of bringing forth life. Such traditionally desirable attitudes manifested themselves long before marriage. A proverb states that girls must be respectful to everyone because they cannot predict whom they will marry:

*Ihlonipha nalapho ingeyukwendela khona.* (Nyembezi, 1954:11)  
She pays respect even where she will not marry.

A barren woman could be considered a witch, who prevented the continuation of the life-energy. *Ukwanda kwaliwa ngumthakathi* ("The increase was prevented by the witch"), proclaims another well-known Zulu proverb. While a western woman commits herself to a person in marriage, the African woman commits herself to the continuation of the clan's life. Therefore, bareness is despised, and a woman with many children is highly regarded. Schapera affirms:

A woman with many children was highly honoured. If she had none at all she was an object of pity often tempered with scorn, her husband's relatives would sometimes reproach her openly and treat her unkindly. In the old days there was apparently even a special mode of burying such a woman when she died: they used to bind her right arm on her back as if it was her child, or she was buried with her hands at the back. (1933:172)

The traditional woman, whose chores are mainly to work in the fields and to look after the children, has been substituted by a new breed of competent women,

capable of making a fair contribution towards the accumulation of the family wealth and even towards community development. Sibiya, a feminist, states:

This new breed will be found among women who are making inroads and advances in various professions, careers, and the business world. They are often referred to as aggressive and at times outstanding because of their ventures. (1990:3)

Some of the traditional roles and biases still occur, but to a lesser extent. And while in our society women still represent something of outstandingly good value, motherhood that is characterized by tenderness, love and care for children, modern husbands and wives tend to display greater care for each other than in the past. Motherhood is a function that should not be subordinated to pure financial considerations, or women risk losing the lofty social position that nature has given them. Unfortunately, as in everything else in life, where there is great goodness there is danger of great evil. Qunta (1987:75) offers some encouraging words to African women: They should not be overwhelmed by either feminist nor chauvinistic propaganda, but take stock of their own abilities, set themselves clear aims, and proceed with courage and determination.

## **5.6 Feminist consciousness and African literary criticism**

In most societies in the world boys were the first ones to make use of formal school education. It was felt that the boys were going to become leaders and needed to be educated, while women had no great need to go to school, as it was enough for them to be good housewives. As a consequence, schools, universities, and even sports fields, were considered the preserve of the boys. It is natural, therefore, to expect that most writers should be men. Apart from very limited exceptions, women came of age in education and in literature only in the last century, and achieved equality only recently. It is no surprise, then, that in Africa the first writers of importance were men, and that women appeared on the scene only during the last few decades. As usual, there are some notable exceptions.

And yet there is nothing in the creative techniques, in prose or poetry that should prevent women from achieving parity with men. In Zulu oral literature,



women had the fame of being great storytellers, while most of the *izimbongi* (traditional poets) were men. Finnegan argues that:

The limitations on this general mastery of the art of storytelling arise from local conventions about the age and sex of the narrators. In some areas it is the women, often the old women, who tend to be most gifted... Elsewhere it is the men who tend to be the experts. (1970:1)

Today, however, with the great development of African literature, several women of outstanding value have come to the fore, both as artists and as critics, occupying a considerable slice of this male-dominated field.

During the colonial period, the sex role distinctions common to many African societies supported the notion that western education was a barrier to a woman's role as wife and mother (because it would qualify her for jobs outside the house), and an impediment to her success in these traditional modes of acquiring status. With few exceptions, girls were not encouraged to attain formal education and especially higher education.

Nevertheless, several perspectives have come from African women in recent years. The African brand of feminism includes female autonomy and cooperation, an emphasis on nature over culture, the centrality of children, multiple mothering and kinship, the use of ridicule in African woman's worldview. A number of traditional rights and responsibilities of women allow us to conclude that the African woman is in practice much more a feminist than her European counterpart. Steady affirms:

True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and reliant. The majority of black women in Africa and the diaspora have developed these characteristics, though not always by choice. (1981: 36)

Steady's position is perhaps appropriate since she examines the socio-economic and class factors which contribute to African woman's oppression (economic exploitation and marginalization) and her responses to this general oppression (self reliance). The lack of choice in motherhood and marriage, oppression of barren women, enforced silence and a variety of other forms of oppression intrinsic to various societies which still plague African women's lives and must

inevitably be at the crux of African feminist theory. It appears as if the most important challenge to the African woman is her own self-perception, since it is she who will have to define her own freedom. Koine believes that progressive African women see the women's struggles for national liberation where the enemy is recognized. She maintains that:

The struggle for equal rights between the sexes is going to prove even more difficult than that of de-colonization because in essence it is a struggle between husband and wife, father and mother. (1983:33)

She further identifies polygamy, initiation rites and *ilobolo* as the most difficult of traditions to eliminate and the most oppressive to women. She says:

It is easier to eliminate the colonial, bourgeois influences that were imposed on us and identified with the enemy than to eliminate generations of tradition from within our own society. (1983:34)

No system should be institutionalized and mandated if it may infringe on the freedom and security of others. For instance, the woman's right to choose, without censure, should be respected. African feminism looks at traditional and contemporary avenues of choice for women. Many of the points mentioned above contribute to the development of a true African feminist theory. The connection between African and Western is that both identify gender-related issues and recognize women's position internationally as one of second-class status and "otherness" and seek to correct that. Yet, though, the concept may not enter the daily existence of the average women, and though much of what they understand as feminism is filtered through a media that is male-dominated and male-oriented, African women clearly recognize the inequities and, especially within the context of struggles for national liberation, are challenging entrenched male dominance. Theoretical African feminism understands the incorrectness of race, class and sex oppression. Consequently it realizes that there are black people who seek to overturn the oppressive structures of their societies.

## 5.7 Conclusion

*NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo* is a throwback to the worst scenario to be faced by a woman in a traditional and conservative environment, namely, the possible abuse

a woman could be exposed to in a polygamous marriage. It sounds impossible that a woman should voluntarily submit to such indignities. She is probably forced by a stern father who mistreats his children into obedience; or by financial difficulties that can only be solved by receiving *ilobolo*; or by juvenile infatuation with a man who talks like an angel but later behaves like an ogre. Once the marriage contract is sealed through the transfer of cattle, the gates of hell close and there is no escape. The only option is to ignore the husband's behaviour, to try to live in peace with one's co-wives, and to dedicate one's energies to the children, through whom one day there might be some form of liberation.

This chapter has also explored the use of violence in a relationship. Mbuthuma is ready to punish his weak wives, but he loses the fight when he faces MaHlengwa's brother, Ngqeku. Women appear physically weaker than men, and that big lump of Mbuthuma finds it a pleasure to torture them, while he is such a coward that cannot stand up to a real man, such as Ngqeku.

Language is another form of sexist oppression, as it reflects the norms accepted by men, who constitute the dominant group. The author hides behind his character to portray Mbuthuma through his own (Mbuthuma's) thoughts, observations, monologues. The result is so appalling that it forces people to think. Respect and obedience in marriage have also been explored. Women in a polygamous marriage must keep silent and comply with custom. Wives appear unable to challenge their husband and fight for their rights and freedom.

The following chapter constitutes a complete change of scene, as it introduces the novel *Ikhiwane Elihle*, by Molefe. The novel investigates the freedom modern women enjoy when they have reached financial independence. Like men, they can choose to marry or not to marry; to have one or more sex partner; to live a complete independent life or to associate with others, males or females. By examining the language for any sexual and gender stereotypes, as the second and third stages of feminist criticism suggest, some widely held ideas may come under the spotlight, creating uncomfortable feelings for many, especially the men.

## CHAPTER SIX

### IMAGE OF A FREE WOMAN

(*Ikhiwane Elihle*, by L. Molefe)

#### 6.0 Introduction

Molefe's novel is historically conditioned by a large number of factors affecting public morals, and therefore human sexuality and the new outlook on women in society. The Second World War brought the oversexed American G.I.s all over the world. Their fight for freedom from Nazism and tyranny was often interpreted as a fight for a freer society. The call for liberation was taken up by the American film industry, which was soon to enter every livingroom in the world with its TV soap operas, mini-series and general information, which all propagated the practices of the liberal society, based on economic prosperity rather than moral principles. Then the world witnessed the introduction of the birth control pill for women, which was meant to give women a fuller control over their reproductive faculty, but also introduced a level of sexual freedom never experienced before. The "winds of change" in Africa swept away political colonialism, and brought in freedom from restricting customs and traditions.

This chapter intends to explore some of the modern problems resulting from the free morality approach to sexuality, as exemplified in L. Molefe's 1985 novel *Ikhiwane Elihle* (The beautiful fig. Or: The beautiful fig on the outside might be rotten inside, as a Zulu proverb states). In the novel, Thoko (Joy), an attractive shebeen queen from Hammersdale, entertains sexual relationships with three men: Diesel, an earlier lover, who has just returned, duly married, from Maputo; Msiphozi, whom she truly likes because he is kind and considerate, although he is engaged to be married to Lindiwe; and Magaya, who helps her mainly with transport when she needs to have drinks brought to her shop: she says she is not really in love with him, but he is useful, and is easily repaid with a romp under the blankets. The novel revolves around the ingenious ways she invents to keep the

three men apart, in spite of her grandmother Thilayila's warnings that what she is doing flies in the face of traditional behaviour and she can only expect sorrow out of her multiple relationship. One day, in fact, Magaya catches Thoko in bed with Diesel and stabs him to death. He immediately takes Thoko and runs away with her, but Diesel's family find them and kill them both. Out of the three lovers only Msiphozi is left, to lick his wounds and to reflect on how stupidly he was seduced by a double-faced woman.

The present chapter analyses the novel from the point of view of the differences in attitudes and in language between men and women, as expressed by the author. While previously women were kept quasi-slaves by patriarchy, which imposed a strict control over their sexuality and reproductive faculty, they now enjoy a new freedom in their relationships. What used to be 'open hunting season' only for men, has now become possible to women as well, if they have the financial independence, the strength of character, the appeal, the beauty and winning ways to attract men. The morality of the situation, as expressed by Thoko's grandmother, does not seem to enter into the equation. Nor does any scruple about venereal diseases, or HIV/Aids. Promiscuity, coupled with superficial relationships, cannot lead to serious commitment, neither to a person nor to new life and family. But the 'new woman' is no longer concerned with her ability to fulfil her natural function of motherhood. All she seems to worry about is that she should be allowed to do whatever men do, and to behave freely as they do.

## **6.1 Gender marked language**

I have already explained that language is moulded to serve the interests of the dominant male group, to the point that in many African societies women are obliged to make use of *hlonipha* terms to avoid words and syllables that reflect the names of their in-laws. Such practice permeates most Zulu texts, but I find Molefe's novel particularly interesting from this point of view, and have therefore decided to concentrate on the gender aspects of the language used.

Linguistic differentiation according to gender seems to exist in all societies, but it varies from community to community, with considerable variations in different cultural and linguistic communities. Labov (1968) states that women show a special sensitivity to linguistic change and that the sexual differentiation of speech may play a major role in the mechanism of linguistic evolution. Robin Lakoff (1975) first popularized the argument that women mark, stylistically, their greater sense of difference or politeness. In twentieth century western societies it has been found that women use literary refined forms even in their casual speech.

Third World patterns of language variation, however, differ somewhat from Labov's model. In some non-western traditional communities women receive less formal education, and therefore have less access to higher-status national languages. Furthermore, women move less frequently in multilingual places of work. Consequently it is the women rather than the men who preserve the clearest markers of their speech community. Many linguists believe that the characteristic occupations of men and of women, the kinds of relationships with employees, general patterns of informal social networks, are mainly the cause of this gender differentiation. The linguistic changes and different speech patterns in gender-sensitive environment form the nucleus of my analysis of *Ikhiwane Elihle*.

The narrator plays an important role in channeling the attitudes of the reader. Thus Molefe describes Thoko in terms of what is appreciated by men:

*Laliyefeza, likhwifakhwifa amathana ezimpukane ngenkathi isitutubheka sesidudla sentokazi KaMncwabe simi indolohwane yesokudla incike esigxotsheni socingo.* (1985:1)

It was just drizzling when Mncwabe's well-rounded lady was standing with her right elbow leaning on a pole.

This is a sort of connotative description. Zulu men, both past and present, judge beautiful a woman by her moulded, well-fed, round body coupled with her facial beautiful features. Marx suggests that literature, history and culture cannot be divorced. Women must have certain qualities that will satisfy men, and not the

other way round. In other words, for women to thrive, they need to possess qualities that would be favoured by men, because, in a male dominated society, a woman is judged according to the appreciation of men. Simone de Beauvoir says:

Thus humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. She is not regarded as an autonomous being. She is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with reference to her; she is the subject; he is the absolute – she is the other. (1949:26)

There are many instances in this text where women are described in terms of appreciation by men. For example, Msiphozi admires Thoko at a distance:

*Yayisakhangwe nje wubugqizima bobududula bakhe. (1985:2)*  
He was mesmerized by her roundness.

Msiphozi later proposes love to Thoko and she accepts immediately. This is very un-African, because traditionally an African woman would initially refuse, but show some interest in the man, and eventually, after several approaches, she would agree to be courted by the man. Thoko here breaks all the rules. She reasons that in the same way that a young man is allowed to make advances to a woman at their first encounter, so should the woman be able to do the same. The text therefore shows the imbalance of treatment between males and females. The narrator continues:

*...Yawela ngokukhulu-ke ukukhululeka manje, akwaze kwafaka ukugxumagxuma (ukubhampa) phakathi. (1985: 3)*

... He non-chalantly crossed the road walking like a tsotsi.

In this case the readers are not supposed to judge Msiphozi's actions as improper, although our Zulu culture does not approve of such behaviour. The atmosphere created in the narrative presents Msiphozi as an adventurous lover (*Isoka*) since he is a man; but if a female should engage in similar behaviour, this would be described in negative terms, "*ubufebe*" (prostitution, immorality).

Hickman (1989) argues that women are usually described in terms of objects, or in association with food. He believes that this association is aimed at acculturating women in kitchen matters. The Zulu tradition expresses sexual conquests in terms of 'devouring', or *ukudla*. Msiphozi falls prey to the patriarchal stereotype, as he uses the opening line associated with a visit to the Executive Hotel, to eat dinner and to 'eat' each other afterwards:

*Ewu yeka sekuwumshoza wami lona, sesimi lapha ngoba silinde okuzosithatha siyongcebeleka eBuzenzeke. (1985:3)*

I imagine a situation where we might be standing like this, waiting for something to transport us to the Executive Hotel to have a nice time.

Sigmund Freud argues that men use psychology to infantilize women in order to oppress them, by first gaining their confidence and then get them into the sack. This could be exemplified by the way a man would refer to his girlfriend, wife or lover as: "*Ingane yami*" – literally "My baby", never considering her real age. It is well known that Freud was a misogynist.

## **6.2 Old women as guarantors of morality**

Morality means the rightness and wrongness of an action or principles, or standards of right and wrong in conduct. Old people, especially older women, are universally considered the guardians of those moral standards by which they have educated their own children and also their grandchildren. Molefe assigns the task of moderator in the moral field to Thoko's grandmother, Thilayila. She reminds Thoko that her actions concerning the keeping of three lovers go against the general norms of society, although her behaviour is unusual (it also creates an interesting plot in the novel).

Traditionally old women symbolize the accepted norms of our society. That is why Mtuze maintains that:

Old women are entrusted with the moulding of the character of younger generations. (1990:60)



Old women always stress exemplary conduct and self-sacrifice. They have experienced life to the full, and seen in their grandchildren the realization of their dreams for the continuation of their family. Through experience of good and evil, they have become wise, and can impart knowledge and wisdom to their young charges. Being old, they have the advantage of having known some of the ancestors personally and of being privy to their desires, fancies, thought patterns, preferences, etc. They are also a link with the ancestors' world because they will soon join the living-dead. They are consequently respected and venerated. Thoko's grandmother tried to warn her about her behaviour and gave her motherly advice on how she was expected to behave in society. At her age, she had the wisdom and experience to help Thoko to be a good respectable woman.

Old women may look rather ambiguous to those who do not know them: they have strange ways of doing things, speak a kind of language which young children often do not understand, use secret recipes for curing wounds or diseases. They constitute a mysterious world apart for the young. They are thus a source of fear and apprehension when met out of their environment, in the bush, away from the normal human habitat, on those fantastic journeys that characterize most of the settings in literature and in folktales. They are thus in-between beings, between the bush and the homestead, a source of veneration but also of healthy fear and respect for the unknown. Kindness to an old person is a sign of maturity and of good behaviour. Msimang affirms this when he says: "In most cases the old women symbolize the test to be accomplished" (1986: 169).

Old women are therefore used as a test of morality, because society believes that they have stood the test of time. The ambiguous approach to old women, on the other hand, proves them as real human beings capable of good and evil, to be either admired or feared. This is the case also with the ancestor spirits who are represented as mysterious agents of good or as dreadful agents of evil either admired or feared. One would also see them playing the role of mediators. In the

absence of a senior male family member, grandmother becomes the link of communication between the ancestors and their families. In the event of sickness, she pleads and prays on behalf of the family.

### 6.3 Behavioural differences of males and females

By the way she looks at Msiphozi, Thoko hints that she is attracted to him.

*Ithule imbuke ngamehlo athambile, iphethe ngokubheka phansi, ibisithi, kanti uqinisile yini?* (1985: 8)

She kept quiet, looked at him gently and said: “Are you for real?”

The gentleness of her eyes and those feminine movements of looking in a downward direction while talking to a man are usually taken as signs of flirtation. There is no need to say it in words, also because it is considered improper for a woman to accept a man’s advances at their first meeting. She would be labelled *isifebe*, “a whore”. And yet there is no restriction or shame for a man to propose to a girl the first time. In fact, he would be considered *isoka*, a gallant young man, popular with the girls. It is evident that culture is full of double standards. Men are the hunters and women are the prey. Helene Cixous (1992) explains that society perceives women as sexually inactive, or passive, because they cannot initiate the love process: only men are supposed to take the first step. Society is full of binary oppositions between men and women. In fact, sex constitutes a very basic binary opposition that, through its struggles, fights and love keep the world and history go round. Since what is possible for a man is not possible for a woman, such binary oppositions as are based on culture rather than nature should be deconstructed.

Thoko’s behaviour is negatively perceived, while Msiphozi’s actions are not. Even if a girl should feel madly attracted to a boy at their first encounter, tradition requires the girl to postpone the display of affection for some time. This is evidently a protection offered by culture to a young and inexperienced person. It

is surprising, however, that boys are not subjected to the same restrictions. Before the introduction of the birth control pill, a boy might have deflowered a girl, made her pregnant, and then forgot about her completely. He would go his own free ways, while the girl would be burdened with the consequences. According to nature, a man's relationship with a woman can be but a fleeting moment, while the woman might have to carry the responsibility for a lifetime. This is why girls must be more reserved, more prudent and less out-going than men. In Zulu tradition it is shameful for a woman to succumb to passion on her first encounter with a suitor. This in Zulu is called '*ukubulala umbungu*' (to buy time).

The beauty of a *femme fatale* can cause havoc in men's minds. And competition between equally attractive women for the heart of the same man can lead to disaster. The world is full of examples of Romeo and Juliet, who die for each other. In our novel, Msiphozi has started to ignore his fiancée Lindiwe, and Diesel is now neglecting his newly-wed wife, and all in favour of Thoko, who breaks down marriages and relationships without giving the injured parties a second thought. It is great that women should have achieved liberation, but the rights of a person must end where the rights of the other begin.

Thoko's grandmother advises her in vain to be careful that what she is doing does cause harm to others, because this will expose Thoko to real dangers and could never lead her to true happiness. But Thoko wants to play the part of the liberated woman, with no boundaries and no scruples. The novel shows that she brings disaster to herself and to the men she declares to love.

Thoko's main concern is to avoid the confrontation among her three lovers. The way she manages to do this is unbelievable. Textually, Thoko has been clever and tricky enough to avoid this confrontation, but the question remains: does society approve of such trickery? Is it true that anything is allowed in love or war? The Zulu tradition condemns Thoko's behaviour. In fact, she is going to cause the death of two of her lovers, and her own. Had the main character been a man,

would the result be the same? Possibly yes, if he hurt other people in the process of searching for happiness in unorthodox ways.

Diesel had left Thoko for two years without telling her where he was going, and yet, on his return from Maputo, he threw himself at Thoko, expecting to re-start their relationship, in spite of the fact that he had married another woman in the meantime. The novel is not clear about whether people knew of this new relationship, and if they approved of it. Certainly, however, if people came to know about it they would not have been scandalized as much as if they knew that Thoko had three lovers. It is again a question of perceptions, dictated by custom, by prejudice, and probably by the roles of motherwood and fatherwood that nature has thrust on women and men. The readers are not accustomed to question a man's behaviour. When Msiphozi enters his room with the aim of changing his clothes:

... *wathatha ezinye ezazisongwe kahle zabekwa phezu kombhede wakhe. Zazibekwe yintombi yakhe yakhona la e-I-South KwaNgidi.* (1985: 22)

... He took other clothes which were well-folded and placed on top of his bed. They had been placed there by his girlfriend of the very I-South from the Ngidi family.

The narrator does not stress the point that Msiphozi has another girlfriend besides Thoko. Furthermore, it can be argued that even if he had stressed it, it would be no shame because society allows such situations. Gil Nilsen, a feminist, argues that culture is not a natural phenomenon but it is a human construct, therefore it can be modified. She further argues that if there is something like polygamy, why are women not allowed to have polyandry (more than one man) in as much as their male counterparts are offered those chances?

#### **6.4 Language and power**

The father of modern linguistics, the Swiss Ferdinand de Saussure, states that language is an arbitrary and conventional system. By arbitrary he means that there is no natural reason why a word should mean what it does. By conventional

he means that language is a sign system whose conventions are agreed upon by a particular society to facilitate communication. In other words, there is no natural link between the signifier and the signified.

Hickman (1989) suggests that language is never neutral, but is designed to favour the dominant group of users, especially because it is manipulated to reflect the ideas, ideals, thoughts and traditions by which the social fabric is run.

Molefe's book reflects the way people perceive events, persons, realities. Language is used to entrench gender differences between males and females:

*Abantu balapha-ke kubo habengeze bangambuza ukuthi uvelaphi ngoba ingane yomfana uma isikhulile ibonakala ngakho ukulahleka lokho ukuthi isinjalo. (1985:23)*

His family used not to bother to ask him where he was coming from, because disappearing was considered a sign of growing up for a boy.

This privilege does not apply to women, who would be severely punished for wandering about un-chaperoned. The narrator simply reflects social custom, accepting as normal that boys should have greater independence than girls. Should they misbehave, the consequences would be left outside the door, while girls would have to bring the consequences home. In a similar vein, negative moral judgement is passed on a "free spirited" woman, and a positive one on a woman who is hard-working, humble, affectionate and loyal. Such type of distinction is drawn between Thoko and Lindiwe (Msiphozi's fiancée), Thoko being a bad woman, and Lindiwe a good one, with whom the readers can sympathize:

*Ngalokho-ke ingane kaNgidi yahlala yahlala ekhaya, kwala, yaphuma yayoqalaza ukuthi isoka layo kalikabuyi yini emzini. (1985:23)*

Lindiwe sat down for a while feeling rather depressed. Then she went outside to check whether he had come back.

Here the narrator paints a picture of Lindiwe being deeply in love with Msiphozi, in spite of her boyfriend's unfaithfulness. The man, however, is not depicted with

the same colours, nor is he condemned for his immoral conduct. The narrator does not manipulate language to instigate the readers to have a hostile attitude towards Msiphozi, as he has done for Thoko's free spirit and behaviour.

Another shattering example: Thoko, a woman, is culturally supposed to value marriage, family and children. Msiphozi does not promise her anything of the kind, but she still loves him, and the author shows no surprise for this. Msiphozi is also under pressure from Lindiwe to begin *ilobolo* negotiations, by sending his *abakhongi* (marriage negotiators) to her home. However, he never comes to the final decision, and this attitude is accepted as normal.

*Ingani phela uMsiphozi lo kuzo lezi zinsuku wethembise ukuthumela abantu kubo kaLindiwe... Iyingqayizivele-ke lephupho leyonto emantombazaneni.* (1985: 23)

A few days ago Maiphozi had promised to send people to Lindiwe's home... That is like a great dream for women.

According to feminists, marriage is a good thing, but men have transformed its nature to render it a form of women subordination. Thus an unmarried woman is defined in terms of [- marriage], "*umjendevu*" (old maid), which carries a negative connotation. Nothing like that appears for men.

The new "free sex" morality gives men free use of what they want, without requiring any commitment in return. They would be silly to reject such an offer. Is this new morality, then, a worse form of slavery and subjugation for women? Probably yes, but they do not realize it, because they often initiate it themselves, and because it makes them different from their parents and their rules and standards. After all, men still get physical satisfaction to their lust, and they acquire a home servant to satisfy all their needs. But what do women gain?

The ancient order defined the free space for men and women to fulfil their respective roles. It was like a carefully marked dance floor, where the courting game took place according to well-established and attractive rules. Some women still adhere to the system:

*Yathula nje nayo ngoba phela noma singaze siphucuzeke kangakanani kodwa kulukhuni kabi ukuthi intombi kube yiyona eqala udaba olunjalo esokeni. (1985:24)*

She kept quiet because, no matter how westernized we are, it's very difficult for a woman to initiate such talks with her boyfriend.

Compare this with the following sad observation:

*Awanamuhla amantombazane awanawo nakancane amahloni okukutshela usungumuntu wesibili ukuthi unguye ebantwini esike yachazeka yibona enhliziyweni yayo. (1988: 27)*

Girls nowadays are not shy to tell you, even if you are her second lover, that you are the first person to really touch her heart.

There is a saying in English that men would like to be the first (and possibly the only one) for a woman, while women like to be the last, and the lasting one, for a man. Does this mean mistrust of women? Or is it something in-built in our sexual make-up that we consider quite sacred? We must reflect that, if women are so very special as to give tone and colour to life, the preservation of their special status cannot be the sole task of men, nor the sole task of women: it must be a common determination. Only then society will be saved.

Toril Moi suggests that patriarchy sees a woman as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order. From a phallogocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between men and chaos. In other words, when a man is furious and needs to act forcefully, that brutal forcefulness will be absorbed by a woman- the woman is placed between men and chaos. Feminists believe in seeing a woman gradually constructing her own identity despite oppression from men. They believe in seeing a woman creating her own meaning of the language. Thoko is gradually gaining the sense of "self" in this text:

*Akakholelwa futhi yena (Thoko) ekuthini umuntu wesifazane akanawo amandla okuqoma abantu abangaphezu koyedwa ngesikhathi. Abafana bona bavunyelwa ngoba benezinjani izinhliziyiyo bodwa. (1985:38)*

She does not believe that females cannot court more than one man at a time. If boys are allowed, is it because they alone have that type of hearts?

Thoko believes in her own gratification, no matter what society says about her morals or her behaviour. She is subtly challenging the long-held notions and beliefs about how a woman is supposed to behave. The pressure on her, expressed by her grandmother, is to behave like any other Zulu woman in a traditional setting. But she believes that times and morals have changed, and that women should throw the old ideas to the winds and boldly become the molders of their own destiny.

### **6.5 Women oppression in perspective**

A myth from Kenya describes the original human social structure: God, who resides on the Kilimanjaro mountain, gave the first nine men nine of his daughters in marriage. Being God's children, those very beautiful women were also the rulers in the community. As time went by, their husbands made a secret plot to wrench the power from the women's hands: they proposed to be extremely loving to their wives during the next three months, so as to impregnate them all at about the same time, so that they would be unable to take turns in governing the country when their babies would be born. The plot worked, and the men were able to start governing in place of their wives, and they never handed the power back to them. The myth reveals the feeling that women might have been the original excellent rulers in a council of state, and that it is quite impossible for a mother to look after a baby and to rule a country at the same time. Men were able to wrench power from the women and to submit them by using love and sex. The myth explains in a simple way the fact that marriage and motherhood require tremendous time and dedication in the home, and that men have always taken advantage of the women's natural functions to submit them to their rule.

The basic division of labour, based on those natural functions, requires women to be home-based, to care for the minimal needs of children and husbands, to share in the economic and educational responsibilities of the household by the means that would not take them away from the home base.



Zulu cosmology describes the world as a circle: round like *umuzi* and *isibaya*, or like *indlu*. Life is enclosed in an egg, *iqanda*, in which the individual is the yoke, supported by his siblings, represented by the albumen. They are enclosed in and protected by the eggshell, symbolizing the mother. The mother's nurturing function is therefore essential, but it requires attention to detail, constant care, and the love that can help a child to grow and develop into a full human being.

This homely function of a mother can be taken for granted by uneducated thick-skin husbands, who think that their distant adventures are more important than the mother's work. Here is probably the root of oppression and abuse, of taking advantage of the physical weakness of women. The result has been the negation, at times, that women are not even full human beings, with no social or legal rights, only useful as low paid labourers, slaves, and baby-making machines. The fact that women add to the man's social standing, that they are essential for the upkeep of the household and for the preservation of the lineage, etc., are all easily and comfortably forgotten.

I have already explained the possible excesses of patriarchy, of the *ilobolo* system, of polygamy. Women are also objects of pleasure for men, either within or outside the marriage boundaries. But I have also underlined the fact that the way women are treated and respected in society is an accurate measurement of the advancement in development and civilization. The respect given to women is then mirrored in the care taken for children, and consequently for the future of the species. Continuing with women oppression means closing the door to the future. An indication of this comes from our South African society, where the abuse of women through rape and torture, common a few years ago, has now given rise to a sickening increase in the rape and abuse of young children.

The analysis of the causes of women's oppression forms the basis for any assessment of just what would have to be changed in order to achieve a society without gender subjugation. G. Rubin (1980:75) argues that:

If sexism is a by-product of capitalism's relentless appetite for profit, then sexism would wither away in the advent of a successful socialist revolution. (1980:75)

Rubin means that, in Marx's map of the social world, there is no real distinction between male and female workers. By contrast, in the analysis of social reality drawn by Freud and Lévi-Strauss, there is a deep recognition of the place of sexuality in society and of the profound differences between the social experiences of men and women.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

The language used in *Ikhiwane Elihle* is clearly based on the subsumed interpretation of social mores in the 1980's. The attentive reader notices that a woman like Thoko is searching for a new role in society, a role that would allow her to be free of traditional norms and restrictions, and would place her on the same level as men. The author has evidently heard about feminist criticism, and tries to portray the image of a financially independent and sexually free woman, but his use of language still heavily resents of traditional stereotypes.

The novel contains a constant confrontation between men and women, in a way that opposes them in public life, while powerfully drawing them together in the bedroom. Thoko's reasoning is that of a liberated woman: if my lovers can enjoy more than one sexual partner, why can't I? Molefe does not underline the dark side of his men characters. For instance, Msiphozi, now that he has started having an affair with Thoko, ignores his girlfriend Lindiwe, to whom he is engaged, and who looks after him with great care. Diesel, on the other hand, has neglected his newly married wife in favour of Thoko. Msiphozi's and Diesel's multiple relationships are not openly frowned upon in the text, but Thoko's polyandry is

because she is a woman. When Diesel's brothers and relatives kill Magaya, this is not described in highly traumatic terms, because he is also killed and the reader feels he got his just reward. But when Thoko is killed: has she really done something bad? The author, reflecting on society's values, evidently says that she deserves to die because she has ruined three different families. But what about Diesel, Msiphozi and Magaya? Should they not have taken a stand to avoid this messy situation with their love life? They are men, and society seems ready to forgive them much more readily than a woman. It is going to take a long time to adjust to the idea that women have the right to be as free as men, or that men must not feel free in their sexual relationships, but feel as careful and steadfast and loyal as they expect women to be.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### GENERAL OVERVIEW OF STUDY

#### 7.1 Scope and objectives of the study

The research started from the hypothesis frequently found in anthropological treatises, that the patriarchal system of Zulu society made it easy for men to abuse the system and to oppress their women, and for severe differences to be identified between the sexes. The scope of the study was therefore to discover the extent of such gender oppression and discrimination.

The system I intended to follow, from the very beginning, was to critically scrutinize a number of Zulu narratives, which are supposed to reflect the social reality, in order to discover how our intellectual antennae, the writers who are supposed to capture the winds and the moods of society, have perceived the situation relating to women in the Zulu milieu. I chose works by male writers on purpose, because I felt that they would be probably unaware of women's complaints or aspirations. Furthermore, they would quite readily accept, or at least record, the prejudices prevalent in society, prejudices that an external investigator could easily identify in the language, or in the authors' choice of subjects and themes, but that the local males would probably accept unquestioningly.

The research had to be based on some basic theoretical principles, and these were rather difficult to identify, especially since I wanted theories that would suit the African situation. It is worth mentioning here that this study is not about feminist literature or feminist criticism, but it deals with the analysis of social background uncovered by literature with regard to perception of women's changing role in Zulu society.

I borrowed ideas from Freud, Engels and Marx, as well as from a number of feminist writers, but often had to re-think their approaches and re-examine my interpretation, because what some hurried African commentators had said seemed to contradict my experience of reality. For example, Davies writes about the situation of women in western societies:

First of all, we cannot only speak of women's oppression by men. In capitalist systems, women tend to be exploited by the very nature of society, particularly the working and peasant women, just as men are exploited. The difference is that women are hit particularly hard. Then you have forms of abuse that cut across class lines: sexual abuse, wife-beating, and the fact that men take advantage of the woman's role as child-bearer. (Davies, 1986:48)

Therefore my theoretical bases are eclectic, drawing from both European theorists and from writers about African customs. I was lucky in this last aspect in having Prof. N.N. Canonici as my supervisor, because he has studied the Zulu oral traditions more than anybody I know, and was often able to help me understand various points by referring me to aspects of oral literature which contain the African secular wisdom, permeated by aspects of the *ubuntu* (humanity) philosophy.

The result of this research is a wide presentation of the problems faced by women in African societies, and an appreciation of some Zulu literary works that deal with such problems. In the same way that my selection of books was limited, so too are, of necessity, the results of my work. I hope, however, that they throw some light on a number of themes that are often dealt with in anthropological studies, but seldom touched upon in literary studies.

In this concluding chapter I intend to offer a few overall observations on the problems dealt with in my study, as I look at them as units around the thematic centers of the oppression of women at various stages of their physical development and social participation; the binary oppositions created by gender

inequalities and general expectations; and the woman as the needle in the compass that measures progress in the process of civilization.

## **7.2 The seasons of woman's oppression**

The patriarchal system prevalent in Southern African societies has resulted in the establishment of a strong male leadership, from the Zulu kings to some outstanding contemporary politicians, scholars and religious leaders. But, like any other social system, also patriarchy has let itself be severely abused by some individuals, and some unjust practices have permeated the entire social fabric. I would like to offer a general view of the works I have presented in this study from the point of view of the ages a woman goes through, as marked by excesses and abuses in male domination which give rise to conflicts that make a story suspenseful.

*Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* deals with a woman in her young age, as she prepares herself to fulfil her traditional life function: to become the faithful companion of a man, and to transform her sexuality into a life-giving gift to the husband's family, to her children and to society. One should not dictate to a girl's heart, because love is like a thunderbolt that strikes suddenly, an individual choice to be given spontaneously for it to become full and fruitful. But Manamuza's greed wants to control Bajwayele, to force her to give herself to the highest bidder, who will rebuild her father's fortunes in cattle and social status. The girl, who feels mature and capable of making decisions with regard to her own life, does not accept what she considers a barbarous limitation to her freedom of choice. When words and protests do not help, she takes the only way still open to her: she escapes to the Rand, where city life will afford her the freedom of anonymity to do what she wants. There she comes in contact with a liberated woman, her aunt Bajabulile, who re-inforces her resolve not to submit to an outdated system. She is also sheltered by a group of 'red lights ladies'. Manamuza manages to trace her in Benoni, through the help of a private detective, and to take her back to Buthunqe,

and to her intended husband, Zulumacansi. The obtuse father, however, confident in the authority granted him by custom, doesn't even bother discuss possible problems with Bajwayele. He still thinks that his word is final and his order is enough guarantee. The dust of the long journey has not yet settled, however, and the girl is back on her escape path, making sure not to leave any traces this time.

This novel does not constitute a traditional "initiation journey" narrative that leads the girl through trials to a purification that prepares her for the usual outcome of marriage. But one might interpret the story as a pilgrimage towards a place where women are free to make a personal choice, without being forced by considerations of the father's authority or of *ilobolo*. The type of choice is finally up to them.

*Inkinsela YaseMgungundlovu* is the story of a woman's maturity, surrounded by her children, respected in her community, and a force to be reckoned with by her husband. The story, however, is not necessarily set in Africa: it could happen anywhere, because it concentrates on the financial responsibilities of a man, and on the contribution that a woman can make to them, were she considered a responsible adult, and consulted and accepted as an equal rather than a marginalized unimportant member of the family. Such a situation is quite universal. Although this "African elite story" is clearly set in Nyanyadu, and at a particular time, with specific cultural and financial problems that are common to African families, the question of women's recognition does not touch the typical African condition resulting from a tradition of polygamy. "You and your daughter go to the kitchen! I am the one in charge of finances here!" This is what Mkhwanazi tells his wife MaNtuli. With different names and in a different language, the scene could have taken place anywhere in the world, where women are fighting for a meaningful sharing of work and profit in a society with equal rights across the gender divide.

*NgumButhuma-ke Lowo* is a throwback to other times and other places: a world where women must accept to marry their father's choice, be appreciated as sex

objects for a short time, and manifestation of the man's wealth and social status; a world where patriarchy has produced polygamy, and polygamy has generated the most odious form of male chauvinistic domination, based on the stupid assumptions of male superiority, of "might is right", of "women are the spoils of war". We had pictures of a polygamous marriage already in *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi*, with irrational abuses of power, through a whip appropriately and cynically called *Usabisabafazi*, a 'wives' threatener'. In Ntuli's short story Mbuthuma is so cruel that he wants to milk his three wives in punishment for a silly act of disattention, and then give the milk to his dog. The desperate women are made to feel inferior to a dog. And they have no escape: no education, no culture of human rights, no family to return to: all they know is the present condition of slavery. Oppression and abuse are rendered possible by the women's bickering divisions and fights to gain the husband's favours for themselves and their children. An equanimous man would need no sjambok to ensure harmony in his household. But Mbuthuma is so stupidly full of himself that he thinks he has only rights and no duties, and he need not listen, respect, love his family in order to be loved and respected. The condition of the woman married in a polygamous family to an obtuse and abusive husband, as depicted in this short story, is the most heart-breaking one.

*Ikhiwane Elihle* offers a new possible answer to a woman's questions on marriage: "Why marriage? What kind of marriage do I want? Would I accept to be one of Mbuthuma's slave wives?" Thoko is interested in male companionship, which necessarily results in sex, in the way that the hunter-men of ancient times could be interested in women when they returned from their extended hunting trips. But Thoko is not interested in marriage, and is not particularly worried about the fact that each of her three lovers is already committed to another woman. Her behaviour, however, poses a number of new questions: Is sexual freedom enough to procure happiness? Is it not that a woman keeps giving of herself, without any tangible returns, thus succumbing to a new form of sexual slavery? How far is Thoko's supposed freedom from promiscuity? Would



motherhood be a form of entrapment, or the real crowning of a woman's life? Is society prepared to accept a sort of polyandry in a patriarchal setting?

The author supports traditional morality very firmly, by the choice of language that underlines and exemplifies the traditional value system. The resolution of the four-set of lovers, with the death of two men and the woman, seems to prove the author right: a woman cannot play around with her life-giving faculty. Women like Thoko, are like beautiful figs that are however rotten inside.

There is a tremendous distance between the situation of forced love, as illustrated in *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi*, and free love, as illustrated in *Ikhiwane Elihle*. The abuses of the first system, which are the abuses of patriarchy and of the *ilobolo* system, cannot be tolerated; but the claim of absolute freedom in sexual relationships as advocated by Thoko, with the excuse that men are allowed 'social sex' without commitment, is probably also going too far. Men and women have different functions, which require different attitudes, convictions, modes of behaviour. If one side is wrong, there is no point in the other side committing the same mistake: two wrongs never make a right. The jury is still out and there is no final verdict: Is an attractive woman like Thoko seeking something that her female gender does not allow her to have?

### **7.3 Binary oppositions of male and female**

This is the way that the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has identified one of the deepest points of social conflict: the binary opposition man – woman, or male – female. The opposition is mediated by sex, which transforms it in love, resulting in a new life, the child. It is therefore one of the most fertile oppositions in nature (cf. Canonici, 1996:178 ff.).

The literary works examined in this study clearly show this binary opposition, while the sexual mediation is not always expressed, nor is the transformation of

sex into fertile love. The children are hardly mentioned at all (except in Nyembezi's novel, where they appear as grown-ups, extensions of the mother), and this probably interrupts the chain of events set out by Lévi-Strauss.

In *Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi* men consider women only on the economic level: goods to be exchanged for a price. The reason is not stated, but taken for granted: they are the means for the continuation of the lineage, which is a supreme good (cosmological level). Women, on the other hand, do not want to be considered at the economic level, but at the cosmological level, of a good to be prized, appreciated, loved and cared for. Potolozi offered the promise of love; while Zulumacansi and Manamuza only looked at the financial value of the gift. Bajwayele would rather choose Benoni, the life of red lights district ladies, in order to affirm her freedom, than submit to become an economic transaction.

In *Inkinsela YaseMgungundlovu* men want women in charge of the kitchen, the gardens, the education of the children: a very basic economic level. MaNtuli fights for the recognition of her right to be heard and consulted in important matters, such as the disposal of the family cattle. In other words, the basic economic level is not enough for her: she wants to be acknowledged for her intellect, and for her function of bringing new life to the clan. She wants to ascend into the cosmological level. Ndebenkulu, like Chakijana, plays the mediating role of any trickster: at the very end of the novel Mkhwanazi acknowledges that MaNtuli had been right all along, and should have been listened to.

In *NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo* men see women in a polygamous family as chattels, sex objects, slaves: economic level. Women seem to recognize their fate, and to acknowledge that they have no escape, because they are kept down by the economic system that has forced them into their present situation. The mediation of outsiders only saves them from the crudest forms of slavery and punishment, but does not redeem them to a level of human dignity.

In *Ikhiwane Elihle* Thoko's three lovers are still bound by the traditional value system and expect the woman to be sexually available only for themselves, as companion, sex partner and lover. They however claim the freedom to have more than one sex partner, but without serious life commitment. This is the sociological level. On the same level, Thoko claims for herself sexual freedom, the ability of entertaining more than one sexual partner, without rules and regulations, and without considering a life commitment. These are also elements in the sociological level. The men are so adamant about their requirements regarding their female conquest, that they are prepared to kill, and to fight, thus moving the goalposts from the sociological to the cosmological level.

Movement from one level to another is difficult to justify in Lévi-Strauss' theory, and produces un-patterned situations. Also the very important function of mediation is rather blurred in some of these narratives. This could point to a lack of clear vision on the part of the authors, or on my part as critic. It could also indicate that the system of cultural description used by Lévi-Strauss still needs refining for the African situation, and perhaps the principles on which he bases his descriptions of civilization are still to be fully appreciated in our societies.

#### **7.4 Woman as a gauge of civilization levels**

The core of African civilization is expressed in the *ubuntu* philosophy, which consists in a deep respect for nature and all that goes with it, and in the celebration of man's central position in the world and its history. Respect must be based on deep understanding, which makes it possible for man to become the voice of the whole of creation and of its seasons. An essential element of this global view is the feminine element, representing the source of new life, the power of restoration and regeneration. Where the spring of life is interfered with, the water is muddied and new life becomes impossible. The way our culture allows us to treat women is the best test of how advanced our civilization is.

My selected works show that the patriarchy system has caused dreadful abuses in this orderly vision of mankind, and that men are the culprits, to a very large extent, because they have corrupted their approach to women. Their selfishness, which they claim as a right given them by their physiology, tends to spoil whatever they touch in nature, as is revealed by the recent spate of sexual abuses on children and babies. Those men erroneously and stupidly thought that violating a virgin would cure them from HIV/Aids. They did not care that they were ruining the entire life of children. Stupid selfishness places such individuals outside the boundaries of redeemable humanity, and makes them worse than animals.

My chosen literary texts demonstrate that traditionally men did not have a very high esteem of women: they treated them as exchange goods (*Uvalo Lwezinhlonzi*), or as soul-less slaves (*NguMbuthuma-ke Lowo*), or as useful servants to attend to kitchen and garden chores (*Inkinsela YaseMgungundlovu*). Where a woman like Thoko (*Ikhiwane Elihle*) claims ownership of her sexuality, the men become ready to kill and mame, in the name of a tradition that gives them full sexual freedom but expects women to comply with men's desires.

Unfortunately women have silently accepted the burdens imposed on them, because they did not have a higher vision of their functions, roles, intelligence and ability. The secular oppression they had been subjected to had produced negative feelings about themselves: they seemed to exist only in relation to men. But my chosen texts reveal that, even in traditional societies such as Buthunqe or Nyanyadu, there existed women capable of claiming their freedom and rightful place in society. When men begin to recognize and fully appreciate women, the social fabric will be able to obtain the equilibrium and the harmony that are necessary for humankind to grow. For human progress can be measured in the recognition of woman.

## 7.5 Male and female authors

African male authors often lack the depth of feelings to explore the psychology of their women characters. As a consequence, women are often treated more as symbols than as living, suffering individuals. Male authors seem to identify undesirable qualities in modern women in terms of male-female relationships. This is affirmed by Millet when she says:

It is natural for man to be direct in his ways with women and she to be devious, him to be plain, she to be subtle, him to roam the earth as he pleases, she always to be home, him to be strong, she weak ... these laws are not man made, and anyone who honestly believes they can be reversed is a freak. (1986:81)

Davies confirms Millet's observations by stating:

The feminine protagonist throughout the Zulu literary texts presents a certain homogeneity of character that can be attributed to a basic similarity in the man's view of the woman... Through the role of the woman, the writer may be re-examining man's role in his changing society. Consequently, the heroine often has a didactic function that deters her from psychological developments. (1986:75)

A close look at the various images of female characters provided in literature reveals that, to a considerable extent, depictions of female characters in the literature by African female writers differ from the images presented by their male counterparts. By virtue of their shared gender experiences, women writers are inclined to depict female characters in more realistic terms with a great deal of insight, and in meaningful interaction with their environment. Also, women writers tend to create a woman's world in which women characters exist in their own right, and not as mere appendages to a male world. Women authors tend to explore alternate possibilities for self-actualization outside sexual roles that are open to their women characters.

On the other hand, male depictions of female characters are often from a fiercely male perspective, reflecting male conceptions of female sexuality. Authors tend to

overplay the sexuality of their female characters, creating the impression that women have no identity outside their sexual roles. These characters usually serve to enhance the images of the male protagonists who occupy the central positions in these works. Circumspect traditional narrators play down the injustices in polygamy as oppressive. Inversely, women have been socialized into accepting their inferior status in marriage. An age-old tradition asserts that 'a woman must sometimes be a fool'. We are never shown that a man must sometimes be a fool to accommodate his female counterparts.

## **7.6 General conclusion**

Many questions arise concerning texts written by female authors. For example, how can we read their work for something more than a representation of the social and psychic values of their class? First of all we must read them together with other contemporary discourses that construct class, race and gender so that we may hear more accurately how their writings appropriate and change dominant ideas of sexual differences. Moreover, because of the subordinated place of women within the ruling classes, and because sexual difference is constructed through the hierarchies of class and gender - and vice versa - men's writing will both articulate and challenge the dominant ideology from a de-centred position within it. Texts by male authors will often move through the rhetoric of radical individualism towards a critique of both patriarchal and capitalist relations. Women's fiction and poetry is a site where women can actively structure the meaning of sexual difference in their society, especially and powerfully as it is applied to difference between men and women.

Sexist language, in our Zulu literary texts, however aggressive in tone, is usually undermining the status of women. This was clearly observed in the analysis of these texts. A normative, subliminal, natural consensus around the subordinate status of women has been successfully challenged. Dominant and alternative discourses now move uneasily between 'old languages' of natural, transhistorical

sexuality and 'new languages' in which masculinity and femininity are contingent terms whose meanings can be changed. Feminism has developed, through its own internal dialectic, a political language about gender that refuses the fixed and transhistorical definitions of masculinity and femininity in the dominant culture.

In the analysis of these texts, the origin of women's subordination has been variously described. It has become clear that power is still maintained by men through the ideologies of gender inequality. Many men stick to their conceived ideology of dominance over women. It is therefore easy to see how patriarchy becomes primarily a power relation, and patriarchal ideology its energy source. In the nineteenth century and today feminism has seen the question of the representation of women, sexual difference and gender relations as 'political'.

Zulu culture and history, despite its shortcomings, did have and still has positive characteristics that value and cherish women. The authors of my chosen texts do not portray this, but they underline socio-sexual abuses in order to create credible suspense and conflict in their plots. Positive attitudes towards women can be found in some Zulu love poems, composed and sang mainly by suitors to win the love of their beloved. Such poems would praise the beautiful features of a woman, as all love poems in the world. The suitor would liken her features to many beautiful things such as the rain, the moon or the stars. Even her undesirable features were described in pleasant terms as though they were not shortcomings but appealing peculiarities.

Love poetry is blind, and sexual appeal always forgets about differences in status. Even the racist American males used to sing and praise the beauty of their slave girls, at least until they managed to get them into the sack. But when they discovered that there were serious consequences to their sexual liberties, they quickly gave up their poetry, lost all interest and refused any responsibility, to the point of allowing their own children to be bought and sold as slaves (cf. President Thomas Jefferson's well-known situation).

The condition of women in the chosen texts is fraught with tensions and oppositions, mostly arising from the organizational structures of particular societies. For example, Zulu texts display great preoccupation with motherhood. At some point, a novel, short story or drama would dramatize a woman's struggle to conceive, for fear of being replaced in her marriage or in the effort to make her marriage survive. Steady affirms:

The most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role as a whole. Even in strictly patrilineal societies, women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of the husband's lineage and it is because of women that men can have a patrilineage at all. The importance of motherhood and the evaluation of the childbearing capacity is probably the most fundamental difference between African women and their western counterparts in their common struggle to end sexual discrimination. (1986:243)

Steady's words confirm what has been stated earlier about the importance of childbearing in Zulu society. A woman is married for the expansion and continuation of the clan. If she is barren, she fails to fulfil her duty, and unless a sister can provide her with an offspring, she is rejected. The other aims of marriage, such as friendship, companionship, mutual support, mutual care in old age, that are very important in a monogamous marriage, clearly pale in a strongly patriarchal African clan. Childbearing is the most significant aspect of marriage. Zulu writers are now challenged to look at the other aspects of married life as well, because these entail the enhancement of human sentiments, and the validation of the woman's role in the family and in society, a role that is more clearly demonstrated in a monogamous marriage, but also extends well beyond the years of youthful infatuation with external beauty. Commitment, kindness, care, love, can richly compensate for the lost beauty of one's youth, and make a relationship truly satisfactory and worthwhile. This should considerably change the outlook and perceptions about Zulu women in our literature.



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