

# ***Unhu/Ubuntu* anachronistic? The manifestation of female agency in Virginia Phiri's *Highway Queen* (2010)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The contemporary relevance of female sexuality as discursive space in fiction is that it reflects current events as it criticises, exposes and illuminates lived reality, such as the HIV and AIDS epidemic, excruciating poverty, homelessness and a general economic meltdown as is the case in Zimbabwe in the first decade of the new millennium. However, the practice of female sexuality may still go against the principles of ubuntu. In *Highway Queen* Phiri gives agency to the female first person narrator, Sophie, and also sets out males and females who in their interaction with each other, may or may not promote ubuntu. An analysis of this novel shows that the writer challenges many unhelpful attitudes towards the HIV and AIDS pandemic by exploring the employment of travel and female sexuality as coping strategies for dealing with poverty, HIV and AIDS, and the economic downturn in the first decade of the new millennium in Zimbabwe. However, the well-intentioned female agency fails to hold up in the face of the dire circumstances of poverty and disease and Sophie's urbanised family has to go back to the village for survival under the care of the patriarchal uncles; thus Phiri appears to give a flawed instrumentality to these women.

## **Keywords:**

agency, anachronistic values, sexuality, survival sex, *ubuntu/unhu*

## **Introduction**

*Ubuntu* or *unhu* philosophy is not just a Zimbabwean outlook on life but an all-pervasive African ethos, particularly in most of east and southern Africa. The Organisation of African Unity's (now African Union) African Charter Article 17(3) – perhaps the source document for the concept of *ubuntu* as holistic education that is espoused in the Nziramasanga Commission Report (1999) [terms of reference 2.1.9] – further consolidates the significance of *ubuntu* to African people. It sets out that "... the promotion and protection of morals and traditional values recognized by the community shall be the duty of the State". This section makes the charter the basis for the promotion of peace, development and ethics

for African people, the common link among African people. Hausbaum (2003) argues that *ubuntu* is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity for building and maintaining community. It is this interconnect- edness and a common humanity that encourages a natural responsibility towards each other that has led to the more informal and relaxed way of life westerners observe among African people (Broodryk 2006; Manda, 2009). Thus for African people, the concept of what constitutes ethically and morally acceptable behaviour is imbued within this philosophy. Modern realities challenge the usefulness of *unhu/ubuntu*. In the face of local and global challenges such as disease, economic woes and globalisation itself, more proactive responses to the practical demands of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are called for.

However, *ubuntu* philosophy is a patriarchal construct and may well function to contain women in subservient roles and continue to uphold anachronistic values. Thus *ubuntu* may not be such a useful outlook on life anymore. Virginia Phiri's novella, *Highway Queen* (2010) well illustrates how the age-old values inherent in the *ubuntu* philosophy are no longer expedient for survival in the current milieu. In this novel Phiri explores female sexuality and attempts to creatively give agency to female characters, but *ubuntu* as an interpretive framework is paradoxical and its ideals difficult to maintain in the world of this tale.

As a non-male writer, Phiri's novella is written from the female perspective and is non-patriarchal in its thrust and so belongs to a sub-genre that is often lorded over by male postcolonial authorship. Female authorship does not necessarily rest on women's ability or willingness to sustain patriarchy rather than challenge its mores. In the last two decades at least, local female authorship has tended to challenge patriarchal mores. Unlike male-authored texts, such texts often reflect female subjectivity and agency. However, delving into matters of female sexuality may be regarded as dealing in soft porn rather than the axis on which most human relationships revolve (Chitando 2011; Muhwati 2009; Ngoshi and Zhou 2010). The reception of female authorship in Zimbabwe is often intertwined with questions of the purpose and motivation of the work and more often than not, upsets traditional and colonial mores that tend to privilege the male subject; but all within a postcolonial Zimbabwe whose sociocultural dynamics have shifted tremendously. Virginia Phiri's representation of female agency in the novel *Highway Queen* is a bold attempt to explore the notion of female *ubuntu* in severely constricting attitudinal circumstances.

An aesthetic appraisal of female sexuality offers deeper insights into local female writers' political and social themes in which they deal with pressing issues on social change. These authors popularise the creative and analytical perspectives of women's social being in their own voices, certainly making them agents of behaviour change. They generally revise and re-envision Zimbabwean history, adding to its framework by offering previously patriarchally constructed fictional versions of the economic, political and social reality. In this way female writing represents the possibility of recovering previously silenced testimonies to fill some cultural and historic gaps. Thus the present paper focuses on how women in Virginia Phiri's *Highway Queen* (2010) are not the usual victims of patriarchy. Unlike some Zimbabwean authors, males in particular, Phiri does not skirt around the

subject of female sexuality and neither is she content to draw images of women whose sexuality is imagined to have propagated the HIV and AIDS pandemic (among other evils), as does Sue Nyathi in the novel, *The Polygamist* (2012). Phiri heeds Muhwati's (2009: 275) clarion call that: "The Aids [sic] riddle mandates new creative methods and levels of conceptualization that transcend narrow gender stereotypes".

Phiri's women characters employ their sexuality as a coping tool for alleviating the effects of economic hardships caused principally by the loss of capitalist oriented male wage labour, the devastating effects of HIV and AIDS, and both states underscored by political overtones. Phiri's characters generally display awareness of the cardinal virtues of life; that is, they have a strong sense of *ubuntu* but find themselves compromising ingrained ethical and moral values for the survival of their families and communities. However, the role reversal that occurs in this narrative further introduces travel as an important economic resource, hence the title, *Highway Queen*. Through the character Sophie's narrative, Phiri questions the continued usefulness of *ubuntu* in the context of the postcolonial Zimbabwe and finds *ubuntu* out-dated and not particularly useful for coping with modern life challenges. Thus it is necessary to briefly examine the three essential aspects of the novel, namely, the changing of patriarchally determined sex roles; the challenges presented by the reality of HIV and AIDS; and the survival, moral and ethical issues. However, the three aspects are interwoven in this discussion because separating them might disjoint this brief treatise on Phiri's bold handling of the near-taboo subject of female sexuality.

## Meeting the challenges of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in *Highway Queen* (2010)

Female agency, while quite prominent in *Highway Queen*, shows the tensions of a fledgling but seemingly successful narration of a tale from an entirely female point of view. Capturing the gender inclusivity of Hudson-Weems' (2004) *Africana Womanist* framework, Phiri's first person narrator Sophie's strongest support base is largely male and patriarchal. However, this does not suggest that women are bound to fail in their quest to gain agency and have to go back to the rural home and fall back on patriarchy for refuge and salvation – as is often the case in the early Shona novels that employ the urban motif (Kahari 1990). Phiri counteracts this seeming dependency on males by creatively committing Sophie to serving her family's interests concurrently with those of other women, mostly fellow prostitutes, in a country where prostitution remains totally illegal (Zimbabwe Constitution 2013). Female characters in this novel on the whole find themselves compelled by their different circumstances to adapt to new roles as breadwinners. Grandmothers have to re-parent orphaned children or children whose mothers are absent from home because they have to fend for the rest of the family in the absence of the patriarchal and *ubuntu*-normed male role of providing for the family. Noticeably, there are no males forced into such role shifts although in reality men may be forced by circumstances to mother their children, suggesting some unintended authorial collusion with patriarchy that renders childcare a female province. Phiri largely manages to portray

women who reject male victimisation and are supportive of each other, especially in their concern for safe sex in the face of HIV and AIDS, a risk they are constantly exposed to within the prostitution rings. In this way the women clearly display humaneness to each other, that is, they possess a sense of *ubuntu*. Phiri's characters demonstrate the truthfulness of Gaidzanwa's (1985) observation that accepting victim status may lead women to overestimate the power of the system against them, thus underestimating their potential for struggle to change and liberate themselves and their society. Embracing *ubuntu* philosophy, the male-female interactions in this novel are varied and a departure from the usual gender divide characteristic of Zimbabwean literature as observed by Mugambi (2007).

In *Highway Queen*, as she does in *Desperate* (2002), Phiri boldly stirs the hornet's nest by asking society's most denigrated, (in the form of prostitutes) to speak out in a manner that fractures existing discourses on their profession and way of life according to Ngoshi and Zhou (2010). This writer also links commercial sex to poverty in general, a connection generally absent in some female and male writing from Zimbabwe. Her readership is invited to appreciate the creation of knowledge as a site for struggle and indeed Phiri has creatively made her presence felt in this fictional representation of female sexuality within a life affirming *ubuntu* framework. There is nothing common or run of the mill about the novel as suggested by the literary critic Benjamin Dhlamini (2010). He says: "... despite being a work of fiction, *Highway Queen* brings to life daily episodes that we choose to ignore in our communities because we are cowards. The book makes you crack your head, laugh and cry" (2010: cover blurb). Instead this is a wholly new narrative that largely succeeds in giving agency to the woman, Sophie, the first person narrator within a set-up that is determined on the principles of *ubuntu*. Phiri presents a narrative that quite obtrusively engages the taboo subject of female sexuality to portray a changing sociocultural practice that has been necessitated by the changing political, social and economic dynamics and the reality of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Although images of HIV and AIDS predominate, the potential contribution of *ubuntu* philosophy is not lost in *Highway Queen*. Presenting female prostitution as a survival strategy in the face of economic hardships and loss of the male role as breadwinners, the women are not only vulnerable to disease, they are also not safe from their clients who may rape and/or rob them and often cheat them out of their dues. Further, they have to lead double lives, lying to their families about the nature of the work they do as they must lie to their clients about themselves, a necessity that goes against the principles of *ubuntu*.

Sophie Mumba, the first person narrator of the novel, is the axis of the tale. Although not strictly a bildungsroman novel, she does not start off as the usual contented housewife, she works outside the home but gives up her job once the husband is retrenched, suggesting that it cannot have been much in the first place. The development of her consciousness begins at the same time that she realises the uncertainties in her own life. She admits to "... shutting out desperate people we could have helped" (Phiri 2010: 1), that is, until her husband loses his job, their home and they must all move to a squatter camp, where the depressed husband Steven gives in to helplessness and ennui. Out of necessity, the individual Sophie takes on multiple personalities corresponding to the different relational

spaces she exists in. She is the mother, the daughter, the wife, the prostitute and the breadwinner. Initially she takes up the role of trader and procures rice and dried fish for resale but she pays both in money and by a violent rape that must go unreported, that way underscoring the lack of any institutional support for women and a male mentality that sexually objectifies every woman and so prevents her from trading “clean”.

The two realities of officialdom and black market trade soon elbow her out of business and well-meant advice sets her off on buying and selling batik tablecloths sprees to the white woman, Mrs Jones, of the unnamed border town. Encouraged by early success, Sophie makes modest profit and sustains her husband, four children and an ailing mother-in-law. However, subsequent trips are not always successful, thus she finds herself far from home and without money and must resort to transactional sex for the family's sake. Still for two years, her children remain out of school because all she can manage is food despite the regular trips and commercial sex she engages in at the border town, somewhat denying her the satisfaction of surviving successfully this way. Thus Phiri does not take the easy route out for her character by making the woman a total outcast as would be dictated by the principles of *ubuntu* or by seeming to sustain patriarchal mores of *ubuntu* or proving the ineluctability of a female break with tradition. Sophie attempts to build a house so as to move her family away from the squatter camp but unscrupulous land developers cheat her, perhaps again, unconsciously on the part of the author, underscoring a perceived female dependency on patriarchal protection and a patriarchally defined manifestation of the principles of *ubuntu*. In reality, Phiri captures the challenges of surviving in a society where morals have been eroded and the cultural values embodied in the *ubuntu* philosophy largely ignored.

Although aware of the need for protected sex, Sophie's clients do not always cooperate and eventually she finds herself infected despite having always used protection with her husband for he had been quite promiscuous in the good days before retrenchment from his job. She is unable to divulge her status right to the end, in spite of Steven's openness about his, whether this makes her dishonest, or wise, she clearly is her own woman. However, the individual Sophie moves from the solitariness of her individuality as at the beginning where she admits “...we shut out desperate people that we could have helped” (Phiri 2010: 1) to a level where she shares the little she has with the poorest. She has grown from individual capacitation, and self-creativity to a relationship with others where her image is that of an individual filled with a sense of solidarity towards her community. Sophie's new realm of solidarity, showing charity among the prostitutes, and displaying the spirit of *ubuntu* even as she practises “immoral behaviour”, is paradoxical. In this instance the author exposes the problematic nature of *ubuntu*. The philosophy undercuts pragmatic action in the face of prevailing circumstances such as the HIV and AIDS menace, chronic poverty and a debilitating hopelessness that drives Sophie and many other women into prostitution for survival.

In *Highway Queen*, Phiri fictionally allows Sophie the knowledge not to judge other people by the anachronistic traditional standards imbued in *ubuntu* philosophy, so that she is able to upset the regular antagonistic mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships

sanctioned by patriarchy to create two women who can support each other through very difficult times to the point where the mother-in-law colludes with the daughter-in-law to suppress information on Sophie's business. The narrator says: "My mother-in-law eyed me not to say more. She had an idea of how I earned money even though she had never confronted me" (Phiri 2010: 177). And yet this seemingly supportive relationship, rather realistically, reaches breaking point when put under sufficiently harsh conditions. When Steven breaks a leg in a drunken fall and is hospitalised, the mother is so anguished that she lashes out at Sophie and tells her in no uncertain terms: "[Y]ou see Steven is my son! He is only your husband!" (Phiri 2010: 122). This incident temporarily puts paid any hope of a genuinely loyal woman-to-woman relationship such as is portent to begin with. Sophie's stoicism holds together this relationship and the family is able to continue pulling together, with the grandmother doing her part despite ill health and Sophie's long absences from home.

Through the character Sophie, Phiri avoids stereotyping men as a sub-species. She regards them as fellow human beings with individual quirks and behaviours, that way achieving better understanding and unlocking possibilities of gender cooperation in the face of economic, social and political challenges both men and women have to live with. That is the case with the man Dhuri, Sophie's arch enemy, who at the beginning forces intimacy with her, over and above the money she had paid to procure rice for resale. In the end, demonstrating typical *ubuntu*, he seeks her out at the border town to inform her of the tragedy back at the squatter camp caused by the looting and burning of the camp by violent gangs of youths, thereby morally redeeming himself. Thus perhaps the new Dhuri illustrates individual *ubuntu* within a framework of better social relations, that way defining the individual in relation to others, so that as these relationships change, characters of individuals also change positively.

Noticeable also is a male helplessness and weakness at the loss of formal employment through their resorting to alcoholic succour represented in the tale by Steven and Dave, another retrenchee. The same pattern is observable in Charles Mungoshi's character, Nhongo, in the short story "The hare" in the collection *Walking Still* (1997). It is as if formal employment breeds a marked inability to survive "after" the job. They seem forever cast in these roles and are unable to draw on some inner strength to survive in the changed circumstances of formal unemployment. Both men had had good jobs but fail to salvage anything of themselves from these jobs, suggesting some skills irrelevance in their world. The two are juxtaposed against the exemplary tenacity of Tickie the tuck-shop owner, whose selflessness and industry is further realised in his two teenage sons who, unlike the much older alcoholic, irresponsible and lazy Steven, attempt to earn a living through wood carving, that is, using their hands, rather than idle time away.

Phiri draws an unusual life-affirming male-female relationship between Tickie and Sophie that definitely demonstrates *ubuntu* philosophy. Rather unrealistically, but illustrating the potential for better relations premised on gender equality and mutual respect, Tickie is Sophie's confidante, co-planner and business mentor. Ordinarily a husband's role, Tickie executes this role without any sexual overtones or much material gain. In turn he is the

conscience she has to subdue when introspection leads her to question the double life she must live. Phiri does exaggerate the erasure of gender differences in this relationship in so far as it only exists in its neutrality, perhaps suggesting it as the ideal between men and women. Thus Tickie's moral support towards Sophie illustrates a strong sense of *ubuntu* on his part, unlike both her husband Steven and Dhuri who, at some point drive her to physical violence.

The first instance is when Dhuri sells rice and dried fish to her but sexually coerces her, over and above the money he takes from her. She has to subdue her conscience but after the act he still refuses to give her the goods and Sophie runs amok, biting him on the thigh, drawing blood and attracting a crowd with his screams. She says: "That fuelled me up. I went for his fat thigh and dug my teeth into it. Teeth were the best weapon under the situation" (Phiri 2010: 19). The second occasion is when Steven goes out selling dried fish but squanders the money so obtained on drink and when confronted, he is empty-handed and Sophie "... lifted him from [their] makeshift bed and threw him at the wall" (Phiri 2010: 39). This way Sophie is initiated into using violence should the occasion arise, as it often does for women engaged in transactional sex. However, although on many occasions male vindictiveness is illustrated, there are numerous times when men come to her aid against other males and other women. Female solidarity is also demonstrated quite realistically with women in some instances fully supportive of each other and at others jealousies souring relations.

For Sophie, church-going is about connecting with other HIV and AIDS-vulnerable women and the sixth commandment, although subsumable within *ubuntu* philosophy, is irrelevant to her. Sophie's fortitude and *ubuntu* shine through, perhaps unrealistically, but a story is true as told by its creator, to go by Anna Chitando's (2011) observation that, every story is true and represents the author's perception of both reality and possibilities. Artistic truth is created by how an author understands the laws governing society and how these laws are represented through characters. By endowing Sophie with an inspired understanding of the dynamics of HIV and AIDS infection, Phiri draws this character as the voice of reason among her co-sex workers. She becomes the instrument that enables a lot of them to remain healthy by teaching them to demand the use of protection, getting tested for HIV and AIDS and avoiding alcohol as it befuddles the brain and can lead such women to make ill-considered decisions that may cost them their lives, that way adding to the misery of their families. Significantly, Sophie preaches the use of condoms by male clients but is noticeably silent on the female condom, somewhat suggesting that men are the ones spreading the disease – a totally different take from the usual literary representations of the epidemic where women have largely been seen as the sources and vectors, an attitude confirmed by Corea (1992); Vambe (2003); and Muhwati (2009), among others. Fictionally Phiri's women manage to transcend the disease, pain, trauma and naming associated with HIV and AIDS (Ngoshi and Zhou: 2010) but these women can only guarantee their continued good health on the whims of their male clients, that way underscoring an insidious dependency on the male subject.

While one cannot question the boldness and determination of Sophie and her co-workers,

the narrative brings out a general lack of imaginative and creative problem-solving. Surely prostitution cannot be the only answer for every poverty-stricken woman. In fact so many women resort to transactional sex that the narrative subverts its own initiative. There are so many of them on the highway that the seeming solution, that is, rampant transactional sex that Phiri details, belies other healthier, more imaginative and legal means of earning a living for women who find themselves in the breadwinner role. This way the writer provides a critique on the lack of any safety nets in the Zimbabwean social systems, despite being signatories to human rights charters and professing *ubuntu* as a national philosophy. Conspicuously though, the author does not explicitly suggest skills education and only vaguely refers to some imprecise wish on Sophie's part to keep her children in school, possibly indicating little faith in academia as a solution to poverty.

Much like the earlier male writers as noted by Kahari (1990), Phiri invests urban space as conflictual due to its financial demands on the individual, making survival very difficult for the poor. Besides women opting to use their bodies to sustain their families, beggars, unemployed youths and the retrenched all try to eke out a living, often unsuccessfully, leading to all sorts of anti-social behaviours contrary to *ubuntu* philosophy. While Phiri exposes urban squalor, she nullifies Sophie's female agency by situating the salvation of her family within a rural and patriarchal environment, but withholds her full immersion into the countryside. She has to continue engaging in transactional sex not only for the survival of her core family. In typically *ubuntu* fashion and a patriarchal familiarity, Sophie now has to support a host of uncles and their families, leaving her with little hope of a quick realisation of the dream of a home for her family, the reason she prostitutes herself in the first place. In this way the character Sophie is unwittingly imbued with a flawed agency, a notion popularised by Motsemme (2007).

Unapologetically but perhaps narrowly didactic, Phiri's narrative shows an energetic approach to the HIV and AIDS problem: Sophie simply preaches the safe sex message. She does not consider abstinence as it obviously counters what Phiri's characters regard as the sure panacea to their poverty. Phiri's message is simply that of awareness of the need for prophylactic protection if women must prostitute themselves. Happily, Phiri sidesteps the kind of representation that could have empowered the men at the expense of the women. She avoids the all too common view that "... the men with whom they prostitute themselves are ... innocent victims of the unbridled sexual appetites of women" (Chitando 2011: 75). The author patently speaks for women in these circumstances but offers no moral rectitude, nor does she endow them with any scruples at all, somewhat seeming to suggest that as the way to go. In fact even those female characters that have jobs, as does Bertha who ran a shop at the border town, abandon these for prostitution, where pickings seem easier and yet the women have little space to negotiate for safe sex.

Phiri's sympathy for prostitutes is rooted in her experience of their generosity at a time when she needed protection from the system. In the preface to her first novel *Desperate* (2002) she explains how, because of her activism in the Second Chimurenga, she was constantly in danger. At one stage, prostitutes saved her life. For two weeks they fed her, housed her, protected her and then let her go on her way when it was safe to do so. She had



nothing with which to pay them for their kindness. She just thanked them and left. This is sure testimony of the author's worldview that quite clearly is at a level the generality of her readers have yet to reach.

Phiri makes a brave attempt to give currency to female agency and indeed a grand gesture of *ubuntu*, because understanding and giving such women some slack is going beyond the usual moral codes. Understandably, Phiri writes kindly about women's situation and often successfully shows cause but she fails womanhood by making transactional sex a female norm, thus confirming such unhelpful attitudes as the continued regard of HIV and AIDS as a women's disease or even that condom use translates into safe sex – because it does not, just as current advertising claims that circumcision reduces the chances of contracting HIV and AIDS. Accidents do happen, across both age and colour lines. Despite a seeming flawed agency fictionally given to female characters in the novel, the strongest achievement of the narrative lies in its thrust towards care, counselling, and general synergising of those women, men and children whose worlds are ravished by the epidemic, or collapsing because of an untenable economic environment, clearly all done in the spirit of *ubuntu*.

## Conclusion

While poverty leads many women and girls into sex work and transactional sex, the formerly employed men must cede the breadwinner role to the previously dependent women who in turn are ill-equipped to take up that role. Women's consciousness grows but it is constricted to prostitution, that way denying these women wholesome meaning to their lives. Women like Sophie walk the tight rope between what they know is culturally unacceptable and what they have to do for survival. Phiri demystifies female sexuality and explores the current social reality to give female agency, that is, power over their bodies, power that is represented as constructive. She does not romanticise *ubuntu*, rather she problematises its manifestation because her narrative is firmly rooted in the ever present reality of disease and poverty and the resultant shifts in family dynamics. In this way, Phiri shows that *ubuntu* philosophy has become out-dated, and therefore not absolute to understanding the lives of people, contributing as it may, to peace in both the private and the public sphere. Thus the constant tensions are what now define people's existence and not some impractical and uncritical consideration of *ubuntu*.

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