

GENDER, RELIGION, AND SEXUALITY UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

This first issue of *Imbizo* for 2017 brings together articles that speak to each other through the interrelatedness of the issues they address. Three central themes form a linear thread across the articles: gender, religion and sexuality. The issues around these themes are multiple, and the articles tackle them in different ways, foregrounding some for the purpose of advocacy and interrogating others with the aim of raising critical awareness.

On the subject of gender, the articles by Fetson Kalua, Tsitsi Roselene Gonzo and Yemurai Chikwangura, Vicensia Shule, and Mohammad Shaaban Deyab and Ebtihal Abdulsalam Elshaikh question certain masculine practices and advocate women's agency, employing insights from the various narrative and film texts they analyse to do so. All four articles query gender differentiation which results, not only in the oppression and marginalisation of women in various spheres, from the family to the public sphere, but also in the downfall of men.

In Kalua's article, which explores two works of journalistic reporting by British-cum-Botswanan writer Caitlin Davies, we get to see how gender works in collusion with racism to dehumanise women. In *The Place of Reeds*, which is Davies' fictionalised memoir, marriage to a Botswanan man exposes Davies to a plethora of oppressive missiles launched against her by the relatives of her husband's family. Kalua notes that "not only is Davies openly ostracised and marginalised because of her white race but she also finds herself at the receiving end of xenophobic behaviour from Ron's relatives, especially when their marriage begins to show symptoms of rupture." Davies therefore experiences a crisis of belonging and severe alienation as a result of sexism and xenophobia. The second of Davies' novels which Kalua explores also raises gender issues, this time centring on the oppression of the colonised male body. The novel, *The Return of El Negro*, tells the story of an unnamed man from Southern Africa whose grave is disinterred and his body taken to Europe for use as a specimen in scientific analysis. This is at the beginning of the 19th century, at the height of European colonisation in Africa. Highlighting the tragic experiences of the protagonists in both texts, both of whom are subjected to inconceivable human cruelty, Kalua argues that the texts "exemplify Bhabha's notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism in the way in which

[Davies] foregrounds the plight of those people – be they colonised or minorities – who have been the victims of oppression and tyranny.” The central argument in the article revolves around the ethical question of human-on-human violence based on notions of difference. Kalua therefore concludes that Davies’s “works are an enactment of the excesses, horrors and brutalities of our racialised and essentialised identities.” He leaves the reader pondering on his last statement that the texts “bear witness to the various ways in which, as a species, we often find ourselves gripped and overwhelmed by a nervous apprehension about who we are and how to grapple with the existential question of what it means to be human.”

The article by Tsitsi Roselene Gonzo and Yemurai Chikwangura extends the discussion on oppression and tyranny, this time focusing on the oppressive potentials of polygamy in African societies as borne out in two African women’s novels – one from Senegal and the other from Mozambique. Analysing the two selected novels, the authors highlight the ways in which polygamy helps maintain a system of gender hierarchy where men dominate over women by marrying multiple wives, and women are compelled by cultural and religious imperatives to accept the sharing of their spouses as ‘normal’. The trauma, betrayal and suffering that result from this experience are captured by Ramatoulaye and Rami, the protagonists in the novels by Mariama Bâ and Paulina Chiziane, respectively, both of whom ‘discover’ in the most bizarre manner that they are no longer in monogamous marriages because there are suddenly other women sharing their husbands with them. What these two novels do is to set the utopia of marriage against the dystopia of polygamy, forcing readers to acknowledge, as the authors do, that women need to be empowered individually and collectively in order to “work their way through the adverse effects of polygamy with dignity.” Maintaining such dignity in the face of persistent challenges in a polygamous household is what each woman in the novels has to figure out for herself. This article does not propose any simple solutions to that effect.

Vicensia Shule takes the patriarchal bull by its crooked horns in her profoundly feminist critique of the Tanzanian film industry, which is male-dominated, with chauvinism and sexism featuring as its hallmarks. Countering the dominant male-induced discourse that “there are no female producers in bongo movies,” bongo movies being local Tanzanian films, Shule argues that such a claim is based on male assumptions that ‘producers’ are people of a particular gender, thus excluding women who produce films from public recognition as ‘producers’. Applying “transformative feminist (TF) analysis which analyses gender, age, and class struggles in the midst of neo-liberal policies and the continued dynamics in the patriarchal systems of domination,” Shule challenges the sexism that underlines film production practices in Tanzania, exposing the underbelly of the industry with its consignment of women to ‘actors’ through whose sexual antics on camera the so-called ‘producers’ get to sell their films. Her interviews with female producers reveal sextortion, low literacy levels, and corruption within the film distribution channels as major challenges facing women producers in

the bongo movie industry. Yet, as she argues, these women are mounting up battles against these challenges, asserting their agency in provocative ways that compel the industry to acknowledge their roles as key players. Shule's remark that "film continues to play a major role in gender transformation" is therefore a statement that must be taken seriously, as further research into this area is warranted.

The last article that focalises gender is that by Mohammad Shaaban Deyab and Ebtihal Abdulsalam Elshaikh. Deyab and Elshaikh rekindle our interest in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* by employing Dialogical Self Theory to facilitate a deeper understanding of Okonkwo's demise in the novel. Reading the novel through the lens of the Dialogical Self Theory popularised by Hubert Hermans from the 1990s, they read Okonkwo's internal and external crises as manifestations of his difficulty to negotiate his different I-positions, which are equally internal and external. These I-positions include his position as a war veteran in the Umuofia society, a husband of many wives, a father to a son with feminine attributes (Nwoye), a father to a daughter with masculine attributes (Ezinma), a son to an effeminate and weak father (Unoka), a foster father to a captive boy (Ikemefuna), an exile in his maternal homeland, and a colonised man within his own village. These different I-positions can be classified into two main ones: his I-position as a masculine man (strong, violent, domineering, and aggressive) and his I-position as an emotional man (loving, tender, compromising, and patient). Deyab and Elshaikh argue that "Okonkwo's decision to kill himself at the end illustrates his failure to form a successful dialogical relation among his multiple I-positions." This is because he cannot reconcile his 'dominant' self, which always strives to be the epitome of masculinity, with his 'other' self that has to be ruled by emotion in dispensing his duties towards his family. The failure to find a compromise that integrates his multiple and diverse I-positions is what leads to Okonkwo's 'self' falling apart. As Deyab and Elshaikh note, "his decision to kill himself represents a shifting relationship between two voices – a central voice representing violence and strength and an undesirable voice representing emotion and compliance to the change that is going [on] in his society." The challenge for gender discourses that this article raises is the possibility of violent men to allow the voice representing emotion to dominate over that which represents violence.

Religion and its potential for engagement with art comes under the spotlight in this issue in the article by Ogungbemi Akinola, Patrick Ebewo and Olufemi Abodunrin. These authors investigate Christian worship as a dramaturgical model in Nigerian churches. In arguing for greater deployment of drama and theatre performances in modern-day Christian worship, Akinola, Ebewo and Abodunrin re-trace from history the use of drama in religious activities, from the play festivals in celebration of Greek gods in 442 B.C. to the musical drama that has accompanied sermons in the Global Harvest Church in Ibadan, Nigeria, since 1995. Their research reveals that performances in Christian worship in Nigeria are not only instruments for attracting and retaining parishioners, but are actually desired by parishioners. It is interesting to note that "results from this

study reveal that parishioners and Pastors are aware of the benefits which theatre and drama bring to Christian worship if it is encouraged by church leadership, and that the use of theatre and drama in the church today to accentuate Bible teachings is an area of Christian worship that Pastors should continuously incorporate into their services.” Such an understanding of drama and theatre as mechanisms for social engagement within religious spaces leaves us in deep thought about the ways in which research can be of greater social value to communities.

The last set of articles to be discussed in this editorial are those that address sexuality issues, such as homophobia and the challenges of ‘coming out’. The two articles by Gibson Ncube and Edgar Fred Nabutanyi are exceptionally insightful in their analyses of the various mechanisms deployed by gays and lesbians to assert their sexuality amidst spaces devoid of any sympathy for their sexual preference. While Ncube explores homosexual identities in the genre of music, Nabutanyi looks at these in selected short stories from Uganda. It is evident from both articles that whether in Uganda or South Africa, public responses to homosexuality are still locked in homophobic sentiments that need to be interrogated through scholarship of this nature.

Ncube’s article examines the music and music videos of two contemporary South African musicians, Toya Delazy and Nakhane Touré, who are pioneers in their open discussion and depiction of same-sex love. Ncube argues that “such open discussion of same-sex love challenges the homophobia that is prevalent in South Africa, particularly in the impoverished townships.” His discussion of the music of these artists incorporates salient aspects of their public lives, which school us about the relationship between music and identity. For example, he notes that while Toya Delazy has remained quiet about her sexuality in public interviews, Nakhane Touré has openly declared his sexual orientation. These different responses of the artists point to the complexity of negotiating a homosexual identity within cultures that are predominantly heterosexual. Thus, this article is especially relevant in that it offers us “insights into the intersection between cultural productions and their discursive function as a critique of the heteronormalising logic that reigns in heteropatriarchal societies such as South Africa.” Ncube’s conclusion that more work needs to be done “in transforming conventions around sex and sexuality in South Africa, and other countries of the global south” is something that many readers would agree with.

Nabutanyi certainly agrees and enhances this transformational process by looking at possibilities offered by Ugandan short stories in breaking the stigmatisation and homophobia associated with Ugandan society’s responses to homosexuality. In his article, which analyses a selection of three short stories portraying gay and lesbian relationships, sometimes in competition with heterosexual relationships, he argues that “societal stigmatisation and erasure of this group’s agency and subjectivity in the texts can arouse empathy for this group rather than derision” as the texts raise consciousness about both the existence and humanity of this group. Nabutanyi beautifully unpacks the multiple symbols and ironies embedded in the short stories to critique society’s

refusal to acknowledge LGBTI persons. In his conclusion, he notes emphatically that “the dual acknowledgement of the existence of queers and the labels attached to queer sexuality subvert Ugandan sexuality debates,” because “the short stories underscore the fact that queers might be a closeted minority, but they are Ugandans who might be our children, parents, friends or relatives.” Such a personalised conclusion to what is a highly controversial subject in Uganda brings the matter home: at the end of the day, we have to accept that queers are human beings like the rest of us.

Evidently, the articles in this issue are engaging in their breadth of subject matter and their depth of argument. The book review we have included herein complements the focus on gender, religion, and sexuality in its exploration of colonisation and the conflicts it created in African societies. Tomi Adeaga reviews Peter Kimani’s novel, *Dance of the Jakaranda*, to arouse interest in a beautifully written historical novel on the Kenyan struggle for independence. Gender, religion, and sexuality issues highlighted in this review include the sexual violation of a young woman by a colonialist man who, ironically, happens to be a reverend. The novel’s criticism of religion, as Adeaga illustrates, goes beyond questioning its moral values to questioning the very morality of Christianity’s imposition of itself on African peoples and usurpation of their wealth, especially their lands. The review eloquently positions Kimani’s novel as an important text contributing to the canon of literature on Kenyan liberation struggles established by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii.

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