

# MOTHERHOOD IN CHILDREN'S DRAMA: SELECTED CASES FROM COLLECTIONS ON SHONA CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

Motherhood is a construct that is highly criticised especially by feminist scholarships for its alleged subordination, marginalisation and oppression of women. Motherhood as a position and its associated responsibilities are lamented and excoriated as the root causes of women's disempowerment, docility and invisibility in society. Feminists also conceive motherhood as a position of the feminine that has little influence and is fraught with physical and emotional weaknesses. Using Africana womanist literary theory, this paper is an analysis of motherhood as conceived and conveyed through selected pieces of drama from Scheu, Hamutyinei and Musa's *Mitambo yavadiki navakuru*, and Gelfand's *Growing up in Shona society: From birth to marriage*, which are collections of Shona children's literature, with the intent to ascertain this ethnic group's attitude to and perception of the position, its roles and significance. The paper observes that among the Shona, motherhood is far from being an oppressive and disempowering position – it is a position associated with admiration, power, influence and affluence, important responsibilities, and hence, with visibility and significance. More so, it is not limited to femaleness; it is a fluid and flexible concept that allows even males to assume the same position and social responsibilities. The paper concludes that observations and assertions by Western-oriented scholarships need to be critically examined before being accepted as universal truths, and that indigenous cultures should be researched to establish their perceptions and conceptualisation of reality. It recommends that the appreciation of indigenous cultures' conceptualisation of reality be approached from the point of view of participants of the culture in question, not outsiders.

**Keywords:** motherhood; Shona; children's literature; drama; disempowerment; marginalisation

## INTRODUCTION

Motherhood has been excoriated especially by feminist scholarships for the many disadvantages it is believed to expose women to. Motherhood is believed to be intertwined with the discrimination, marginalisation and disempowerment of women within and outside the home. Neyer and Bernardi (2011, 164) posit that “the issue of motherhood has been one of the anchor points for denying women rights and equality and for discriminating against them.” In other words, motherhood is criticised for sidelining women in society. De Beauvoir (2010, 525) also argues that “[i]t is fraudulent to maintain that through maternity woman becomes concretely man’s equal.” De Beauvoir conceives motherhood as the key feature which causes women to be seen and regarded as “others” and to tie them to immanence. Maternity is conceived as a position that binds women not only to the home and family, but also to a man. In addition, this role is also projected as a position of inferiority within the home and one that exposes women to purportedly less important tasks in and around the home such as cooking, sweeping the compound, as well as minding babies. Thus motherhood, as part of womanhood, is conceived to be a social category understood to be powerless, disadvantaged and controlled and defined by men (Oyěwùmi 1997, xiii). It is believed that patriarchy allows a man to dominate and override his wife in everything done in the home all the time. The purported dominance of husbands over their wives has led anthropologist Shirley Ardener (1975) to come up with what is regarded as the Muted Group Theory, in reference to mothers. The assumption and argument of the theory is that motherhood does not allow women to be heard on any issues of significance in life.

Motherhood is also perceived by feminists to be a condition and position, together with its responsibilities, limited and confined to women. Motherhood is often exclusively reduced to biological motherhood (Neyer and Bernardi 2011, 168). It is reduced and confined to the ovarian and the uterine functions; that is, it is linked only to those who produce the eggs, carry out the pregnancy and give birth (Stanworth 1987, 16). In other words, motherhood is conceived and defined wholly in gender terms. It is believed to be a construct limited to people with a female anatomy. As Oyěwùmi (1997, 12) observes, physical bodies are seen as social bodies. Grosz (1993, 198) remarks:

The body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read into. Social law is incarnated, “corporealized”[;] correlatively, bodies are textualized, read by others as expressive of a subject’s psychic interior.

Motherhood is thus associated with the biological make-up of people. This means that men, by virtue of having a different body anatomy to women, cannot assume the position and responsibilities of motherhood. The assumption is that there is a distinction between sex and gender. The human body is believed and seen as evidence of different positions and social roles. Through this view, the anatomy of one’s body is seen as a determinant of one’s position and responsibilities. Biology is thus considered and

conceived as destiny. Thus, to feminists, biological facts determine who becomes a mother and who does not.

In addition, motherhood is also associated with negative character traits. These include being weak, dominated and a gossip. King (2007, 48) argues that motherhood is associated with weakness, meekness, and whatever other ignominious “-ness” the speaker has in mind. Such weakness, it is believed, manifests, both physically and emotionally, for it is also associated with the argument that women tend to break down emotionally at the slightest provocation (Peter, Vingerhoets, and Heck 2001, 19). Motherhood is also associated with docility; what McNaughtan (2012, 9) describes as “stay-at-home”. Hence, motherhood is considered both a restricted and restricting position and condition. Against this background, this paper aims to show that motherhood, as conceptualised and practised by Africans (unlike in the West), is a construct and position of empowerment, recognition, respect and flexibility among others. It does so focusing on selected Shona children's literature, in particular, children's drama. Such type of research is significant for it acts as a challenge to Africans to research their own indigenous cultures and not adopt the world views of motherhood and womanhood held by outside cultures.

## THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Motherhood as conveyed through Shona children's drama can be looked at from the perspective of Africana womanist literary theory. Its proponent is Clenora Hudson-Weems (2004, 1–135). She posits that what Western feminists say about the perception and position of women does not apply to African realities. Rather, she argues that each race and culture have their own unique ways when it comes to how gender relations are conceptualised, ways which should not be generalised to all ethnic groups. Many first and second wave feminists see womanhood and motherhood as demeaning, disempowering and marginalising. However, Hudson-Weems conceives this as a Western and not an African problem. Overall, her theory, just like Afrocentrism, laments that Western experiences and thoughts have been generalised to include humanity elsewhere, yet African people, for example, have their own way of looking at themselves. Thus the theory is about how Africans have been made to share the burdens of Western discourse vis-à-vis how the Africans perceive themselves. In fact, Hudson-Weems argues and urges that African gender relations be looked at and be appreciated in the context of African history and culture, not of a Western framework. Thus Africana womanism is both “a critique and corrective” (Asante 2007, 37). It is a critique in that it exposes the limitations of assertions by feminists about how women are perceived and shows that, when looked at in the context of the African milieu, such assertions about women are largely distortions or falsehoods. It is corrective in that it strives to correct the distortions and assertions by such Western discourses especially in reference to African realities.

In looking at African gender relations, Hudson-Weems has eighteen descriptors which she argues that show the position, perception and society's attitude to womanhood and motherhood. These are self-naming, self-defining, family centred, in concert with male in struggle, male compatible, flexible role player, mothering, strong, authentic, nurturing, ambitious, respected, recognised, whole, adaptable, respectful of elders, spiritual, and genuine in sisterhood. At the core of her argument is that "Africana women have not had that sense of powerlessness that White women speak of, nor have they been silenced or rendered voiceless by their male counterparts as is the expressed experience of White women" (2004, 55). In other words, motherhood, as conceptualised and practised by Africans is a concept and position of empowerment, recognition, respect and flexibility among others. This is what the selected Shona children's drama vindicate.

## A BRIEF ON THE SELECTED PIECES OF SHONA CHILDREN'S DRAMA

The paper analyses pieces of Shona children's drama selected from Scheu, Hamutyinei and Musa's *Mitambo yavadiki navakuru* (1972) and Gelfand's *Growing up in Shona society: From birth to marriage* (1979), which are collections on Shona children's literature. The two collections describe how such dramas are enacted, also showing that Shona children have a variety of literature for entertainment and learning. The same collections are evident that Shona children's literature falls into the popular literary genres: narrations, poetry and drama. Scheu, Hamutyinei and Musa's book has more than 15 pieces of children's drama while Gelfand's has more than 20. This article focuses on four pieces of children's drama: *gondo guru chawauyira* (Big eagle why have you come?), *vana vangu vapera* (my children are finished), *matakanana* (playhouse) and *mahumbwe* (mock marriage) with the intent to ascertain their depiction of the construct, position and responsibilities of motherhood. Some pieces of the selected Shona children's drama, though sometimes punctuated by song, heavily exploit role play as children enact various roles of members in society. The named pieces of drama were selected on account of the centrality of the mother figure in them, making it possible for observations and conclusions about the position and depiction of motherhood. In other words, the selected drama excerpts explicitly centre on the position, role and image of a mother in the Shona milieu. In addition, the pieces of drama were chosen owing to their popularity among contemporary Shona children. The four pieces are still practised among many Shona children of today.

### *Gondo Guru Chawauyira* (Big Eagle Why Have You Come?)

Both collections on children's literature describe how this drama is performed among Shona children. It is performed by children of both sexes. The children play it in a row,

holding each other by the waist (Scheu, Hamutyinei, and Musa 1972, 32–33). One of the children assumes the position of an eagle while another takes that of a mother who will be protecting her chicks (children) from the eagle's advances. The mother will have her hands stretched out, trying to bar the eagle from getting to any of her children. The eagle will be doing all it can to dodge the mother and get to the children. If one child is caught, the players stop and the mother rearranges the children again. The mother puts the cleverest child at the back, knowing that the child can keep the eagle at bay. She also advises the children not to leave the line or remain behind alone, for those that do so are easy targets for the eagle. They keep playing the game, with children alternating the positions of the eagle and the mother (Gelfand 1979, 164–5).

### ***Vana Vangu Vapera* (My Children are Finished)**

The way this drama is performed is explained in Gelfand's *Growing up in Shona society: From birth to marriage* (1979, 177). It is performed in almost the same way like *gondo guru chawauyira*. In some cases, one boy is chosen to play the role of a marauding beast, such as a lion or a hyena, and a girl is chosen to play that of a mother who must protect her children from the beast. In other cases, all children, both boys and girls, alternate in the positions of mother and beast. The mother advises her children to keep the group intact in a line, each holding the next tightly by the waist (Gelfand 1979, 177). As soon as the beast appears, the mother, who will be in front of the line, puts up a struggle, keeping the beast at bay.

### ***Matakanana* (Playhouse)**

This drama is described by Gelfand (1979, 181). *Matakanana* (playhouse) is normally played by young girls of between two and five years. It can be performed individually or with other little girls. The small girl assumes the position and responsibilities of a mother with and in her home. She marks out her home and kitchen and has household gadgets that symbolise those in a real kitchen. Her cooking pots are calabashes, her cooking sticks are twigs while her firewood is twigs or grass. In addition, her relishes are tree leaves, her mealie meal soil, while her child is either a doll or a cob strapped on her back. She busies herself with household chores, ventures out of the house and home for some tasks such as collecting relishes and firewood. She cooks *sadza* (stiff porridge) and "gives" it to her child. She also even calls out to passers-by to come and join in having the meal. She "bathes" her child, "dresses" it, "breastfeeds" it and even "lulls" it to sleep. She does exactly as she has seen her real mother do in actual life.

### ***Mahumbwe* (Mock Marriage)**

*Mahumbwe* is explained by Gelfand (1979, 169 and 190–191). It is played by children of between two and 16 years, and of both sexes. It is played just after harvest. Depending

on the numbers, the children normally constitute a family comprising a grandma, a grandpa, an uncle, an aunt, a mother, a father and, of course, the children (Gelfand 1979, 169). Those who play the roles of mother and father should not be related and should be of a different sex from each other. In this game, children emulate society in almost every respect. In some cases, the children may just demarcate their homes and the houses with a line or stones, while in other instances they actually build good-looking, but small structures to mark their dwellings. If they have to erect structures, male children go out and cut the poles and dig the foundations and then erect and thatch the huts. Female children (the mothers) also go out to mow grass, to beat the floors and also to plaster and beautify the huts with decorations.

After the elders have finished harvesting, the children get into the same fields, collecting any leftovers in the form of grain (finger millet, sorghum, maize cobs or *mhunga*) or vegetable relish. The grain is prepared by the "mothers", ground into mealie meal and stored in containers. The "mothers" go out to look for wild spinach while the "fathers" go out to hunt or trap birds and mice. Upon their return from a hunting expedition, the men are thanked and the mothers prepare food for the family. Occasionally, they have a domestic dispute, as in real life and they usually go to the aunt who resolves it amicably. After the game, girl children are taken to the river for inspection by the aunties and usually no one is found defiled. In rare cases of defilement, the responsible boy is heavily fined and made to marry the girl.

## MOTHERHOOD IN SHONA CHILDREN'S DRAMA

In Shona children's drama such as *gondo guru chawauyira* (big eagle why have you come?), *vana vangu vapera* (my children are finished), *matakanana* (playhouse) and *mahumbwe* (mock marriage), the motherhood position and responsibilities in society, within the home and family set-up as well as society's attitude to that, are well enunciated.

### Motherhood as a Social and Flexible Position and Role

While feminists conceive and limit motherhood position and responsibilities to women, the Shona milieu presents a different scenario. In the Shona milieu, motherhood is more of a social responsibility which any member of society can undertake, regardless of their gender. In *gondo guru chawauyira* and *vana vangu vapera*, boys and girls take turns to assume the role of the mother who shields her children from the marauding eagle or beast. By taking turns to play the same role, Shona children are taught that motherhood, just like other societal roles, is not cast in stone. Thus the Shona world view, just like other African ethnic groups allows for male and female members to occupy the same position and undertake similar responsibilities. Commenting on the Shona world view on motherhood, Furusa (2006, 3) asserts:

In Shona, all the people on my mother's side including males are responsible for "mothering" me. This means that my mother's sisters, brothers and all male and female children of her brothers are my mothers. Similarly, all my father's brothers and sisters are responsible for "fathering" me.

In other words, male members of society can also occupy the position and carry out responsibilities of motherhood. As such, positions and roles are never competed for in Shona society. They are fluid and flexible such that both female and male members can assume them without any hesitation or problem. There is always a platform and time for everyone to assume a position and undertake the responsibilities associated with it. That is why the boys and girls happily alternate any positions and responsibilities of motherhood in the games. Being a mother does not always mean being female. The anatomy of one's body does not determine one's position or responsibilities. Hence, Hudson-Weems (2004, 35) stresses that African men and women are "flexible role players".

Shona children's drama also shows that mothering is not just a biological duty. In other words, a mother does not only care for and feed her biological children. She feeds and cares for her children, and also other people's children, together with society in general. This vindicates the African philosophy that although it may take two to bear a child, it takes the whole village to raise the child (Hudson-Weems 2004, 53). The fact that the whole village comes in to help raise the child shows that the responsibilities of motherhood are more than biological. The young girl playing *matakanana* (playhouse) has her own baby (which resembles her biological child), but she calls on passers-by to come and share a meal that she has prepared. She is not worried about the welfare of her immediate children only, but the welfare of humanity in general. Hudson-Weems (2004, 53) observes that an African woman is committed to loving and caring for her own, and she extends that to the entire African family; she executes her duty to humankind. The same applies to the mother in the *mahumbwe* (mock marriage) drama who also prepares and dishes out food to members of the immediate and extended family and humanity in general. These acts constitute the descriptors of "mothering" and "nurturing" identified by Hudson-Weems (2004, 53–54).

## Motherhood as a Role Requiring Physical and Emotional Strength

Womanhood and motherhood are often associated with powerlessness and the need to be protected and worked for. The Bible, in Proverbs 31:10–31, describes the strong and independent woman and mother, but the scripture that is read most at marriage ceremonies in Zimbabwe is from Ephesians 5:25, which urges men to love their wives taking into cognisance that they are the weaker sex. Thus women are largely described in Zimbabwean Christian circles as not able to undertake strenuous activities. In Victorian principles, the woman's roles are linked and confined to the kitchen and other purportedly less laborious or less strenuous work. Thus motherhood is believed to be a



position of weakness, both physically and emotionally. Weeping or crying is generally associated with motherhood and womanhood.

In Africa, Hudson-Weems (2004, 55) observes that, generally, the Africana womanist comes from a long tradition of psychological as well as physical strength. Shona children's drama shows a mother who exudes both forms of strength; physical and emotional. Physically, she has to confront powerful beasts like the lion, the hyena and the eagle. This is demonstrated in pieces of drama like *gondo guru chawauyira* and *vana vangu vapera* where the mother faces the rogue animals head-on, by herself. If she gives in, she risks losing all her children. In many instances, she manages to keep the animals at bay, showing her courage and the might of her power. The eagle, lion and hyena in the drama pieces represent life-threatening encounters which the mother has to face while raising children in life. Some of these dangerous encounters happen when the men are not around, and even when the men are around but seem powerless or unable to fulfil the traditional role of protector (Hudson-Weems 2004, 55) and so warrants the mother to be equally strong to help ward off the mercenaries.

In drama pieces like *matakanana* and *mahumbwe*, the mother demonstrates physical strength in that she works hard in and outside the home. She undertakes many roles, such as cooking, sweeping, beautifying the compound, grinding corn, pounding and going out to look for firewood and wild spinach. All these roles are usually performed with a baby strapped on her back. Sometimes the mother works on the fields, together with the men but in other instances undertakes some roles away from the men. Aschwanden (1982, 47) writes that among the Shona, a young man looking for a woman to marry is advised to look for one with rough hands, which are a sign of being a hard and strong worker. Soft hands are associated with laziness. Among the Acholi of Uganda, p'Bitek (1986, 30) makes a similar observation that laziness in women is excoriated. In fact, a lazy woman among the Acholi is derogated as the *lala* vegetable, which, although its leaves are good-looking, is sour in taste. The idea is for men to look for physically strong and hard-working women and avoid lazy women in marriage.

Emotionally, the drama pieces train those who assume the motherhood position and responsibilities to be strong. In *gondo guru chawauyira* and *vana vangu vapera*, motherhood is shown as prone to tragedies. The mother occasionally loses a child to a rogue beast. The dramas train those who assume motherhood responsibilities to expect and be able to cope with the sudden loss of a child. The mother is trained to be strong enough to face life despite having lost some of her children. In the games, once the mother loses one of her children, she regroups her children, enhances more protection and continues with life. In other words, even in moments of death and loss, mothers are shown as resilient and forward-looking. They "do not sit and mope" (Moyana 1996, 55). Such a stance shows that, those who associate womanhood with being weak emotionally are misinformed. Instead, among the Shona, mothers are expected and challenged to be emotionally and psychologically strong.



## Motherhood as Source of Knowledge, Wisdom and Life Skills

Western patriarchy to some extent associates motherhood with being “small minded” (Myers 2015, 1). In other words, the mother is thought not to have the same intellect as that of men. The mother is viewed as and considered less resourceful than her male counterparts. As a result, in patriarchal society, decision-making is considered the sole responsibility of men. That is why patriarchal societies regard women as perpetual minors (Weinrich 1982, 22).

In African culture and world view, motherhood is associated with resourcefulness, witicism and wisdom. In the drama pieces *gondo guru chawuyira* and *vana vangu vapera*, the mothers are shown teaching, advising and warning their children about expected behaviour for survival. The mothers tell their children to keep in a line and not wander away from the line. Wandering away from the line exposes the children to beasts. The line is symbolic, it is a warning given by the mothers to live in line with societal dictates. Those who ignore societal norms and values normally expose themselves to dangers. In other drama pieces like *chidhanga chidhanga* (Scheu, Hamutyinei, and Musa 1972, 35–36), the mother advises the children not to entertain strangers (represented by the hyena) as this might be a ploy to lure them away and prey on them. Thus mothers are presented as storehouses of valuable and indispensable knowledge and skills for survival. Those children who religiously follow their mother's teachings hardly get themselves into trouble. That the mother is a respected and respectable resource of knowledge and life skills is seen in that humankind across the globe entrusts mothers with children at their critical stage of development (from birth to 15 years), who teach them not only the language, but culture as well. Sociologists and psychologists have regarded this age as the “critical age” (Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams 2013, 413) in which the child is exposed to and acquires all the necessary vocabulary and values that guide them in later life. That society even has faith in mothers teaching the children shows how respected the mothers are. They are known fountains of knowledge and great philosophers.

## Motherhood as a Platform for Freedom and Independence

Feminists argue that by being bound to the home, women are not using their capacities fully (Hirshman 2006, 2). However, the claim of being homebound and being denied the platform for self-expression has no place among the Shona. In the dramas, motherhood is presented not as a dominated and powerless position. In *matakanana*, motherhood is shown as a position of independence and freedom for the mother. Each mother has her own kitchen where she directs all activities and determines what has to be cooked and at what time. The space accords her the platform and right to be creative and active. She is in no way docile, but works hard to maintain the ambiance of the home. Motherhood does not confine the female beings to the kitchen and home. Rather, it accords them the mandate and choice of venturing out of the home and working, bringing various material wealth to the home. Thus, motherhood allows the womenfolk to be outgoing,

to be hardworking and to be seen. This negates feminist perceptions which describe mothers as “stay-at-home” people (McNaughtan 2012, 9).

That mothers wander and work away from the home is quite in sync with the Shona thought which says, “*Mai igonzo*” (the mother is like a rat). A rat is known for its endless trips, looking for, and gathering foodstuffs for its own, and its young ones’ consumption. This is an acknowledgement and celebration of the mother’s activities within and outside the home, activities which enables her to venture out, gather and bring home a variety of wealth. In Shona society, the wealth that a mother makes and gathers through her hard work is regarded as *maoko* property (Weinrich 1982, 42). Although such property and wealth are meant to cater for the well-being of the family, the mother has singular power over the disposal of such property or wealth.

The mother also works independently, and enthusiastically presides over all the affairs of the home, such as cooking, bathing babies and feeding the family. Such responsibilities are in no way inferior, especially taking into consideration the importance of the home and the kitchen in the Shona milieu, as well as the unparalleled importance of children in the Shona world view. Among the Shona, the kitchen is the temple of the people’s religion, the African restaurant where menus are prepared and served, the classroom of young Shona learners, the economic bank of the family, and the rendezvous for important family activities such as marriage negotiations (Makaudze and Viriri 2012, 41–46). Thus motherhood allows women to preside over the heartbeat of Shona life. In the kitchen, the mother takes orders from no one. Rather, she is her own master and shapes the destiny of the home. This is quite in line with Shona philosophy which says, “*Musha mukadzi*” (a home is such because of a woman). Her position, as well as responsibilities, shape up and make up the home. The tasks she embarks on are crucial in Shona life. She feeds, not only her immediate and biological children, but society as a whole. Hence, motherhood is a life-giving and life-sustaining responsibility. The responsibilities associated with it are acknowledged, celebrated and cherished by society.

## Motherhood as a Source of Wealth and Guarantor of Property Ownership

Shona children’s dramas teach participants to note and appreciate the power wielded by the mother, especially in terms of property ownership. *Matakanana* and *mahumbwe* show that the Shona mother owns a variety of gadgets and has other material wealth. The household items such as calabashes, pots and other utensils are the mother’s personal possessions. In these pieces of drama, the kitchen itself, which is also the first dwelling to be built in any Shona homestead, is the mother’s personal possession and no other woman can use it, together with the gadgets therein, except the one allowed in Shona culture. In these drama pieces, each mother directs all activities within and around her kitchen and the home, demonstrating her undoubted power and authority. She can hire

out any of the kitchen wares and other material goods in the kitchen without having to consult or seek the consent of her husband (Makaudze 2015, 271). Furusa (2006, 4) acknowledges that the mother is the only person in Shona society to own private property; whatever she has belongs to her and her alone, but whatever the father has, belongs to the whole family, including the mother. Motherhood enables the woman to generate and accrue personal wealth. Thus, contrary to popular belief that motherhood disempowers women, they are instead economically empowered. Motherhood does not just provide women with multiple avenues to generate and accrue wealth, but also to have sole ownership and individual freedom in the disposal of such wealth (Makaudze 2014, 26).

### Motherhood as Equal and Complementary to Fatherhood

In *mahumbwe*, motherhood is shown as a position of significance, equality and complementarity to that of fatherhood. The mother embarks on a different set of roles which are not in any way inferior to those of the father, but rather complementary. While the father goes out to cut poles and erect the physical structures of the home, the mother also goes out to mow grass for thatching and gathers clay for the walls and the floors. In other words, the mother occupies a position, and has responsibilities not in any way inferior to those of the father. They pursue different but complementary roles which are of equal importance. No one can do without the other. The mother and the father also need each other, physically as well as emotionally. Neither women nor men can claim that the other gender is undesirable and dispensable (Hudson-Weems 2004, 67). In *mahumbwe* (mock marriage) the man (father) recognises that even though he may love himself, he desires a special somebody to fill the void in his life, one who makes him complete. That somebody is the woman (mother). Without her, the human race becomes extinct and the father's life is incomplete. Motherhood is thus part of the equation that makes the human race and life tick.

Feminists also believe that motherhood binds a woman to a man in a union where she is subordinate. McNaughtan (2012, 14–24) describes mothers as muted. However, children's dramas instead show that in the Shona milieu, the mother is not at all subordinate. She has great influence both with and outside the home. In the home, she has jurisdiction over what is to be cooked, and when as well as by whom it should be eaten (Makaudze and Viriri 2012, 44). In these dramas, as in real life, the mother is in charge of all the material and economic wealth generated and gathered by either her or the husband, which includes varieties of relish such as wild spinach, vegetables from the fields or the garden, birds and mice trapped by the men. She is the family bank manager. She is also the chief economist who preserves varieties of food and even stores them for future consumption. Her voice is not only sought after, but listened to and obeyed. The “father”, and the “mother” together with their “children”, sit together to discuss issues that affect the family. In these discussions, the mother is neither avoided nor bullied into

silence. Rather, she is accorded more time to explain how she sees things and how they have an impact on the family for she is better positioned as she manages most things (Rukuni 2007, 54). The father then upholds the decision as his and communicates and defends it outside the home (Rukuni 2007, 55). In other words, being a father is not an executive position, rather, it is ceremonial. Hence, while feminists believe marriage disempowers the mother, the Shona scenario shows it as empowering and uplifting. Whereas the feminists feel that marriage excludes the mother from important decision-making matters, in the Shona milieu, the mother is quite central in, and shapes, all family deliberations.

### Motherhood as a Protected and Deified Position

In the dramas, just like in the traditional Shona milieu, in the event of a domestic dispute, motherhood does not expose women to various forms of violence. Instead, beating a wife is regarded as the worst form of weakness for a Shona man (Chigwedere 1996, 26). Misunderstandings are discussed and common ground sought by the young "spouses". In the event of the two failing to resolve the conflict, they seek advice and counsel from the aunt, the husband's sister. The aunt is so powerful, especially when it comes to the treatment of her brother's wife. The power stems from the fact that the *chipanda* Shona custom allows cattle paid as bride-wealth for the aunt at her marriage to be used to bring a wife for her brother (Auret 1990, 98–99). In other words, it is through the aunt that the brother has bride-wealth with which to marry. So the wife is also customarily the aunt's wife as well. This is in line with the Igbo world view where they also have female husbands (Amadiume 1987, 125). This aunt has a very strong say over how the brother's wife is treated and, in cases of disrespect or violent behaviour by the husband, the aunt has the right to take the wife away and deny the man any form of access until all misunderstandings are resolved. In this regard, motherhood is a very protected and respected position. It is a position of dignity, integrity and respect. As with the children, they respect their mother so much that no one dares beat her, let alone scold her.

This is in line with the Shona belief that the mother is so powerful and untouchable that not any of her children can raise a hand against her or insult her. Any child who does so is believed to court misery in life. They can only make recompense when she is alive, through the *kutanda botso* custom, which is a very painful and humiliating way of rectifying the bad treatment of the mother. Hence, motherhood is a deified position. The mother is a semi-god who is approached and treated with awe.

### CONCLUSION

The paper discussed motherhood as conveyed through Shona children's drama. It focused on the position as well as the associated responsibilities. It probed feminists' conceptualisation of motherhood as a position of the feminine which has little influence

and is fraught with physical and emotional weaknesses as well as the subordination, marginalisation and oppression of women. The paper observed that among the Shona, motherhood is far from being an oppressive and disempowering concept, but is a construct intertwined with admiration, power and influence, important responsibilities and, hence, with visibility and significance. More so, it is not limited to femaleness. Instead, it is a lucid and flexible concept that allows males to assume the same position and social responsibilities. The paper concludes that, observations and assertions by Western-oriented scholarships need to be critically examined first before being embraced as universal truths, and that indigenous cultures should be researched to establish their perceptions and conceptualisation of reality. The paper recommends that the indigenous cultures' conceptualisation of reality be appreciated from the point of view of participants of the culture in question, not outsiders. It further recommends that contemporary society adopts and adapts male-female relations of the past as a way of dealing with a host of problems related to gender today.

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