

Thematisations of Child Abuse by Xitsonga Music Composers

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Abstract

Abuse in its multifarious manifestations, for example, physical, sexual, emotional, economic, verbal and psychological abuse, as well as harassment, stalking, and property vandalism, is currently treated as both a global and national crisis. This malady permeates a variety of spaces. It is notable that even musicians devote their creative outputs' thematic foci to confrontations and agentive contestations against abuse. Some Xitsonga music composers in particular have been adamant in vocalising their objections to child abuse through songs, an area which is yet to receive broad scholarly attention. This article employed a qualitative approach and discourse analysis to reflect on three purposely selected Xitsonga songs that thematise child abuse in its varied forms. This article employed literary theory to analyse song lyrics. The songs are analysed based on a predetermined set of themes, namely, notions of child abuse, condemnations of child abuse, conscientising society about child abuse, and the selected musicians' proposed remedial interventions against child abuse. The article contributes a contrastive dimension to the ongoing discourse on abuse in general and child abuse in particular from the perspective of Xitsonga musicians. The article recommends, with heavy reliance on the sampled songs, the ways through which the malaise of child abuse can be best addressed and possibly even eradicated in society.

Keywords: child abuse; contestations; physical abuse; psychological abuse; violence; Xitsonga music



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Introduction

The prevalence of child abuse has drawn attention from various social commentators, including Xitsonga music composers. Among such composers are Thomas Hasani Chauke and Freddy Masingi (also known as Matshwa Bemuda), who are prominent Xitsonga music composers whose creative outputs thematise and challenge, among other burning issues of the day, occurrences of child abuse in society. Child abuse refers to the prolonged ill-treatment of or violence towards someone, the use of insulting comments, an improper use and abuse of power, to the detriment of another person. Child abuse is mostly defined as any form of child maltreatment, including neglect (Levi and Portwood 2011). Child abuse can take many different forms and includes any act against a minor child that causes physical, sexual, psychological or emotional harm (Chudleigh 2005). Child abuse is classified as any kind physiological or psychological harm to a minor child (Slep, Heyman, and Snarr 2011). According to Umobong (2010), child abuse is any act of omission or commission, physical or psychological mistreatment or neglect of a child by its parents, guardians, caregiver or other adults, all of which may endanger the child's physical, psychological or emotional health and development. Section 28 of the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution (RSA 1996, 1255) states that "every child has the right to basic nutrition, shelter, health care and social services, as well as the right to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation."

It is important to investigate child abuse because abuse can lead to negative consequences such as depression, developmental delays, and risk of developing substance abuse during adulthood. Many forms of child abuse are treatable and avoidable, and many severe consequences of child abuse can be diminished with proper attention and assistance. Investigating child abuse provides an opportunity for society to address, and ultimately prevent, a range of individual and social disorders that impair the health and quality of life of millions of children as well as their families and communities. It is for this reason that this research intends to interrogate the theme of child abuse in Xitsonga music. The songs to be interrogated are "Mayanda," "Ndzi n'wana mani" and "Qweta (Vana va mufi)." The aim of this study is to analyse the thematisation of child abuse by Xitsonga music composers.

Existing research indicates that young children are the most vulnerable to abuse because they may be heavily dependent on caretakers (Fang et al. 2012). Data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau (2017) revealed that more than one quarter of victims of child abuse were below the age of three. In addition, it has been found that girls are more likely to be victims of certain forms of abuse (i.e., sexual abuse) than boys are, whereas boys are more likely to be victims of physical abuse (Andrews et al. 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau 2008). Finally, research from New York also indicates that children with disabilities (especially those with severe disabilities) may also be more vulnerable to abuse than children without disabilities (Sullivan 2003; Sullivan and Knutson 2000). It

is possible that some children with disabilities may have limited communication skills, and this makes it difficult for them to understand and verbalise episodes of abuse. Due to the delicate and rather sensitive nature of issues relating to children, child abuse has attracted considerable scholarly attention.

Heyman and Slep (2002) observe that child abusers are likely to have experienced abuse themselves. Abusive behaviour is transmitted across generations, with studies showing that some 30% of abused children became abusive parents. Children who experience abuse and violence may adopt the behaviour as a model for their own parenting, and parents who cannot differentiate between discipline and abuse also abuse their own children (Gelles 1973).

Khumalo (2012) conducted a study on child abuse where children are abused in African marriages. The study portrayed how children are abused in the Xitsonga novels *Madumelana* and *Hi ya Kwihi*. Khumalo explains that children are helpless, beaten and denied their inheritance by elderly people.

Lamula (2012) conducted a study on child abuse intending to propose some remedial interventions against the prevalence of child abuse as reported in newspapers and on television. He indicates how children are being killed, raped, bullied and beaten every day. He concludes that children are also abused in churches by men. Mayimele (2013) focuses on how children are being abused by elderly men and women in the novel *Rhukubya ro swoswela embilwini*. Beatings, deprivation of education, sexual abuse, and poverty were reported as common manifestations of child abuse. Child sexual abuse includes touching private parts and inappropriately hugging and kissing children. Common among the foregoing studies is the plea from the researcher that elders should love and protect children. In tandem with these studies, the present article seeks to highlight occurrences of child abuse as thematised by Vatsonga music composers and subsequently to recommend the ways through which child abuse can be eradicated. This article contributes to the existing literature by promoting awareness and social change. It raises public awareness about the issue, leading to increased understanding, empathy, and support for victims. It also helps to reduce stigmatisation and foster social change by challenging societal attitudes and norms that perpetuate abuse. Research findings can contribute to public discourse and educational initiatives, helping to create a safer and more protective environment for children.

Theoretical Framework

This research article will be guided by the family systems theory. The family systems theory, developed by the late American psychiatrist Murray Bowen (1913–1990), provides a new paradigm for conceptualising human behaviour and treating human problems. It is a theory about relationships. Instead of seeing an individual as an emotional unit of his/her own, or as a separate entity, and the individual as the basic unit of treatment, Bowen (1978) deemed that individual functioning should be understood in the context of relationships, that each person's emotional functioning is closely

interconnected with those of others, with reciprocal impact on each other. Bowen formulated the family systems theory from knowledge of natural sciences, evolutionary biology, and his research on families. It is a natural systems theory, where Bowen sees that the human family system, like any other living forms, is a part of nature, and is governed by relationship processes similar to other forms of life on earth—that a change in any part of the system will automatically entail compensatory changes in other parts of the system. He sees these emotional processes as transcending cultures and regulating the functioning of different social groups. Cunningham et al. (1988, 1) classify family violence into five theoretical frameworks (groups) that are biological or organic, psychopathological, family system, social learning and feminist. From the above theories, this study will focus on the family system as is relevant to it. The behaviour of one member and the probability of a reoccurrence of that particular behaviour are affected by the responses and the feedback of other particular members.

This perspective looks at the communication, relationship and problem-solving skills that a family applies when violence occurs. In addition, Miller, Keane, and O'Toole (2003) view a family as a dynamic, interactive unit that undergoes continual evolvement in structure and function. Within a family system there is a subsystem that comprises discrete units such as mother-father, sister-brother and mother-child, and there is also a suprasystem, such as the community. The main functions of the family are considered to be support, regulation, nurturance and socialisation. This approach emphasises the interdependency of family members rather than focusing on individuals in isolation from the family. Family members profoundly affect each other's thoughts, feelings and actions; it is as if people are living under the same "emotional skin." The theory is applied to conduct the analysis and strengthens our understanding of the effectiveness of preventing child abuse recurrence by family members.

Methodology

This research is conducted through the use of a qualitative method to gain relevant information. The method is appropriate for the research as it strives to employ an in-depth analysis of the data. In this article, two songs by Dr Thomas Hasani Chauke and one by the late Matshwa Bemuda were selected for analysis, particularly because the songs thematise child abuse. The first two songs by Dr Thomas Hasani Chauke are "Ndzi n'wana mani," off the album *Shimatsatsa No. 09*, released in 1989, and "Qweta," off the album *Shimatsatsa No. 27*, released in 2007; the last song by the late Matshwa Bemuda is "Mayanda," off the album *Chom na Chom No. 2*, released in 2017. The songs are analysed on the basis of a predetermined set of themes, namely, child neglect, physical child abuse, and emotional/psychological child abuse, respectively.

Observations and Discussion of Child Abuse in "Mayanda," "Ndzi n'wana mani" and "Qweta (Vana va mufi)"

Although the selected artists thematise numerous forms of child abuse, the researcher will nevertheless restrict the analysis to three Xitsonga songs only in view of the stated

themes. The first theme is child neglect, as thematised in the song “Mayanda” by Freddy Masingi (also known as Matshwa Bemuda). Neglect is the failure of a parent or a caregiver to provide the child’s basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, medical care, hygiene, or supervision that might threaten or harm the child’s health and safety. The following lyrics in the song support this assertion:

*Mayanda wa xaniseka,
Vanhu va le tlhelo va nge n’wi hlayisi.
u tirha ku vava a tirhela ku dya.)*

(Mayanda is suffering,
Outsiders would not take care of him.
He is working in a harsh condition to get food.)

In the song, there is a mother cohabiting with a man. She has left her child without a caregiver. As a result, the child, Mayanda, is suffering to the extent that he has to work very hard in a harsh environment to secure shelter and food, all of this because his mother neglected him. Mayanda’s uncle becomes so concerned that he asks his sister to at least ask the man to take in the boy so that the boy will get food and shelter. He even suggests that, as Mayanda is a boy, he (Mayanda) could herd the man’s donkeys, as a token of appreciation for shelter and food. The singer goes on to say:

*Leswi a nga jaha u ta risa timbhongolo ta lowa sivara.
Ntsena a kuma ku tlela, a swi na mhaka ri xa ri ya mahlweni.*

(As he is a boy, he will herd the brother-in-law’s donkeys.
As long as he gets food, it does not matter life goes on.)

Mayanda’s relatives have all neglected him. Since his mother chose a man over him, he is forced to search for shelter and food. This is a clear indication of child neglect, which further results in child labour in search of food. Mayanda’s father was willing to take his child with him, but the mother refused, claiming that she is the one who took care of him since childhood, as supported by the following lyrics:

*Tata wa Mayanda a n’wi terile u ala,
u te a nge n’wi teki u lo n’wi kurisa.*

(His father came to take him, but you refused
Saying that you raised him alone.)

Seemingly, Mayanda’s mother hits Mayanda’s father, and Mayanda thinks that she is hurting the man, not realising that it is actually Mayanda who is getting even more hurt than his father. Here, one notes how abuse can also occur in settings where one seeks vengeance against one’s ex-lovers. It is also a clear case of selfishness and inconsideration that a child has to suffer on account of its parents’ inability to reconcile. Children are often caught in the middle and suffer the most in instances where parents

separate and ultimately divorce. In the song, a child is denied the opportunity to stay with his father simply because the mother has a score to settle. The song is thus composed to discourage such behaviour in society because it has detrimental effects on the children's psychological, emotional and even physical well-being. The family systems theory emphasises the importance of clear and healthy boundaries within the family. When these boundaries become blurred or overly rigid, it can contribute to an environment where abuse is more likely to occur. For example, if a parent has poor boundaries and lacks self-control, they may be more prone to abusing their child. In families where communication is characterised by hostility, aggression, or lack of empathy, the risk of child abuse may be heightened. Poor communication can contribute to misunderstandings, frustrations, and a breakdown in emotional connections, which can lead to abusive behaviours.

Physical Child Abuse in “Ndzi n’wana mani” by Dr Thomas Hasani Chauke

Physical child abuse involves physical aggression directed at a child by an adult. This type of abuse is usually meted out as “discipline” when parents fail to control their anger and their children. Thus, they resort to inculcating fear in their children, which is also accompanied by the unpredictability of their behaviour towards their children. In the song “Ndzi n’wana mani,” physical abuse is foregrounded as the most common form of child abuse. In the song, a stepmother is a child abuser. When the biological mother of the boy left, the father married another woman who, as a stepmother, abused her stepson physically. The following lines in the song support this assertion:

*Ni ta biwa ngopfu,
ni tlhela na la kaya ni hlongoriwa
ni ya etlela enhoveni.*

(I will get a serious beating,
chased out of the house
to sleep in the forest.)

The preceding lyrics reveal that the physical child abuse is so intense that it culminates in a sense of alienation. The victim is not even wanted at home. He lives in the forest, because his stepmother chases him away from home after beating him. Ironically, the very same abusive stepmother would treat her children as, for lack of a better word, angels; they could do no wrong in her eyes. Even in instances where her biological children did do something wrong, she would not punish them. However, whenever she looked at her stepson, she would feel nauseated and disgusted by him:

*Kambe loko ku lo dyoha lavan’wana vana
va la kaya na ku hayi, hi nge swi twi.*

(However, when the other kids did something wrong,

nothing has been said.)

It seems that no matter what the stepson does, his stepmother keeps abusing him physically. The abuse goes as far as ensuring she deprives him of food and shelter; hence, he sleeps in the forest. On other occasions, the stepmother would slap him around and throw away his blankets, leaving him in the cold the whole night while her children sleep comfortably and warmly in the house. In the singer's words:

Va ta raha swikumbana.

(They will kick the blankets.)

The above song shows the relationship between stepparents and stepchildren is rarely harmonious. In most cases, either of the two behaves savagely towards the other. In this case, it is the stepmother behaving abusively towards the stepchild. It is unsurprising that the boy reminisces on his mother's absence as a contributory factor to the abuse he suffers:

*Se leswi manana a nga famba a ni siya
la mutini mi to tlanga hi mina.*

(Because my mom left me,
Here at home you will toy with me.)

He lives in terror and destitution. In the process of lamenting his suffering, the boy also seeks answers that would establish in him a sense of belonging in the world. This goes to show that child abuse has the power to blur in one's mind a sense of identity and belonging. Abused children are thus likely to grow not knowing who they are and why they are in this world, further developing a tragic sense of hopelessness and purposelessness. The interface between identity and belonging unambiguously manifests in the singer's rhetorical questions below:

*Ndzi n'wana mani mina?
Boxani ndzii wa le kwihhi mina
Ndzi xisiwana ni wa le kwihhi mina?
Mi nga tumbeti ndzi wa le kwihhi mina?*

(Whose child am I?
Where do I belong, tell me?
I am destitute, where do I belong?
Do not hide it, where do I belong?)

The singer seeks to conscientise families about occurrences of abuse and its effects on the well-being of children. Step-parents are prodded towards a reflection on their treatment of stepchildren. The song reveals that abuse often emanates from a sense of hate and the need to exclude the *other*, simply because there is no sense of kinship with

the *other*. This *otherisation* ought to be done away with since it is the source from which some step-parents draw their misguided rationalisations of abuse and exclusion.

Emotional/Psychological Child Abuse: “Qweta (Vana va mufi)” by Dr Thomas Hasani Chauke

This type of abuse refers to any psychological and social problems that a child suffers because of the parents’ or caregivers’ behaviour. This abusive behaviour includes, but is not limited to, yelling at a child, making rude remarks or exhibiting loathsome attitudes, defamatory name-calling, severe criticism (often unwarranted), belittling the child’s personality, exposing the child to the abuse of others, limited physical contact with the child, seeing a loved one being abused, etc. In the song “Qweta (Vana va mufi),” the abusers are the siblings and grandparents. They are abusing the boy psychologically by not telling him the truth about his identity. The boy grew up knowing that he shared the same father as his siblings, only to find out at the father’s burial that he is not biologically related to the deceased. He wanted to know why his siblings hated him so much to the extent that they excluded him from the deceased’s obituary. In the song, the singer says:

*Mina ni voni masingita eku feni ka tatana
Vana va mhani mo ni zondha mpela mi ni zondhela teti?*

(Witness a miracle on my father’s death [burial]).
My siblings, so you hate me just because of all this?)

The boy was abused emotionally and psychologically because the people he trusted hid the truth about his identity until the father passed on. The following lyrics show that he was excluded from the father’s obituary.

*Kokwana mo miyela mi nga ni byeli xivongo xa mina
Loko ku hlayiwa vana va mufi why mi ni siyile tlhelo
Na loko ku hlayiwa wili ra mina vito a ri vuriwi
He wena qgweta why u nga ri hlayi?
Ni n’wana mani?*

(Whose child am I?
Grandparent you kept quiet and hid my real surname
When the deceased’s children were mentioned, why did you exclude me?
Even when the will was read, my name was not mentioned
Hey, lawyer why did you not mention it?)

The boy was abused emotionally and psychologically. Whatever the boy had known as the truth about himself in relation to the deceased father and surviving “siblings” resulted in untold pain. Compounding the pain was that he had to re-orientate himself and learn to live with the knowledge that the man he thought was his biological father turned out not to be. Further, the people he considered to be his siblings are now

alienating him from the people as a way of reminding them that he does not belong with them. His sense of security, identity, self-confidence and self-worth are all shattered upon realising that he had not known the truth about himself and his family. The purpose of the song is to communicate: (a) families should not keep secrets from each other; (b) learning that one is not a biological member of a family should not necessarily result in the exclusion of that particular person; (c) questions of identity and belonging should be dignified with honest answers, as opposed to using secrecy and silence as a means to deepen the inquirer's sense of alienation. The song is meant to highlight these dimensions of abuse as they manifest in the family set-up.

Conclusion

The selected songs have one common theme among them, that is, child abuse. Research consistently demonstrates the harmful consequences of child abuse. The major themes found in the selected songs highlight that child neglect, physical abuse, and emotional abuse can lead to long-term psychological and emotional damage, affecting a child's self-esteem, mental health, and ability to form healthy relationships. The research shows that child abuse often occurs within the family unit, and it is often perpetrated by parents or caregivers who are supposed to provide love, care, and protection. In the song "Qweta (Vana va mufi)," the siblings and grandparents are the perpetrators. They have betrayed the trust of the boy. This betrayal of trust makes the impact of abuse even more devastating for the child. Child abuse by parents is an unacceptable and deeply harmful behaviour that requires comprehensive societal responses. Child abuse by parents is a grave issue that affects children across different demographics and has severe and lasting consequences. In the song "Mayanda," it is also a clear case of selfishness that the mother does not care about the whereabouts of her child. She has failed to maintain contact and provide support to her child for a specified period. It is crucial to raise awareness, implement prevention strategies, support victims, and hold perpetrators accountable. By prioritising the protection and well-being of children, society can work towards creating a safe and nurturing environment for all children to thrive. The artists seek to educate the listeners about the varied forms of abuse with the hope that their music will effect social transformation and thus yield harmonious communities.

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