

“UMabhejane the Witch” as Perceived through the Eyes of the Narrator

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the folktale “*uMabhejane the Witch*.” *uMabhejane* is depicted as a heartless witch who uses her evil powers against innocent people, especially the envoys that come to her house to ask for her daughter’s hand in marriage. Previous research on the folktale suggests that Mabhejane is a heartless witch who is jealous of her daughter who is getting married to a prince. Against this background, this paper grapples with the question: Is Mabhejane really jealous of her daughter or is she being overprotective of her daughter because she feels that her daughter is not yet ready to face the challenges of marriage, and particularly so, polygamous marriage? Contrary to previous research perspectives on Mabhejane, it is argued in this paper that *Mabhejane* is used as an example to demonstrate to young girls that outspoken and defiant women are not appreciated in society. Only witches behave in such a manner. According to tradition and patriarchy, an ideal wife is one that is submissive and obedient to her husband and in-laws.

Introduction

Africans, in particular the baPedi people, have a saying that states that “*Mmagongwana o swara thipa kabogaleng*”, which, when loosely translated, means that a mother holds a blade at its sharpest end. This saying conveys the message that a mother will do whatever it takes to protect her children from looming danger. Lessons about protecting the young abound in the folktales that are told in the Zulu culture. This is not only applicable to human beings, but to other creatures as well. Protection goes hand-in-hand with love. The main purpose of telling stories that cover a variety of themes is to inculcate the norms and values prevalent in the culture in order for the young to draw lessons, which they will find useful now and/or in future from these stories as they tend to touch on almost all spheres of life. Zulu folktales cover a variety of themes such as marriage, child upbringing, witchcraft and so forth.

This article focuses on one of the controversial themes in African epistemology, witchcraft and defiance as reflected in the folktale titled ‘*uMabhejane the Witch*’. This article attempts to interrogate the unusual behaviour of a mother who shows her love in a bizarre and unacceptable manner according to the African culture. She is a powerful witch who rebuffs ordinary men, and kings alike, who intend on asking for her daughter’s hand in marriage. It becomes an ideological dichotomy in African societies when a mother denies her daughter the opportunity to go through this important stage of life – that of getting married. Strange and unthinkable as this would appear to be especially under traditional circumstances; it is indeed true in the story of *uMabhejane*.

Questions abound as one reads the folktale: Why does *uMabhejane* eschew one of the most respected traditions in African societies? Does marriage, which is venerated in African societies since time immemorial, appear meaningless to her? Is *uMabhejane* perhaps jealous of her daughter because she would be marrying a king? It could be further insinuated that *Mabhejane*’s maternal instinct refuses to release her daughter into marriage as she is aware that her daughter is not yet mature to face the challenges of marriage. Therefore, does she feel obligated to protect her daughter? It is against this background that this article analyses the actions of *uMabhejane* in the folktale entitled “*uMabhejane*” in order to determine why she vehemently refuses to let go of her only daughter. The folktale underscores the notion that *uMabhejane* is a woman who makes her voice heard when she’s unhappy, albeit in an unconventional manner. She would rather be unpopular with her society than to wallow in self-pity and die in silence. The folktale is an excerpt from Msimang’s 1987 folklore collection titled *Kwesukesukela* (Once upon a time).

In African societies, oral literature also serves as a conduit to endorse norms and values that are deemed acceptable. Oral literature has a dual purpose in that it mirrors and interprets the experiences of those who narrate the stories and their perspectives. These endorsements of mores are entrenched and validated through legends, folklore, proverbs, literature, and archetypes, etc. These socio-cultural beliefs also play a role in validating gender inequality. Myths recommend, prescribe or validate the society’s norms, values, code of conduct, social roles, gender socialisation and society’s sense of identity and collective acceptance.

Any digression from the set norms and values of the society is tantamount to defiance and the price may be too big to pay. It is the role of the story teller to ensure that the status quo in society is maintained; that is, young girls should be encouraged not to question or rebel against the set

norms of the society. In African societies, mothers are expected to fulfill all their children's expectations. What children want influences the way they view their mothers. Children who approve of their mothers may be those whose mothers give them love, material possessions and affection. Conversely, those mothers whose interests do not suit their children may be viewed as cold, selfish and uncaring (Gaidzwana,1985:10)

Theoretical Framework

The folktale "*uMabhejane the witch*" will be analysed within a feminist framework. There has been a lot of debate as to which type of feminism suits the African women best between Western feminism and African feminism. The ideas propagated by the African feminist ideology founded upon the principles of traditional African values that view gender roles as complementary, parallel, asymmetrical and autonomously linked in the continuity of human life, will best suit the arguments presented in this article.

The conceptualisations of 'feminism' and 'gender' that emerge in writings by African women offer a starting point for exploring some of the principal themes and complexities in the wider literature. Mama (1977:72) argues that foreign scholar's frame of reference 'have often been at best irrelevant and at worst inimical to African concerns and interests. A range of African feminist perspectives have emerged to challenge the biases of Western feminism. African feminism has a distinctive set of precepts. Some proponents posit a more radical epistemological and political break with Western feminism (Gaidzanwa 1982). These proponents argue for a campaigning of complementarity and co-operation between women and men, against the individualism and emphasis on sexuality and conflict with men identified by Western feminism.

For a number of African feminist writers, the very concept of 'feminism' is misplaced in the African context. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:229) argues for an alternative approach, 'STIWAnism' (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), which draws on 'the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women'. For Acholonu (1995:82), 'motherism' becomes a replacement for a feminism that is cast as 'anti-mother, anti-child, anti-nature and anti-culture'. For others, Alice Walker's (1983) 'womanism' describes a politics of commitment to survival of women and men alike, rather than an adversarial separationism. Others urge a more pragmatic and pluralist stance. Imam (1997) points out that resorting to versions of 'traditional' culture in defence of an 'essential Africanity' leaves African

women without the political resources to combat those very aspects of tradition that damage them as women. Nnaemeka (2005:39) advances the notion that

‘Feminism’, as used to capture women’s engagement in demanding and creating an equitable society, is an English word that speaks different languages worldwide. If women in different societies have to name their struggle in their own language, ‘womanism’ will be as alien and inappropriate as ‘feminism’ in an African village where English is not spoken.’

She therefore, suggests that the usage of feminism or womanism in the plural, points to both the necessity and convenience of terminology that captures women’s engagement and at the same time recognizes variation of the same theme. In line with what Ogundipe (1994), Acholonu (1995) and Walker (1983), argue Nnaemeka (2005:32) maintains that African feminism neither demotes/abandons motherhood nor dismisses maternal politics as non-feminist or unfeminist politics.

The language of feminist engagement in Africa (collaborate, negotiate, compromise) runs counter to the language of Western feminist scholarship and engagement (challenge, disrupt, deconstruct, blow apart, etc.). African feminism challenges through negotiation and compromise (Nnaemeka 2005). Nnaemeka (2005:32) maintains that the much bandied about intersection of class, race, sexual orientation and so forth, in Western feminist discourse does not ring with the same urgency for most African women for whom other basic issues of everyday life are intersecting in most oppressive ways. Nnaemeka (2005) is quick to point out that, this is not to say that issues of race and class are not important to African women in the continent, rather African women see and address such issues as they configure in and relate to their own lives and immediate surroundings.

According to Ryan and van Zyl (1988:24), feminism challenges the "patriarchal" conception of male and female roles in the society. It also draws a distinction between sex and gender in order to redefine male and female roles. Feminism also confronts sex-based oppression in domains such as reproduction, production, sexuality and socialisation. In its broadest sense, feminism constitutes both an ideology and a global political movement that confronts sexism, a social relationship in which males as a group have authority over females as a group.

Looking at the plight of women in Africa, Ogundipe (1994:27) argues that the African woman is oppressed on all sides. Starting with the oppression which was brought about by the colonial powers, she contends that the colonial systems negatively encouraged and brought to the fore the

traditional ideologies of patriarchy or male superiority which originally existed in African societies. She further points out that women are naturally excluded from public affairs: they are viewed as unable to hold positions of responsibility, rule men or even be visible when serious matters of state and society are being discussed.

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:40), an African feminist scholar, posits that feminism should not be viewed negatively. Her interpretation of feminism in an African context advocates that feminism is not opposed to African culture and heritage, and that culture is certainly not static but dynamically evolving. Culture should also not be immobilised in time to the advantage of men as most African men would want it to be. Also, women should not neglect their biological roles but consider motherhood to be idealised and claimed as strength by African women. Ogundipe-Leslie also maintains that the conditions in Africa need to be addressed in the context of the total production and reproduction of African society and this scenario should also involve men and children. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:40).

In the story we see how the “noble” thoughts uMabhejane has for her daughter, are thwarted by the king who wants to take her daughter’s hand in marriage. She does all it takes to impede the king’s attempts to marry her daughter. According to Hadjitheodorou as quoted by Phindane (2012:207), marriage and motherhood, traditionally, are often used by society as a measuring instrument by which to gauge a woman’s social development and success. Despite the unrelenting pressure, however, women do find some time to rebel and create personal lives ‘within the framework of possibilities, limitations, structures and culture. These women try to transform their identities and create their individual profile in the context of social relations. Their struggle to reconstruct their lives differently is, however, perceived as negative and rebellious (Phindane, 2012:207).

Literature Review

Previous research on *uMabhejane* includes studies by scholars such as De Bruin (2002) and Masuku (2005). Msimang (1986), in his published dissertation entitled *The Influence of Folktales on the Zulu Novel*, analyses various folktales, of which *uMabhejane* is one. She is depicted as a heartless witch who does what is humanly possible to prevent her daughter from getting married. She is attached “the destroyer of human life” stereotype because she even killed the envoy that

came to ask for her daughter's hand in marriage. In his analysis, Msimang (1986) indicates how this folktale influenced some of the writings in Zulu literature.

Masuku's (1994) research in *The Role of Women in Folklore with Special Reference to Zulu Folktales*, is another attempt to analyse the stereotypical images attached to women in Zulu folktales. Using a feminist approach, Masuku (2004) unleashed that women in folktales are expected to married and bear children. If they fail to do so, they are regarded as not compliant to societal values and norms.

De Bruin's (2002) study gives an in-depth investigation of the roles played by children in the Zulu folktale and their role as an audience. It also looks at the roles of parents, girls, boys and grandmothers in folktales. She concludes by mentioning that girls who disobey the norms set by the society are punished, whereas those who are depicted as examples of the *intombi* are rewarded.

When analysing the folktale *uMabhejane* from different perspectives, Masuku, Msimang and De Bruin all agree that Mabhejane is a witch because of her actions. She kills innocent people and shows no remorse. She is eventually ostracized and also denied the privileges of associating with her community. She is an outcast and an enemy of society because witchcraft is considered an act that is abhorrent in African society. This view is also entrenched in isiZulu proverbs where men are warned not to marry into a family where witchcraft is practised. An example of such a proverb states:

Umswane wembabala awungeniswa ekhaya. 'The bowel contents of a bush-buck are not brought home.'

This saying is connected to marriage. It warns that one should not take the daughter of someone who practises witchcraft. She might destroy the whole family (Nyembezi, 1990:135). Contrary to what has been argued by De Bruin, Msimang and Masuku, this article will determine whether there is another motive behind Mabhejane's "cruel" intentions other than being a destroyer of human life.

Before we can embark on the analysis of the folktale "uMabhejane the witch", the traditional background on the perceptions of African society towards marriage and witchcraft will be provided.

Traditional Background on the Importance of Marriage

In traditional societies, the culmination of love was shown in a form of marriage. In African societies, both men and women were expected to get married when they have reached a certain stage in life. The girl was raised and socialised to get married and bear children. This occasion is what all parents aspire towards for their daughters. Mothers tend prefer that their daughters a man capable of providing both materially and emotionally for their daughters (Gyekye 2003:76).

Each society has belief systems that regulate the way people behave and interact with each other. Strict conformity to the prescribed norms and values implies acceptance within a particular society. From earliest childhood, girls in the traditional Zulu society are socialised into submission. They must obey the rules of the society and accept that their ultimate goal is to be a good wife, and produce and raise children. This must be done without any protest. Any behaviour contrary to this would be too bitter to contemplate. Traditional Zulu girls grow up with the knowledge that they will always be subjected to the authority of a male figure; be it their fathers, their uncles, their brothers, their husbands or even their sons, after the death of their husbands. This is further attested by Hammond-Tooke (1974:90) when he reveals that a young woman in a primitive society is certain that marriage is inevitable. Her future as a wife and mother holds little mystery and fewer illusions for her. Her mother's and grandmother's life experiences are effective models of what hers will be, and she is not necessarily in hurry to begin her career as a wife. This means that in traditional Zulu society, every girl was destined to get married. She had no choice but to comply with the expectations of her tribe. Any signs of wilful behaviour were punished by being ostracized from the society whereas conformity was praised.

Summary of the Folktale “uMabhejane”

UMabhejane is depicted as a powerful witch who has a horn on her head. This woman had a beautiful daughter who was deeply in love with King Mahlokohloko. King Mahlokohloko sent people to uMabhejane to inform her of his plans of marrying her daughter. The first group of envoys, which consisted of males only, were all killed by uMabhejane. After every massacre, the king would send more messengers to negotiate with uMabhejane. She killed 30 messengers in total. Eventually, the king decided to go and see uMabhejane personally.

On his way, the king met an old lady who requested the king to lick oozes from her eyes. The king obliged. For his good deed, the old lady rewarded the king with a gall bladder that would protect him against uMabhejane's evil tricks. On arrival at uMabhejane's homestead, she made several attempts to kill the king but she failed. The king took his wife and returned to his homestead. UMabhejane followed their trail and scooped the king's footprints. She bewitched the footprints and the king was transformed into a black bull. The king was taken to the river where his new bride and other wives sang his favourite song. The king transformed into a human being again. As punishment for her evil deeds, uMabhejane lost her daughter forever, because her son-in-law would never allow mutual visits between his wife and his mother-in-law, fearing that she might try to harm his wife or his future children (Msimang,1984:120).

Discussion

According to De Bruin (2002) and other scholars who researched this folktale, uMabhejane is depicted as the mother-in-law from hell. Despite her physical deformity of having a horn on her head, she still gave birth to a very beautiful daughter who attracts even the attention of chiefs. UMabhejane's behaviour is in direct opposition to the expected norms of her society. She does not participate in the festivities and jubilation that normally surround a wedding. She does not allow her daughter happiness but instead tries to kill her daughter's husband.

Is uMabhejane jealous of her daughter because she is getting married to a chief? According to scholars such as De Bruin (2002), uMabhejane is indeed jealous of her daughter. De Bruin (2002:65) further argues that mothers like uMabhejane who try to prevent their daughters from marrying good men, are probably motivated by jealousy. An intensive psychological assessment of their behaviour may lead to the conclusion that they are examples of the "Electra complex" which refers to animosity that can occur between mothers and daughters De Bruin (2002:65).

De Bruin's character analysis of "uMabhejane the Witch" from a psychological perspective may be spot on, and from her argument one cannot refute the fact that uMabhejane is indeed the personification of evil. UMabhejane is depicted as an enemy of society and as a fearful, resentful human being. She is shown as a woman who is aggressive and domineering. Such women are not accepted by society. Strong women are given names by society; one example can be that of a witch. In African societies a witch is a person thought capable of harming others supernaturally through the use of innate mystic powers, medicine or familiars, and who is symbolised by

inverted characteristics that are perceived as a reversal of social and physical norms (Krige, 2004:40). However, the opinion that mothers like uMabhejane are probably motivated by jealousy may be overrated. On close inspection of the folktale, it can be deduced that uMabhejane was once married even though there is no mention of her husband. The result of the marriage was a beautiful girl. Furthermore, to contend that uMabhejane is jealous because her daughter will be married is a bit farfetched as she also had the opportunity to go through marriage. Her marriage could have ended because of her practises in witchcraft or probably the problems she encountered in marriage. Traditionally, a polygamous marriage was not for the faint hearted. There was rivalry amongst co-wives as they were competing for the husband's attention. The principal wife would sometimes bully the young wives as a way of showing her power. Returning home to your family because of abuse was a sign of weakness.

In Kolawole's (1998:11) empirical studies on gendered African oral myths, it has been shown that many women do not wish to change the harmful traditional beliefs on the status of woman because they desire to maintain the cultural status quo. Thousands of women suffer in silence because tradition imposes reticence on them but more so because of their own acceptance of the situation.

Kolawole (1998) further argues that in African societies, myths are highly gendered and depict negative images of women's roles. When these myths with negative images are narrated over a period of time, certain perceptions emerge which are then taken for granted as natural and African. Be that as it may, uMabhejane makes her voice heard, although in a manner that is not acceptable to society. Hence, she is seen as a witch. Although *uMabhejane* is unsuccessful in her quest to prevent her daughter from getting married, she stands up and makes her voice heard. She does not want to condone the idea that culture should not be immobilised to the advantage of men; with men taking advantage of her child.

This article maintains that uMabhejane is trying to protect her daughter from the harsh reality of marriage. While marriage is a stage that uMabhejane's daughter has to go through, uMabhejane feels that her child is not yet ready for such a tremendous responsibility. This is attributable to her use of unconventional methods to drive her point home in an attempt to change the status quo. These unconventional ways include the act of killing all the men who were sent by the king to her daughter. When the king took uMabhejane's daughter home as his wife, uMabhejane followed

the trail and scooped and bewitched the king's footprints. The kind eventually became a black bull.

It can also be asserted that uMabhejane is a mother who is very protective of her daughter. From her unusual behaviour, it can be deduced that she is objecting to the marriage because she feels that her little girl is not yet ready for the challenges of marriage. Her behaviour depicts the actions of an unhappy woman because she knows from experience that marriage is sometimes not a bed of roses. Jealousy and clashes between the co-wives are rife. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) challenges women to rise against some cultural practices which are detrimental to women's emancipation. UMabhejane deemed it necessary to ensure that her daughter is not subjected to a practice that will be detrimental to her image as a woman.

Although this story is only a narrative, women who are brave enough still stand up to their rights and those of their daughters. It is interesting to note that issues that occurred in traditional societies still persist in modern times. UMabhejane is a deviant character who rejects and rebels against the prescribed acceptable norms which are held in high esteem in society. Women who deviate from these prescribed norms may be rejected and isolated from society; hence uMabhejane is regarded as a witch.

Even in current times there are women who still stand their ground, for instance, Lindiwe Dlamini, a Swati mother, has took King Mswati III to court to prevent him from marrying her daughter. She explained that two royal emissaries abducted her 20-year-old daughter, Zena Mahlangu from school. Dlamini went to court in Mbabane to demand that the king return her daughter. She is quoted: "I don't want the king to be my daughter's husband, she has other plans of her life....I will fight the case until I die". ([http://www. The free library com. The King, the 10th bride and her mum](http://www.thefreelibrary.com)). Putting such a case to court was unheard of in Swaziland. A close relative of the king, threatened three High Court judges with immediate dismissal if they did not remove themselves from the case that involved the abduction of a girl, who eventually became his majesty's wife.

Conclusion

It is acceptable knowledge that literature, whether written or oral, is the transmitter of ideology. Oral stories are told for amusement, behind which, there is a deeper meaning. Children, especially

girls, are sensitised to an acceptable mode of behaviour as future mothers. It is inculcated in them at an early stage that as mothers, they should not behave like uMabhejane. They should not defy culture and deny their daughters the opportunity to get married. Powerful and aggressive women are not acceptable to society. A good woman is humble and accepts situations as they are. Any sign of wayward and unsavoury behaviour may create problems for them. They may be regarded as witches. Only witches defy culture and act contrary to the acceptable norms and values of society, just as uMabhejane does.

From the analysis of “uMabhejane the Witch”, it can be concluded that uMabhejane is not jealous of her daughter. She is a woman trying to protect her daughter from the harsh reality of marriage. uMabhejane wanted to shield her daughter from the challenges of marriage as she felt that she was not mature enough to handle them. Unfortunately, her attempts to change the status quo in society were unsuccessful. In the present-day society, the actions of a mother who took the bold step of taking the king of Swaziland to court clearly shows that a mother will go to great lengths to protect her children. Although both women lost because of the unwavering patriarchal system, they made noise and did not accept their fate as doomed. They transcended the subaltern condition of being silent.

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