

“DIGGING BELOW THE SURFACE” – NDEBELE PROVERBS AS A REFLECTION OF GENDER ROLES IN NDEBELE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the significance of Ndebele proverbs in discoursing gender relations in Ndebele society. In most cases, gender relations in a particular society are reflected in novels, poems or drama texts. This article therefore, examines how Ndebele proverbs reflect on gender relations within Ndebele society and argues that focusing on novels, drama texts and poems alone might not allow a comprehensive exposition of gender roles in Ndebele society. Data collection for the study involved compiling a list of Ndebele proverbs from native speakers of isiNdebele and interviewing them in relation to the use of these proverbs. The researcher was also aided by intuitive knowledge of the language. The African Womanist literary theory was adopted in this study because of its emphasis on positive male-female relations for the betterment of the African family. Thus, an attempt is made in this article to offer solutions on negative male-female relations by searching deep into our past, since proverbs are reservoirs of discovered knowledge that is based on lived experience.

Keywords: complementarity; culture; gender relations; gender roles; proverbs

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PROVERBS IN NDEBELE SOCIETY

Proverbs are short, sharp statements or expressions that speakers often use. It takes wisdom to understand the meaning that the proverb is conveying—as the Igbo of Nigeria say, if a proverb is said unto a fool, it has to be explained at the same time. A proverb has both a literal meaning and a hidden meaning. For example, the Ndebele proverb *izandla*



ziyagezana literally means (“hands wash each other”), while the hidden meaning relates to the need for people to help each other in times of need. The efficiency of proverbs as didactic tools in the community lies in their applicability to various situations, and in the fact that they are not bound by time and place, and may be used in everyday speech for emphasis. Therefore, proverbs are powerful tools for communication and education, which are easily and rapidly accessible through speech, unlike novels or folktales, which are longer pieces and require greater attention and longer reading time. Proverbs also celebrate the collective communal as opposed to the individualistic way of life. The communal way of life also finds expression in the family setup, where a man and a woman are supposed to work together for the betterment of the African family.

Proverbs are expressions used widely in most societies, and their wide use reflects their significance. The Igbo regard proverbs as the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Chabata and Mashiri (2012, 103) meanwhile argue that “proverbs are expressions of wisdom acquired through reflection, experience, observation and general knowledge.” Proverbs, just like folktales and riddles are communally-owned and handed down from generation to generation. Since proverbs are communally owned, this implies that a particular society subscribes to the views projected in the proverbs. The efficiency of proverbs in everyday speech takes us back to the lived experiences of the Ndebele people and seeks to warn against behaviours that society does not approve. Thus, gender-based proverbs are educative as they seek to shape and mould the individual to behave according to societal expectations.

Ndebele proverbs in the gender discourse should be understood as the peak of the creative thought patterns of the Ndebele people. This observation comes against the background that several scholars have produced negative research about African languages and the creative thought patterns of Africans. Conrad (1993), for example, in *Heart of Darkness*, notes that the Negroes do not have a language; they “shriek and howl.” Transcending this limiting definition of languages spoken by black people, proverbs constitutes what P’Bitek (1986) refers to as philosophy as lived and celebrated in a particular society as they capture the sensibilities and worldview of the African people, placing the discourse of gender at the heart of the Ndebele society. Malunga (2014, 170) highlights the rich cultural heritage that Africans have in his observation that

Africa is a continent replete with rich cultural tools that nurtured diverse ancient civilizations. However, Western scholarship has often omitted, ignored, or deemphasized this cultural heritage, an attitude based largely on the assumption that non-Western traditions are rudimentary.

The worldview of a people is embedded in their proverbs. Kerschen (2000, 62) notes that “proverbs may not be true or represent the truth, but they indicate what the people hold on to as their rules and ideals of life and conduct.” As such, proverbs represent what people believe in and serve as a moral compass or guide regarding the do’s and don’ts of a society. Since time immemorial, proverbs have served as *isikolo sonsundu*

(“source of knowledge for the African people”). If proverbs are a source of knowledge transferred from generation to generation in appropriate contexts, they are therefore, intended to mould the individual socially, politically and economically, thus enabling them to participate fully in society.

In this vein, Malunga (2014, 172) rightly points out that African proverbs are intended for self development. This is well reflected in the Ndebele proverb *induku kayakhi muzi* (“a knobkerrie does not build a home”), which discourages violence within the family, as matters are to be handled and dealt with amicably, through talking. In this light, it can be argued that Ndebele proverbs discuss gender relations from an African perspective. Gender becomes a contested terrain as evident in different gender-based theories such as radical and liberal feminism, socialist feminism, and black feminism, amongst others. Ndebele proverbs also make a contribution to the lived experiences of the Ndebele people. As such, Africana Womanism has been adopted in this study because of its theoretical grounding in African culture and history, as proverbs reflect the historical and cultural experiences of the African people. Hudson-Weems (2012: xii) argues that “Africana Womanism proffers a critical alternative based on the prioritization of family centrality and an unyielding commitment to finding workable solutions to dysfunctional male-female relationships.” Ndebele proverbs do not operate at the fringes of the society, but at the centre of everyday language and speech, and reflect the day to day experiences of the Ndebele people, be they political, socio-economic issues or gender discourses. As Hussein (2009, 98) argues, “there are strong, intertextual and intercultural threads between the ways proverbs represent the roles, statutes and identity of women.”

ISSUES OF GENDER WITHIN THE NDEBELE SOCIETY

For some scholars, gender is synonymous with issues concerning women. However, Ndebele proverbs prove that this is not the case, as gender expresses a shared ideology, and is not a divisive concept as it includes both men and women issues. As Anderson (1997, 20) argues,

gender refers to the socially learned behaviours and expectations that are associated with two sexes, whereas ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ are biological facts, becoming a woman or becoming a man is a cultural process.

It can therefore, be argued that culture as a methodological tool plays a central role in shaping maleness and femaleness in any particular society. For this reason, gender is not given; it is acquired. When a child is born, he or she is socialised and introduced to the values of his or her particular society. Socialisation should not be misunderstood to be an event but a cultural process, as Saymen (1997, 106) notes in his assertion that

socialisation refers to how people learn or acquire norms, traditions and values in a specific society. Through the socialisation process, individuals are assisted to understand what is expected of them.

Differences in gender realities in the African context should not be misinterpreted as platforms for “othering” women, but for complementarity between the sexes. “Othering” women and placing them at the margins in literary discourse by portraying them as the “other” gender, which is only there for the exploits of men, does not improve relations between men and women within society but contributes to the continuous stereotyping of women as the weaker and less significant sex. The separation of men and women, furthermore, would narrow the issues of gender to women’s issues, resulting in a continuous struggle between the male and female genders. Cooper (1892), (as quoted by Hudson-Weems (2012: xii), has this to say about men and women working towards a common goal: “[w]omen’s cause is man’s cause: (we) rise or sink together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free.” There are, therefore, dangers in restricting the discourse of gender to women’s issues or making it synonymous with women’s issues.

This article, therefore, analyses Ndebele proverbs that highlight issues of men and women, and provide a yardstick for men and women to work together towards a common goal—that of building and shaping the society as a whole. Talking about women without talking about men is like clapping with one hand only. Analysing proverbs that make reference to men and women provides a platform for discoursing gender relations in Ndebele society, which cannot be fully understood when a particular gender is given more attention. There is, therefore, a need for dialogue on gender relations; and this can only be achieved by drawing in women and men’s issues. Complementarity between the male and female genders is emphasised at an early age, as boys and girls are introduced to culturally-bound gender roles. Girls are advised in terms of appropriate behaviours by an elderly maternal aunt, while boys are advised by an elderly maternal uncle.

In traditional African society, girls were encouraged to stay at home and help with house chores, while boys would carry out activities such as hunting and herding cattle. By doing household chores, the girl child, who would later grow into a woman, was confined to the domestic space. When the girl child did not carry out her gender-specific role well, elders would be heard saying *usuzafika usiyangisa khonale* (“you will embarrass us at your future in-laws place”), or *sizazidla sizibeka amathambo* (“some of your bride wealth will be returned as a result of your wayward behaviour”). To this day, a certain amount of pressure is placed on girls as they grow up to do well in the kitchen, which becomes one of the performance spaces for women. On the other hand, masculinity was instilled in boys as they played masculine games like *ukuqwaqwazana* (“fighting using sticks”), in which the *ingqwele* (“the one who would beat them all”), would emerge victorious. It can be argued, therefore, that from one culture to another, the male-female dichotomy has been assigned meanings and significance that have implications for work, family and leisure (Lips 2001, iv).

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that girls were distinguished from boys through the kind of chores that they performed, as well as the kind of games that they played. To this day, this distinction reinforces gender roles that society assigns to boys

and girls, who later grow into men and women. The performance space of the male is outside the home such that a young man who loves being in the house is mocked as *imbongendlu* (“the one who dwells in the home”). Men are thus expected to be outside the house while young women are expected to be within the home, where they are taught how to behave well and attend to all motherly and wifely tasks. Men are, therefore, encouraged to conquer other spaces, while women are encouraged to be kind and behave well in the home; and be family oriented. This would provide a solid background for a family setup for children to be born in that marriage. It is thus, through the claiming of spaces by different genders that we realise the difference in the performance spaces of men and women, that seeks to empower them and not place them as subordinates.

Contrary to some Western scholarship, which perpetuates the division and separation of men and women, African men and women are seen doing family centred roles for the betterment of the family. Complementary gender roles are not to be understood as subordinate roles for men and women but roles that are meant to be complementary. There is less separation and superiority within the African setup. Gender, as understood from an Africana Womanist perspective, is not separatist, as it dwells on issues concerning both men and women. The present study emerges against the background that oral art forms empower women more than any other genre as expressed in the Ndebele worldview. The study also refutes the assertion that the female gender was totally subjugated and passive, and did not play any significant role in the betterment of the African family. It unravels African knowledge systems as reflected in particular Ndebele proverbs and how they discourse gender relations.

Gender, unlike sex, is a social construct, and as such, involves socially-determined codes of behaviour for men and women in different societies. Sex is therefore biological, while gender is socially constructed. Anderson (1997, 20) notes that gender refers to the socially-learned behaviours and expectations associated with the two sexes. Whereas maleness and femaleness are biological facts, becoming a man or woman is a socio-cultural process, since an individual acquires the accepted modes of behaviour of a particular society.

This article, therefore, argues that some Ndebele proverbs open discursive spaces for the participation of both men and women—contrary to the views held by radical feminists, who concur with Hussen (2009, 98)’s assertion that “African proverbs reinforce the myth of male superiority.” Male superiority has never been fully realised in African circles since women themselves have a voice and agency realised in different performance spaces. Muwati and Mguni (2012, xvi) argue that

[t]he frequent pronunciation of the woman as victim becomes a naturalized and universally accepted condition if attempts are not made to explore alternative avenues and channels of female power and authority ...realizable outside the framework of feminist influences and putative female victimhood and marginality.

DIFFERENT PERFORMANCE SPACES FOR MEN AND WOMEN: A WOMAN AS A CHILD NURTURER

In the African society, and in particular the Ndebele society, a woman is valued as the one who feeds, dresses, cleans and nurtures children. This is reflected in the proverb *intandane enhle ngumakhothwa ngunina* (“a better orphan is the one who has a mother as the surviving parent”). This proverb suggests that a woman is the only parent who is bestowed with nurturing qualities, as society relies solely on her to nurture, provide for and groom children in the most socially-acceptable manner. Significantly then, women shape not only individuals but also national identities. Wilford (1998, 8) notes that “gender is central to the project of fashioning national identity.” A woman is thus bestowed with the duty of imparting cultural values to the child, which is, in itself a form of empowerment, contrary to some views that women are the insignificant other in the family setup. Shaping an individual is like shaping society, since the same individual becomes part and parcel of a society, and takes part in decision-making. Hudson-Weems (2012, xiii) notes that “[i]t has long been established that the African woman is a culture bearer, who socialises her children to conduct themselves in the regent manner of respectability.”

From time immemorial, the responsibility of socialising children has been placed on the shoulders of women. Yuval-Davis (1998, 28) concurs with Hudson-Weems’ views on raising children; that “[w]omen are often the ones who are given the social role of the intergenerational transmitters of cultural traditions, customs, of songs, cuisine and of course, the mother tongue.”

Children are central in a marriage set up. In the Ndebele society, soon after a man and woman get married, the elders are quick to notice any change in the lives of the newlyweds. When the newlyweds have children, members of the clan are excited, but if they do not, one hears older people say *endlini yabantwana kumnyama* (“it is dark in the newlyweds’ house”). The darkness in the African sense meant that children were regarded as the light in the house, highlighting the value that children add in a marriage relationship. Children, both male and female, are important in that they carry the name of the family and symbolises continuity for the clan. The centrality of children in a marriage is reflected in the Ndebele philosophy that *kulotsholwa abantwana* (“the husband does not pay *lobola* or full dowry unless and until children are produced in that marriage”). Scholars such as Ndlovu, Ndlovu and Ncube (1995, 47) argue that “*Esintwini umuntu wayethathela ukuthi akhe umuzi. Esintwini umuzi ngumuzi ngabantwana. Ngakho-ke ukutholakala kwabantwana kwakuyiyona nsika yomuzi.*” (“In African tradition, marriage was central and a real home had to have children. The main agenda was to have children in a marriage”).

The importance of children in a marriage is also emphasised by the proverb *khala mfazi ongazalanga* (“weep, childless woman”). Related to the centrality of children in a marriage is the important role that mothers play in socialising children and promoting

socially-acceptable modes of behaviour. Women are confined to the home, where they nurture children who are pre-social beings. This confinement to the domestic space should not be misunderstood as a form of oppression, but as a form of empowerment; since society itself is empowering women to take on such roles for the continuity of tradition and national identities.

In a family set up, children are in direct and permanent contact with the mother, who takes care of them. Their attachment to her resembles the attachment in the womb, through the umbilical cord. Mothers are approachable, as reflected in the proverb *umntwana ongakhaliyo ufela embelekweni* (“a child who does not cry dies on its mother’s back”). This proverb conveys the sense that the mother is the first person that children turn to when they are in trouble, and when they do so, the mother is quick to respond because of the close relationship that she has with her children. The decision not to turn to the mother is made at one’s own peril. Mothering is not only confined to dressing and bathing children but also extends to the nurturing of these children, a crucial role in the formation of ethnic identities. Marsh (1998, 94) opines that “women’s reproductive and nurturing roles are presented as crucial to survival of the nation and ethnic community.” Thus, such roles should not be misunderstood as disempowering women, but rather empowering them, since they take part in shaping ethnic and national identities, which are crucial to the survival of the society and nation at large. Moreover, the mother is a nurturer and a source of comfort to the children, as noted in the proverb *intandane enhle ngumakhothwa ngunina* (“a better orphan is the one who has the mother as the surviving parent”).

A mother raises children from birth even up to marriageable age. Even a suitor derives great pleasure from securing a well-raised bride, as suggested in the indirect reference, *izambane liquntwa kunina* (“a nut is usually harvested through being pluck from its mother, the source of life”). The mother becomes proud when she realises that she did a sterling job in raising her child and contributing to his/her moral standards. When a girl child gets married, she carries the name from the household she is coming from, such that behaving in an unacceptable way would bring shame to her household. This is noted in the saying *ukuzidla uzibeka amathambo*, which expresses the idea that if a girl child misbehaved in the marriage, part of the *lobola* or dowry would be demanded back from the girl’s family. Hence *ukuzidla uzibeka amathambo* would mean that the *lobola*, in the form of cattle should not be consumed in its entirety, since one does not know how the bride would conduct herself in marriage.

When children grow up, they rarely forget their parents, especially their mother. Women who are reaping the fruits of their labour, when their children are grown up and are taking care of them would scorn women who have had few children, or who do not have children at all, by employing the proverb *khala mfazi ongazalanga* (“be in despair, childless woman”). This alone signifies the centrality of children in a marriage set up, as well as the role the mother plays in bringing up these children from birth to a point where they are ready for marriage. Thus, Ndebele proverbs clearly highlights the

active role that parents, especially women, play in instilling socially-acceptable codes of behaviour in children, in all the stages of their lives.

WOMEN AS ADVISORS

The Ndebele society is believed to be a patriarchal society or one in which men dominate in the political, economic and family sphere. This article argues that traditional women in Africa, like women today, were not always completely dominated by men; they were not as passive or lazy as European scholars depict them (Pape 1990). Women took part in leadership roles, as they shaped the worldview of men, by virtue of raising boys. Another proverb *umfazi kalankosi* (“a woman can proffer worthwhile advice to everyone, including her male counterpart”) suggests that a woman can act as an advisor even if the king rejects all sorts of advice from everyone in society. A woman is thus endowed with extraordinary powers that transcend masculinity, as noted by Ndlovu (1999), when the king’s advisors say *Ndlovukazi ulamandla amakhulu, nxa inkosi ingekho ulilihlo lendlebe zenkosi* (“Queen of the nation, you have great power to deliberate on issues pertaining to leadership, when the king is not there you are his eyes and ears”).

Women were never passive as they played an active and central role in politics, as observed in the examples of African queens, Mkabayi and Nzingha. In the examples cited, women play a leading role as advisors of their male counterparts in the family set up and also assume positions of leadership.

MALES AS PROVIDERS

In Ndebele society, there are clearly defined gender roles for men and women. As has been noted above, women would be active in the domestic front and men would be active out of the domestic space. In the domestic space, women would cook and be responsible for the nurturing of children, while outside of it; men would provide for and sustain their families. Men and women thus played, and still play different but complementary roles for the continuity of the African family. From the onset, the husband pays *lobola* for the wife. As a cultural concept, *ukukhipha amalobolo* (“Paying the dowry”) is not tantamount to paying or purchasing a wife, rendering her the property of her husband—as wrongly interpreted by Europeans. As Chiwome (2002, 12) maintains “the missionaries condemned the payment of bridewealth as purchase of a wife by a man.” After the bride price has been paid, the son-in-law continues to provide for the needs of his wife’s family, as noted in the proverb *umkhwenyana yinxoza* (“The son-in-law is likened to a type of tree that does not get used up as it continues to be stripped off its branches”). Here, the son-in-law continues to provide for both his wife and in-laws.

A good man in Ndebele society is the one who is able to take care of his family by protecting them from physical harm and providing food and shelter for them; portraying himself as *indoda emadodeni* (“a man among men”). On the other hand, the one who

fails to cater for these material needs is derided as *indoda ngamabhulugwe* (“a man by virtue of wearing trousers outside that context he is not a man”), because the Ndebele culture does not approve of laziness and failing to provide for one’s family. Every individual is expected to take care of their own, as noted in the proverb *akusikhwehle saphandela esinye*, which literally means an eagle would always take care of its own. In terms of fending for a family if a man’s plan fails, it is not the end of the world; as they can always get an opportunity somewhere. This is well articulated in the saying *indoda kayiphathi ndukunye*, literally meaning a man does not carry only one knobkerrie when hunting. As stated before, the worldview of Ndebele people is mirrored in its proverbs. The Ndebele people note that life’s challenges and demands presented themselves in different ways. There is also, no guarantee that if something worked for one family, it would work for another family also. Hence, a people would be encouraged to think fast and employ different strategies that would contribute meaningfully to one’s life, as reflected in the saying *indoda kayiphathi ndukunye*. Different methods are therefore, used to tackle challenging social issues. This shows that in olden days people were guided by their own worldview; contrary to the views of early European scholars, who regarded Africa as a dark continent, whose people were incapable of thinking or being innovative.

The foregoing discussion has proven that the husband had a duty to secure the economic base of the family and live in peace and harmony with his wife. In the event of a conflict, the couple was expected to resolve this amicably; by either consulting elders or close relatives such as paternal aunts. A man was never encouraged to physically harm his wife, as this was against societal norms, as reflected in the proverb *induku kayakhi muzi* (“a knobkerrie does not build a home”); since issues could never be resolved by beating one’s wife. The Ndebele society, therefore, encouraged dialogue between the couple, as opposed to violence.

FLEXIBILITY IN THE ROLES PLAYED BY MEN AND WOMEN AS WELL AS HARMONY BETWEEN THE TWO GENDERS

As has been highlighted in the proverbs analysed, men and women were allocated specific gender roles. Even though the roles that men and women should play are specified by the proverbs, it should, however, be noted that these roles were never meant to be completely rigid. Where necessary, and depending on the demands of the situation, a woman would assume the role of a man and vice versa. A woman who would assume the roles and duties assigned to men would be known as *indodamfazi* (“female-male”); reflecting society’s recognition and admiration of her ability to tap into a man’s space for the betterment and improvement of her family and society. Regarding the flexible roles played by the male and female genders, Hudson-Weems (2012, 2) argues that

[g]oing back to Ancient Africa, we witness women at the height, reigning side by side with their male companions and even when necessary in leadership, as is the case with Queen Hatshepsut, 1506–1435 BC, Queen Nzingha, 1853 and Queen Mother Yaa Asantewa of Ghana, leading the Ashanti people against the domination of the British empire in the Yaa Asantewa War.

It is evident, then, that the tapping into a man's space by a woman was admired; as long as it served to improve the wellbeing of the family. Once a woman was married, everything she did would be centred on the family rather than her; such that she would temporarily trade her role and adopt the role of a man; which is often misunderstood as being dominant. The saying *indoda yinhloko yomuzi* ("the man is the head of the family") should be understood to mean that a man is there to guide and lead the family; although the burden does not lie solely on his shoulders, nor does he have total power or control in the household, as he has a wife to help and guide him, for the betterment of the family and society.

Hudson Weems (2012: xii) argues for flexibility in the roles played by African men and women, from an Africana Womanist perspective in her assertion that "the rallying point for this theory is the search for harmony between the African man and woman as well as within the African family itself."

Even though men are supposed to be the sole providers or breadwinners in a family set up, it can be noted that the Ndebele language has terms that suggest that women are also providers. *Indodanfazi* is a term that reveals that women can provide for the family, adopting the provider role, often associated with men. These roles are constantly negotiated, as Muchemwa and Muponde (2007, xviii) observe in their statement

[in] the long and often indefinite absence of men, women left behind take on the roles of men. The reverse is true in instances where women leave men at home to become international migrant labourers, leaving men to take on the roles of women.

It is evident, therefore, that harmony within the family cannot be achieved when the sexes are competing with each other; but rather, when they are working towards a common agenda: that of building the family through socially- and culturally-defined gender roles.

CONCLUSION

Proverbs are not statements which people utter carelessly, but are owned by the community. As has been highlighted in this article, men and women have clear gender roles, although, in some instances, these roles are flexible. Proverbs are central to the gender discourse, as they clearly outline the worldview of the Ndebele people. Although there were, and there are still specific-gender roles for men and women, there is flexibility in these roles, if needs be. These roles have been ascribed to both men and women to ensure solid families and continuity of each culture. Therefore, one should perceive the roles discussed above as neither male nor female centred, but as family centred. The

differences in roles do not amount to subordination, but difference in what a particular gender can do for the betterment of the African family. The continued use of proverbs, therefore, reveals what is at the centre of the Ndebele society.

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