

# The Journey Back: Ambivalent (Re)Presentations of Pre-Colonial Women in Post-Independent Shona Novels

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## Summary

Myths on gender relations of the African past, invented and propagated by settlers, were imbibed and even disseminated by early Shona writers. Shona indigenous culture, men and patriarchy were always shown to subordinate women's interests to men's and to place women in the service of men. After independence, novelists such as Mutasa (in *Nhume yaMambo* and *Misodzi, Dikita neRopa*) attempt a reconstruction of the position and image of African women in pre-colonial Zimbabwe. Using the Africana Womanist literary theory, this article is an examination of the (re)presentation of pre-colonial women by the contemporary Shona writer with intent to ascertain its authenticity. It observes that, while the writer's image of women approximates life of the past, other images still pant to Eurocentric images of African women. Thus, the writer exudes ambivalent (re)presentations of women in his novels. The article urges writers on the African past to keep researching and come up with layers of information on how past life was like as well as the good that can be adopted and adapted for the good of today's life.

## Opsomming

Mites oor geslagsverhoudings uit die Afrika-verlede, deur setlaars geskep en gepropageer, is deur vroeë Shona-skrywers opgeneem en selfs versprei. Inheemse Shona-kultuur, -mans en -patriargaat is altyd só uitgebeeld dat dit vroue se belange ondergeskik aan dié van mans stel, en dat dit vroue in diens van mans stel. Ná onafhanklikheid probeer romanskrywers soos Mutasa (in *Nhume yaMambo* en *Misodzi, Dikita neRopa*) om die posisie en beeld van Afrika-vroue in pre-koloniale Zimbabwe te herkonstrueer. Met behulp van die Afrikana- swart feministiese literêre teorie, ondersoek hierdie artikel die (her-)voorstelling van pre-koloniale vroue deur die eietydse Shona-skrywer met die doel om sy outensiteit te bepaal. Die waarneming is dat, hoewel die skrywer se beeld van vroue die lewe van die verlede nader bring, daar steeds Eurosentriese beelde van Afrika-vroue bestaan. Die skrywer straal dus ambivalente (her-)voorstellings van vroue in sy romans uit. Die artikel spoor skrywers oor die Afrika-verlede aan om voort te gaan met hul navorsing en vorendag te kom met lae van inligting oor hoe die lewe in die verlede was, sowel as die goeie wat aangeneem en aangepas kan word vir die goeie van vandag se lewe.

## **Introduction**

The colonisation of Africa, apart from ushering the economic and political subjugation of African people, also witnessed the “invention” and distortion of the indigenous people’s culture and practices. Missionaries and settlers (re)interpreted indigenous African practices and gender relations to suit their liking, and ever-since, some of such practices and images of women have remained elusive to contemporary Africans.

In gender studies, African male-female relations were looked at as if African indigenous culture, like other cultures the world over, shut all doors for women. Belief was that African women were, since time immemorial, marginalised and disparaged. Patriarchy, men and culture were also identified and criticised for the disparaged image, position and role of the African women in life. Traditional African gender roles too were excoriated for purportedly limiting women’s area of influence to the home, with their main staging arena being the kitchen (Furusa 2006). The human body was shown as the basis on which social positions were hinged whereupon the female biology was considered disadvantageous to its bearers (Grosz 1983). Johannsdottir (2009) blames patriarchy and its detrimental effects on women’s position in the world today. In Zimbabwe, Kambarami (2006) laments that in indigenous cultures; patriarchal practices shape and perpetuate male domination while women have to contend with marginalisation and powerlessness. Such denigrations, initially peddled by European writers and missionaries, were to be imbibed and taken to equally high levels by some Zimbabwean writers like Makayi (2004). Such writers excoriate and even distort the practices and institutions of the indigenous Africans.

However, although African men, patriarchy and culture have to an extent contributed to the negative perception of contemporary African women, Amadiume (1987) and Oweyumi (1997) maintain that traditional Africa generally had positive and healthy gender relations which were however, disrupted by the onslaught of colonialism. As part of the decolonisation process that post-independent Africa has been engaged in, contemporary Shona writers have taken readers on what Barker (1980) describes as “the journey back”. It is a journey back to the pre-colonial period; to try and expose how life was lived then, which includes among others, the male-female relations of the time. Chiwome and Mguni (2012) vouch that Mutasa’s novels bring pre-colonial African society into fiction in a realistic way. However, it should be hazarded that, writing at a time when most people’s conception of past life is blurred, and has been distorted by a lengthy colonial period, chances are, writers may, in some instances, not have a clear conception of the affairs of the life in question. They may unwittingly present the colonial versions of African practices as the indigenous people’s original practices. In other words, they may depict the cultural forms in their abused forms, as typical (Kandawasvika-Chivandikwa 2006: 193). It is against this background

that Mutasa's portrayal of the image and position of African women is examined. The aim is to establish the writer's conceptualisation of the images of women in past African life.

## Theoretical Grounding

The article is inspired by, and grounded in the theory of Africana Womanism, propounded by Clenora Hudson-Weems (2004). The theory contends that western feminists' understanding of the nature, image and position of women in society does not apply to women of African descent. She argues that feminism was conceptualised and adopted by white women, reflecting an agenda which was designed to meet their particular needs (Hudson-Weems 1993: 18). On the other hand, Africana Womanism is:

An ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in our culture, and therefore, it focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of African women.

(Hudson-Weems 1993: 24)

Africana Womanism is an African paradigm for assessing African works on African women (Hudson-Weems 2007: 75). In other words, Africana Womanism looks at, and tries to explain and understand, African women in the context of African culture and history. It looks at the positions, responsibilities and perceptions of African women in the context of African way of life. It looks at issues to do with African women using the African eye. Africana Womanism is the ideal theory in this article in that, it looks at African women in the context of African history, philosophy and way of life. Thus it is inward-looking and self-analytical. It helps explore the position, image and stature of African women from the point of view of the participants of African culture and not on-lookers or what p'Bitek (1986) regards as "arm-chair critics." p'Bitek (1986: 37) further asserts that only participants in a culture can pass judgement on whether a practice or custom is bad. Distancing her theory from the goal of Western feminism, Hudson-Weems (1993: 48) writes that:

Indeed African 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.

In other words, Hudson-Weems asserts that in the African culture and life, women have never been as powerless and voiceless as asserted by pro-women writers. It is this fact which the current article seeks to explore in the post-independent Shona novels on the pre-colonial period. The article examines

whether the contemporary Shona novelist shows the African woman as a powerful, respected and respectable being in society.

## Methodology

The article employed the qualitative research methodology. It discussed the images and positions of pre-colonial African women as conveyed through Mutasa's two novels; *Nhume Yamambo* and *Misodzi Dikita Neropa*. The researcher purposefully chose Mutasa because all of his novels are set in the past, an era of interest to the current article. Two novels, *Nhume Yamambo* and *Misodzi, Dikita Neropa* were as well purposefully selected because, unlike the other novels published during the colonial era which largely denigrate most past African practices including gender relations, these two, were published after independence and in the context of cultural regeneration. It is therefore imperative to determine if these two published under totally different circumstances project a different picture of African women. The article is thus a content analysis of the two novels. The discussion is buttressed with ideas from researches on culture and gender relations in pre-colonial Africa as well as from observations from oral literature. Literature on pre-colonial African life and gender relations help show the philosophy of life as lived and celebrated by the people. Oral literature is consulted because it is an incontestable reservoir of the values, practices and imagination of pre-colonial Africa (Gudhlanga & Chirimuuta 2016). Olarinmoye (2013) actually regards oral literature as based on the experiences of its creators and as "an autobiography of a tribe". These sources were used as a yardstick to measure the current novelist's ability to present typical images and positions of pre-colonial African women.

## Portrayal of Women in Mutasa's Novels

In *Nhume Yamambo* (1990) and *Misodzi, Dikita Neropa* (1991), Mutasa shows traditional African women on one hand, as a very important and indispensable group who occupied positions of great magnitude and significance in people's lives and on the other, as an exploited and used group. In the two novels are women characters such as Harupindi who is King Chirisamhuru's *nyachide*, or favourite wife; the *mbonga* or female religious attendants; Ndomboya who is Chuwe Tavada's (the male religious emissary's) mother, Nyamazana, a female leader of one of the groups that fled from Zulu king, Shaka; as well as the young girls who dance at King Chirisamhuru's religious festival.

## Positive Images and Roles of African Women

### Women and Societal Decision-Making

Harupindi, the King's favourite wife is portrayed as intelligent, influential, respected, respectable, obeyed and motherly. She is also shown as architectural in that, together with other women, they are shown as the brains behind Chirisamhuru's victory over Dyembeu and his subsequent successful and unwavering reign. The favourite wife also executes advisory roles to men and women of Chirisamhuru's kingdom, especially at public meetings. She exudes such values as love, loyalty, trust, dignity and integrity of African wifehood and motherhood. At an *indaba* to wage a war to dislodge Dyembeu from kingship, her contribution is said to have intrigued the participants. The writer says:

*Dare rakanakidzwa neshoko raHarupindi rikaritsigira kwazvo.*  
(p. 175)

The court was impressed by Harupindi's contribution and unanimously supported it.

Evidence is that in African milieu, women had the chances to, not only sit among important men of society, but also had the platform and freedom to contribute ideas. Harupindi sat amongst the great men of society and made a contribution which intrigued and was supported by the gathering. She compliments her husband's efforts to become the Paramount chief of the Rozvi (Charamba 2013). This contrasts the popular belief that women were viewed and treated as minors in traditional African society. Further, contrary to the view that traditionally women were never heard, here the writer shows that women's ideas were respected, listened to and their advice heeded to (Rukuni 2007: 54).

The novelist further shows that during the subsequent war between Dyembeu and Chirisamhuru, it is women who suggest that Tavada disguises as Mavhudzi, the High Priest of the Mabweadziva shrine while they disguise themselves as sacred virgins from the shrine. In their disguise, they would deliver to Dyembeu a message of defeat. The women also suggest appearing naked before Dyembeu's army as a way of weakening them (for it was common belief that any soldier who took sight of a naked woman would die in battle). The women's idea formed part of the basis of Chirisamhuru's victory in the war. Harunadima and Harupindi's war strategies prove worthy (Charamba 2013) since they lead to Dyembeu's defeat. From the novel, one gleans that pre-colonial Shona women did not always have to be holed up in hiding places or sit back in their homes during the war, as common belief has

it. Instead, they at times accompanied their male counterparts to wars where they also participated with distinction.

## **Women as Political Leaders**

Mutasa further shows African women as quite visible and powerful political leaders. He partially conveys this through Harupindi, Chirisamhuru's wife who, as queen, interferes and rules alongside her husband. That Harupindi has political power, gains support from research on pre-colonial African life wherein a dual sex system with shared authority and power (Sofola, 1998; Charamba 2013) was operational. As shown above, Harupindi complements her husband, Chirisamhuru in making important political decisions.

The writer also shows that women did not just play a complementary political role, but in some cases, a leading role. Fakudze (2019), analysing African epics, observes that African women did not just rule alongside men, but in some instances were actually heads of states. Mutasa brings this out through Nyamazana, a female leader of one of the Nguni groups that fled from Shaka. She leads a breakaway Nguni group from modern day South Africa. She attacks Chirisamhuru to test his fame. Chirisamhuru's debilitated army fails to withstand the attack. The assertive and domineering Nyamazana captures the once mighty Chirisamhuru and even skins him alive in order to check if the popular belief that he had two hearts was true. Thus the previously unconquerable Chirisamhuru is cowed by a fearless female leader. Such a portrayal goes a long way in demythologising colonial history that has claimed that the Rozvi state fell to the Ndebele when in actual fact, by the time the Ndebele came, the state was already on its feet because of such raids by Nguni forces that passed through.

Such images of African women as brave, daring and intelligent resonate well with African history which is replete with women who were well-known and distinguished legendary political leaders who even victoriously led their clans in battles, for example Queen Mantantisi and Queen Nzinga and Nehanda the religio-political Shona leader of the Chimurenga uprising in colonial Zimbabwe (Asante 2007). The legend of the heroine Nehanda vindicates Mutasa's portrayal of African women. She was believed to have been a daughter of Nyatsimba Mutota who was given a district of herself to rule in the 1500s and was described as a brilliant ruler who ruled her people quite well (Musiyiwa 2008). Yet another legendary Nehanda (personal name, Charwe) arose in the 1880s and was a spirit medium of the legendary Nehanda. She played a crucial role in Zimbabwe's First Chimurenga of 1896-1897 (Gudhlanga & Chirimuuta 2016). She mobilised and sustained a very powerful revolution and was responsible for the death of Henry Pollard, the Native Commissioner of Mazowe. She inspired the freedom fighters in the Second Chimurenga that ultimately ushered Zimbabwean independence. Oral tradition presents her as

gallant, defiant and brave fighter who was instrumental in the liberation of Zimbabwe (Gudhlanga 2010). Among the Ndebele is also the legend of Lozikeyi, the wife to King Lobengula. When Cecil Rhodes threatened the Ndebele and led Lobengula into hiding, Lozikeyi took over and was described as one of the best strategists in Zimbabwean politics (Gudhlanga & Chirimuuta 2016). During the 1986 uprising, she equipped her fighters well, kept her intentions to attack the whites a secret. When the whites were then attacked, they were taken by surprise. Thus, Mutasa's portrayal of women holding political positions and undertaking their associated and distinctive roles is in line with pre-colonial African life. By showing political leadership positions as so flexible as to be occupied by either men or women, Mutasa brings out another truism that "Africana males and females were flexible role-players" (Hudson-Weems 2004), with no gender dominating or marginalising the other.

### **Women and Religious Positions**

Women also held very important and crucial religious positions that guaranteed society of a prosperous life and of continuity. These positions and roles provided women with a degree of status and allowed them to exercise authority both within and outside religious circles (Makaudze 2017). In the novel, some women were *mbonga* (female religious attendants), whose lives were solely devoted to serving the God of Shona traditional religion. The writer gives women characters like Harupindi, Harunandima, Hwerure, Nyikite, Masikinye and Chisvo working for the feared Shona religious cult at Mabweadziva. These women, together with some male religious attendees' duties included receiving and conveying people's problems and wishes to the spiritual world, as well as the responses thereof, back to the people. Another important position held by women was that of spirit mediums. Ndomboya is one such example in the novel. She doubled as both a spirit medium and a member of Chirisamhuru's council. Thus women were even consulted by, and acted as advisors to, chiefs and kings. Kabweza (1979: 107) stresses that it was also always imperative for women to hold such religious positions, not just men.

In the novel, the *mbongas* were stationed and worked at Mabweadziva, the central and most powerful Shona religious place in charge of guaranteeing peace, curing illnesses, provision of good rains and bumper harvests. The position held by the *mbongas* was akin to the one held by the legendary Mbuya Nehanda who was a spirit medium-cum-political leader. She interceded on behalf of the people. This clearly demonstrates that women in African society had significant roles that guided society and were not second class citizens. They worked for life.

## African Women and Property Ownership

Furthermore, in Africa, as mothers, women could own ‘personal’ property. This was unlike their male counterparts who could not at all own property deemed “personal”. At each of their daughters’ marriages, most African mothers usually were given a cow (always given to one’s mother in-law), known as *mombe yeumai* among the Shona, whose proceeds they had authority over. The cow entitled to the mother was never negotiated downwards or to something simpler. In fact, such a cow was always paid timeously. The mother-in-law’s cow was one of the very first live beasts handed over to in-laws by a son-in-law. The mother’s cow had to be given regardless of the custom of marriage used. In Mutasa’s *Nhume Yamambo* (1990), women like Ndomboya boast of personal properties. Ndomboya, Tavada’s mother, is showered with cattle and servants by many clans seeking favours from her and her brother, Chirisamhuru. The same also happens in Kunene’s (1979) epic, *Emperor Shaka the Great* where Shaka’s mother is spoiled with many gifts which include cattle, by many clans who seek favours from her and her son. Cognisant of the power that a mother wields over her children, these clans appease such mothers so that they arbitrate for them. Ndomboya thus boasts of several personal herds of cattle whose disposal she presides over. These are given out to her and meant for her. Thus, contrary to Euro-centric thinking, African women never had the status of a minor. The belief that African women never owned “personal” wealth was again a colonial invention. In Shona culture for example, the only person to own private property was the mother (Furusa 2006: 4). Whatever a mother owned belonged to her and no member of the family including her biological children had a right to it. This means the cattle given out to Ndomboya were her private and not family property. The only privilege that the family had was to share it with her while she was still alive (Furusa 2006: 4). Therefore, unlike popular belief today, in the past, whatever the father owned belonged to the rest of the family, including to the mother. In his novels, Mutasa therefore provides an admirable image of Shona women, which had been overlooked by many early Shona writers.

Mutasa’s expositions prove that contrary to Eurocentric myths, African women were not reduced to the status of ‘outsiders’ who had no political or social authority, human rights or dignity. Women in African culture were a very powerful, respected, respectful and respectable group (Makaudze 2017). In African societies, though undertaking duties different from and at times interchangeable with those of their male counterparts, women were crucial economic, political, social and religious figures. The novelist presents pre-colonial Africa as having flexible gender roles. In such a society, women could delve into areas highly associated with men, such as war (as in *Nhume Yamambo* 1990), but they would still be undertaking roles different from those of their male counterparts. Furusa (2006: 3) notes that it is colonialism



which bracketed the African woman into restricted roles of wife and mother whose performance space was the home, with her major staging area as the kitchen.

## **Perpetuation of Colonial Myths about African Women**

### **African Women as an Abused and Exploited Gender**

The same author also posits that although African women were seen in high regard, there were occasional instances where they were somehow dehumanised and abused. Although the writer shows women distinguishing themselves in the war against Dyembeu, the same incident shows that, by being nude before the enemy, the women were somehow demeaning and denuding themselves of dignity and integrity. Among the Shona for example, the worst thing to happen to any woman is to be seen naked by a man who is not her husband. Again, this incident shows that the women were slaving for Chirisamhuru to be king, vindicating them as a used, abused and usable group. In addition, when Chirisamhuru ultimately becomes king, he has groups of young women who always sing and dance his praises. At a religious ceremony meant to give gratitude to the territorial spirits, the author says:

*Kubva pasuwo remana raMambo uchidzira nomudziswa uye mugwagwa waisvika kudariro guru, paiva noruzhowa rwemhandara kumativi ose. Dzakanga dzabva pakubuda kwezuva dzichiimbira Mambo nziyo dzokurumbidza. Nziyo idzi dzaikurudzira vanhu kuti vatende Mambo pamhepo yavanofema, mvura yavanomwa naihwo upenyu hwavanahwo. Mhandara idzi dzaiva norunako pauso, pachimiro, pamakumbo napamanzwi. Dzakafumirira kutsvara uye kurigidura pasi namakumbo, safuri dzichinzviririka zvainzikwa navakamirira Mambo. Dikita raidirana richiyerera nokukukura guruva kuvasikana vaitaridza kusutswa nokuimbira Mambo.*

(1991: 5)

From the main exit from the King's palace going down the road to the main arena, there was a huge line of young women on either side of the road. They had been singing songs of praise to the King since morning. These songs urged people to thank the King for the oxygen they breathed, the water they drank and even for life. These young women had very beautiful faces, rounded bodies, attractive legs and mellifluous voices. They had gotten up quite early to dance and beat the ground with their legs, rattles making noise that could be heard by those waiting for the arrival of the King. Sweat oozed out, carrying with it all the dust that was raised by the girls who danced for the King as if possessed.

The incident described above is one case of exploitation of women. These young women dance in two thick lines; the lines demarcating the path to be

used by the king on his way to the podium. The lines make it possible for the scantily dressed women to be the king's sight until he gets to the main arena. Apart from being used as road markings, the women are made to sing praises to the king, from morning. A lot of sweat streamed out of these women's bodies. This pants to feminist observations that African women were a weaker sex with no say in society; but who had to keep on doing what men decreed them to do. These were denied resting time from the previous night and are also made to deify humanity. The songs centre on deifying the king for guaranteeing them life. The songs overlook the significance of ancestors and the spiritual world, including *Mwari* (God), the Creator himself in the people's life. Yet, in African milieu, it is the spiritual world that actually guarantees both abundant rains and life. The writer shows that women "worshipped" men and elevated them to a godly position. In this incident, the women urge people to worship and accord the king all reverence. They are shown as a powerless gender that can only obey orders. They have no freedom or authority to desist or resist. Women are thus shown as a group that was exploited for the benefit and interests of men.

### **Women as Sex Objects, Mothers and Wives**

In his novels, Mutasa also presents African women, at one level, as sex objects and at another, as mothers and wives. At King Chirisamhuru's religious ceremony, Tavada admires the rhythmic and energetic dances of the young, beautiful and entertaining girls although he is quick to stress that their bodily attributes were a testimony of their desire to bear and rear children. He describes and looks at the dancing women erotically and with awe. He is swayed by their vigorous and provocative gyrating. These dancers had been chosen on the basis of their physical beauty, a testimony that in the past African women were reduced to sex objects. The writer does not provide enough sociological detail as to how important positions and roles of mothers and wives were in African milieu. His touristic description of the whole scene is susceptible to misinterpretation and pants to western feminists' claims in a number of ways. First, it betrays the perception of African women as objects meant to satisfy men's lust. In addition, the roles and positions ascribed to women reduce and confine them to not-so-important domestic roles. As lamented by Euro-feminists, such images and positions confine women to the home, with their staging arena being the kitchen. The writer's description does little to vouch that the roles and images of women as mothers and wives made women a respectable, indispensable and unavoidable gender in African milieu. It does little to prove that African males and females needed each other to achieve wholeness and authenticity (Hudson-Weems 2004). Pre-colonial male-female relations as conveyed by the writer are skewed in favour of men. Thus whilst the writer had almost convinced his readers that women

were viewed positively in Africa milieu, he then provides evidence to the contrary. Readers are again persuaded to believe that the same women were abused and denied total freedom to express their feelings and wishes. Thus, the writer exudes an ambivalent (re)presentation of the image and roles of women in Shona society. This in a way vindicates Hughes' (1971) words, that pre-colonial African societies were "beautiful, but ugly too".

## Conclusion

In light of settler-invented myths about gender relations of pre-colonial Africa; this article made an analysis of post-independent Shona novels' depiction of pre-colonial male-female relations, with intent to ascertain the authenticity of the writers' expositions. The article focused on Mutasa's *Nhume Yamambo* and *Misodzi, Dikita Neropa*. It observed that, on one hand, Mutasa demonstrates that indigenous African culture was not as highly sexist and patriarchal; as highly oppressive and abusive to women as purported by Eurocentric scholarship and yet on the other hand, he vindicates colonial and feminist claims that the same cultures had terribly skewed gender relations. He demonstrates women's marginalisation and, like feminist scholarship, blames African men and patriarchy. The article concludes that the writer exudes an ambivalent (re)presentation of the image and position of women in pre-colonial African milieu. It also urges writers to continue doing intensive and extensive research for them to realistically convey African perceptions of the same.

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