

# Media and Development: The Politics of Framing Gender Struggles in the Postcolonial Zimbabwean Shona Films

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## Summary

To *frame* gender struggles is to set an agenda on what people should think about it in respect of the contradictory roles that men and women play in society and culture. In this article, three films in the Shona language – *Mwanasikana* (1995), *Kapfupi* (2009) and *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993) have been sampled out to explore gender struggles inherent in the Zimbabwean society. The premise of this article is rooted in the ideological *doubleness* of the word framing as both restrictive as well as an instrument for liberation. Framing gender in the discourses of these three films calls attention to perceiving gender struggles in certain ways and in the process manifesting as far as possible the buried narratives that are otherwise obscured in manipulated forms of representing life. It is the duty of film critics to retrieve these silenced and “*other*” readings because of their potential to suggest to the audiences some alternative opinions and reactions. I advance in this article that while a *frame* can impose *what* should be thought about, it does not necessarily dictate *how* audiences interpret its text(s). This dialectical relation of framing implied in the restriction liberating dimension of a frame, that emerges as it were from the struggle of verbal and visual images inside a frame’s boundaries, actually can predispose audiences to want to delve for alternative images of how men and women are depicted in the Shona film.

## Opsomming

Om die genderstryd in n *raamwerk* te plaas, is om 'n agenda te hê vir wat mense moet dink oor die teenstrydige rolle van mans en vroue in die gemeenskap en kultuur. In hierdie artikel word daar na drie films in Shona (*Wanasikana* (1995), *Kapfupi* (2009) en *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993)) gekyk om genderstryde wat inherent is aan die Zimbabwiese samelewing te verken. Die veronderstelling in hierdie artikel is ingewortel in die ideologiese *dubbelsinnigheid* van die woord “raamwerk” as beide beperkend en 'n bevrydingsinstrument. Om gender in die raamwerk van die diskoerse van hierdie drie films te plaas, vestig die aandag daarop dat genderstryde op sekere maniere verstaan word en word die verborge narratiewe (wat andersins in gemanipuleerde vorms om die lewe uit te beeld, verberg word) so ver as moontlik blootgelê. As gevolg van die potensiaal van hierdie gesmoorde en “*ander*”

interpretasies om 'n paar alternatiewe opinies en reaksies aan die kykers te suggereer, is dit die plig van filmkritici om hierdie gedempte interpretasies terug te bring. In hierdie artikel voer ek aan dat alhoewel 'n raamwerk mag voorskryf *waaroor* daar gedink moet word, dit nie noodwendig dikteer *hoe* kykers die teks(te) daarvan moet interpreteer nie. Hierdie dialektiese verband van omraming wat deur die beperking-bevryding-dimensie van 'n raamwerk geïmpliseer word, wat as't ware uit die stryd van verbale en visuele beelde binne die grense van die raamwerk voortvloei, kan kykers in werklikheid vatbaar maak om te wil delf vir alternatiewe beelde van hoe mans en vroue in die Shonafilm uitgebeeld word.

## **Introduction: Theorising the Framing of Gender Struggles**

The term framing is usually used to refer to the way news reporters shape the content and context of news items by focusing on what should be thought about and the range of acceptable debate on a particular topic/event. The metaphor of a frame implies the presence of a fixed border that includes some things and excludes others. Put differently, a frame which in the film genre translates into a screen, is an ideological window into the world that can censor the type and quantity of information accessible to the audiences. In his groundbreaking research, Lippman (1922) in Wicks (2001) contends that the basic ideas that drive the framing concept are rooted in stereotyping. Stereotyping has, as its frame, the desire to confine cultural meanings. A stereotype is a site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsessions enclosed in a system of synchronic essentialism and a knowledge of language signifiers (Bhabha 1996). Stereotyped roles and images of women inhibit their advancement in the social, political and economic spheres. However, it remains a fact that whether in film, written literature or any other cultural site, a stereotype can mean many things despite its insistence on wanting to be understood in a single direction.

Fortunato points out that “[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation and moral evaluation” (2005: 51). If film frames promote a particular problem, it means that they are selective in attending to social issues. The idea of selective attention emerges from the understanding that in film, “an idea or event cannot be whole, self-contained and uncontaminated because it depends for its very existence on that which it is not” (Brunette & Wills 1989: 7). It implies that off-screen stories create alternative readings to meanings included within the boundaries of a film frame/screen. Jamieson and Waldman in Fortunato pose critical questions to depict how the audience can deconstruct film frames:

- What kinds of stories, causal interpretations and potential solutions is the film ignoring that it should not ignore?
- Where do film frames originate and how do they affect interpretation?



- Why do filmmakers adopt a given frame for social phenomena/problems and ignore other frames?
- Which segments of stories or events does society gain or lose from filmmakers' framing decisions?

(Jamieson & Waldman in Fortunato 2005: 58)

The above questions illustrate that in bringing diverse readings to the framing of content produced by a film, audience members produce their interpretive frames of reference. If audience members *produce* meanings it means that the concept of *audience reception* should be questioned for assuming that audiences are simply receivers not producers of ideas (Harindranath 2009). In other words, the primary focus of meaning production shifts away from the possibility or assumption that the manner in which the audience interacts with film is universally similar and that frames presented by films are interpreted similarly across a wide spectrum of the audience. The idea that gender struggles framed by the films *Mwanasikana* (1995), *Kapfupi* (2009) and *Nhasi tave nahama* (1993) are dominant ideological readings, is where the *media effects* or *hypodermic syringe effect* (Kwaramba 2000) debate begins to incite subversive or dissent interpretations. Dissent interpretations refute the reification and reductive symmetries of a master narrative promoted by patriarchal influences. Within the spirit of this article, to struggle is to move beyond normative interpretations of gender issues; it is a dialectical approach towards understanding the character of the forces that oppress men and women. Part of the struggle is waged by audiences who can possess the power to contest a stereotypical reference to the roles that men and women play in society and culture. Audiences of a film must not be viewed as *empty buckets* waiting to be filled with information. They are a heterogeneous group that can organise and give meanings to the components that constitute gender framing by directing attention to particular aspects of that frame, consent to its ideas, contest the ideas or even obscure other less relevant aspects (Goffman 1974; Minsky 1975). Put differently, the acceptance and sharing of messages about gender struggles in these three films depend on what understanding the film readers bring to the text/message to produce a negotiated version of their meanings. On the one hand, film frames could have a greater opportunity of luring the attention of audiences by drawing on the cultural beliefs held by the audiences. On the other hand, the same frames of reference could also draw the attention of audiences by presenting controversial issues that challenged *fixed* beliefs held by society and culture on gender roles. In the context(s) of these films, setting an agenda for a debate on gender struggles could occur if the three films confronted traditional beliefs that view women as housewives, passive, tender, emotional, less intelligent than men and sexually weak. Debate may also take place if the same films depicted *only* male characters as entrepreneurs, more intelligent than women, self-assertive, aggressive, competitive, sexually strong and less emotional.



The three films under scrutiny depict how patriarchal influences could create restrictive frames that could stifle alternative ways of understanding the roles that men and women play in the Zimbabwean society and culture. Cohen and Kennedy (2007) define patriarchy as a form of oppression that elevates men to positions of power and authority. Through patriarchy, women remain subject to forms of domination from husbands, sons and male kinsmen that are legitimised by cultural values and/or underpinned by economic dependency. Defining gender, Moto (2009) asserts that it is an analytical variable that refers to the social construction of male and female roles and relations. It entails on the one hand, men and women's active roles in society and, on the other hand, ingrained social ideas about what men and women should do and how they *ought* to behave and interact. The deeply rooted nature of traditional stereotyped roles and images of women is a source of gender struggles that are dramatised by these three films.

## **Framing Patriarchy and Gender Struggles in the Film *Mwanasikana* (1995)**

Whenever people refer to the negative effects of patriarchy, they are considering how the system is manipulated by men to advance their self-serving interests. On the social and cultural levels, men and women undergo discriminatory socialisation. That is, “[b]oys are generally socialised to be inquiring, adventurous, to subdue, conquer or at the very least understand nature while girls are expected to be obedient, malleable, traditional preservers of nature. The tragedy in the situation is that women are themselves the chief agents of this socialisation which confers inequality on their kind” (Tamale & Oloka-Onyango 2000: 14).

In the film *Mwanasikana* (1995), almost all decision-making processes emanate from male characters. For example, Tariro is a hard-working girl doing her Grade seven but she is told by her father that she should forget about continuing with her education because learned women are a problem to their husbands. The father puts it emphatically when he says: “*Iyi ndiyo temu yako yekupedzisira. Vakadzi vakanyanyo dzidza vanozoneisa varume*” [This is your last term at school. When women become educated they become a problem to their husbands]. Already, a restrictive frame is set around Tariro's ambitions to proceed with education so that she can widen her horizon of choosing different options in life. Instead, her father proposes marriage as the best option for her. Evidently, the basis of patriarchy is built upon controlling women by making them submissive *objects* confined to matters that deal with family affairs. However, postmodernists emphasise the multiple and ever-shifting roles and discourses that permeate social life so that there can be no immortalised structures shaping human behaviour or absolute values that should not be contested. This line of argument is



supported by a female character in *Mwanasikana* who, in no uncertain terms, castigates the notions of Tariro's father that a female child should not go to school because she is destined for marriage. On the one hand, the female character, being a teacher by profession, cites herself as an example of what women can do if given opportunities to explore possibilities in life. But, on the other hand, Tariro's father views her firstborn, Precious, as an achiever in life because she was married after completing her Grade seven. Without feeling guilt about terminating Precious's hopes for better education, the father boasts that "*Precious mwana kwaye. Akapedza grade seven yake, ndokuroorwa, kutaura kuno akagara zvakanaka. Mapasuru arikutumira. Ndizvo zvinoitwa nemwana akabva pamusha unorira huku*" [Precious is a good child. She finished her Grade seven, she is married and as I am speaking, she is enjoying her marriage. She is sending groceries to us. This is what a well-groomed child should do]. What is being framed here is the traditional belief that a female child is like a commercial product that is sold in order to bring some profits to her place of origin. Through *maternalisation* of the female body, the patriarchal system creates rules that force women to become mothers and by rewarding them for motherhood and punishing those who do not conform (Kroeze 2007). In the words of Kristeva (1982), patriarchy has framed the body of a woman as the abject *object* that can be acted upon, and whose social value is decided by a male head. The social abjection of women in some Zimbabwean cultures manifests itself through situations in which women are forced to marry a man against their will; they can be betrothed to a husband while they are still young. Some women are labelled as prostitutes or promiscuous without also citing men as a source of the unwanted behaviour of prostitution. This kind of unfair treatment of women emerges from the way patriarchy gives premium to the male child who is given powers to dominate without having to account for his actions.

Forcing a female child to get married is not without its negative repercussions. In the film *Mwanasikana* (1995), Precious comes back with her belongings because her marriage is a non-event. From her countenance, her parents can tell that something is wrong when they ask her thus: "*Ko kwakanaka here kubva watouya nemabhegi ane midziyo?*" [Is everything alright? For, we are seeing that you have come with everything that belongs to you]. Her father is particularly worried because he usually boasts about how Precious looks after the whole family. It is ironic that the father expects Precious to fend for the family and yet he ended his daughter's education prematurely, thereby diminishing her chances of having a better life. Soliloquising Precious's predicament, the father says: "*Precious apedza masvondo ari pamusha. Haana kana waarikutaura naye. Aakunge ane mamhepo*" [Precious has spent many weeks here. She is no longer talking to anyone. She is like a person possessed by an evil spirit]. The power to create myths about the reality of social conditions is traditionally infused in the discourses of patriarchy. For example, the reality of Precious's unhappiness



is attributed to the evil spirits, and yet the glaring truth is that she cannot make it in marriage because her husband thinks that she is uneducated. The escapist mentality exhibited by Precious's father is also evident in the film *Tanyaradzwa* (2005), another Zimbabwean film also dealing with gender struggles. In *Mwanasikana*, all women are framed so that they only focus their attention to emotional issues such as love affairs. But as articulated through music lyrics in *Mwanasikana* (1995), "Our daughters need education to secure their future". This assertion is fundamental to the development of the nation as the saying goes: "If you educate a woman, you have educated the nation but if you educate a man you have educated an individual". Trite as it might seem, this saying contains a grain of truth considering the fact that women play a fundamental role in the upbringing of a family. Thus, the logic is that if a woman is educated she is likely to encourage her children to do likewise. In *Mwanasikana* (1995), Precious and her friend Linda – now a growth-point prostitute, hold a discussion citing examples of their friends who have made it in life. Precious is given the advice that she can find employment in the shop owned by Mudiwa [The Loved One]. But as his name suggests, Mudiwa is always chasing after young girls. His deplorable character is exercised through his nefarious actions of wanting to rape Precious who is working in his shop. Without showing a dint of shame, Mudiwa says to Precious: "*Precious, ngatimbodyai nyika rutivi*" [Precious, let's enjoy ourselves (meaning let's make love)]. When Precious rebuffs his advances, she is told that she will not receive her wage. Mudiwa's sexual advances to Precious is symbolic of the *sexploitation* most women have to put up with in places of work so that they will not fall out of favour with their bosses. What this points to is that if women want to liberate themselves, they should thrive to be owners of means of production so that they do not pander over the whims of men bent on abusing their bodies. As Rwafa (2008) argues, women should brace themselves for a struggle if they are to assert their positive role in society and culture. Part of the struggle can begin by defining their own space among a multitude of "voices" defined by gender, race, class and gender struggles. Instead of taking a fatalistic course of action like prostitution, exemplified by the female protagonist in the film *Tanyaradzwa* (2005), women are urged to carve a productive niche focused on improving their lives. The process involves subverting the "ghost" of inferiority complex and self-negation. After all, nothing comes on a silver platter.

The kind of struggle envisioned by Rwafa (2008) will lead women to challenge bad decisions such as the one made by Mudiwa and VaJumbe (Tariro's father). The two connived that as soon as Tariro finishes her Grade seven, she would become Mudiwa's wife to reciprocate beer services rendered to his father by Mudiwa. Mudiwa does not mince his words when he asserts: "*Ini ndiri kutofano bvisa roora kuburikidza nechikweriti chehwahwa chamurikutora. VaJumbe, takaitirana chibvumirano. Tarirai*



*chikwereti chenyu chinovika ku850 dollars*" [I am paying my bride price through the credit that you have accrued in this shop. VaJumbe, we made an agreement. Look at your credit now amounting to 850 dollars]. The commodification of female bodies depicts the highest form of moral degradation. Mutating in various ways in the Zimbabwean traditional culture, the commodification explains why some young women were used as a retributive price to be given to the family of the deceased if a man killed a person he was not related to. Along the same lines, married women were used as a betting price by a man trying out his luck in card games.

### **Engaging the Revisionist Sensibility of the Film *Mwanasikana* (1995)**

The revisionist sensibility advanced towards the end of *Mwanasikana* gives its text a nourishing vision. Through her statements, Precious is advocating the education of the female child as the first major step towards liberation of women. She enunciates her vision clearly to her father when she says: "*Baba naAmai ndizvo ndizvo zvamaida. Dai ndakadzidza handaidadirwa nemurume ini. Ndakadzwa zvekuda kuroodza kwamurikuda kuita Tariro. Siyai Tariro apedze chikoro, baba*" [Father and mother, this is what you wanted. If I were educated, my husband would not have thrown me out of the house. I overheard you planning the marriage of Tariro. Leave Tariro to finish her education, Father). In response to the demands forwarded by Precious, her father declares: "*Tariro uchaenda kuchikoro kusvika paunoda. Precious uchaenda kunight school*" [Tariro, you shall go to school till you reach a stage that satisfies you. Precious, you shall go to the night school]. To grace the occasion, the film depicts Tariro going to school together with her brother. But the question is: Do parents have to let the situation go bad before they act? Regarding the life of a female child in the film *Mwanasikana* (1995), an answer to this question shows how some parents may not prioritise the concerns of a female child as compared to what parents do if it comes to a male child. However, the revisionist sensibility portrayed by the film *Mwanasikana* (1995) is important in teaching a moral lesson that parents and society should not discriminate against the female child. In focusing only on the female child, the film seems to give a high moral ground to a male child. In other words, the film presupposes that a male child is an achiever in all aspects of life. This kind of approach masks the reality that there are also boys who drop out of school because their parents fail to pay school fees. Also, the decision to make Tariro continue with her education is voiced by her father thereby re-enforcing a myth that without decisions from the father things will not come to fruition. As Butler (2008) argues, most female heroes in film embody aspects of empowerment rather than an end to power structures, equality rather than difference. Within the



line of thinking proposed by Butler (2008), the revisionist sensibility advocated by the film *Mwanasikana* is not convincing because of its failure to confront patriarchal norms and values as the basis of the exploitation suffered by female characters. In other words, whatever resistance that comes from Precious is within the frame of power structures dictated by patriarchal values. From that angle, the discourse of *Mwanasikana* (1995) fails to dispel suffocating discourses that restrict a female child to make her own decisions that have a positive impact on her life. However, the ending of the film provides laudable solutions to filmic texts that present a woman as a sex object destined to quench men's sexual libido. The film's act of providing "voice" to its female characters implies that the metaphor of representing women should not only relate to the "truth" of the image but should also encompass the conditions of its construction and its social effects. In Zimbabwe, the social effects and the power invested in the images of the film *Mwanasikana* (1995) should inform national gender policies that focus on creating social harmony by discouraging cultural stigmas constructed around women and gender issues.

### **The Film *Kapfupi* (2009) and Discourses of Women Oppression**

The phenomenon of women oppression in the film *Kapfupi* is manifested through the centrifugal forces of patriarchy that create the untouchable character Marabha. Marabha is a domineering and arrogant young man who does not think that his sister needs someone who can love her. Actually, the overprotective stance that Marabha reflects makes him force his sister's boyfriend Kapfupi to drink urine because he caught him talking to his sister. Through this shot, the film exhibits the spectacle of masculinity that privileges through the male body qualities of toughness and being in control. Nixon (1997) argues that these codings eroticise the male body as the centre of power while female bodies are viewed as an ideological site to exercise masculine power as well as bodies that symbolise social abjection. The tendency of oppressive power is reflected through Marabha's tough statements addressed to Precious, his sister, when he says: "*Iwe Precious urikuenda kupi haugone kutamba wega. Mapreti hauna kugeza, sadza hauna kubika ....*" [Precious, where are you going? Can't you play alone? You have not washed the dishes, you have not cooked *sadza* ...]. Already, as a young man, Marabha is groomed to issue commands regarding what society and culture expect fathers to do. Put differently, Marabha's speech reverberates traditional beliefs which view all household chores as the responsibility of women whereas men, viewed as providers of the family, are privileged to do more enterprising jobs. But rather than representation of some idealised form of African femininity subject to male dominance, a film frame should



represent possibilities for women to question patriarchal values that hinder women advancement (Murphy 2000).

Essentialist claims about the roles that men and women *ought* to perform in society should be regarded as *grand narratives* of patriarchy that try to conceal the reality that culture is dynamic. The ambivalence of culture provides people with space to decide their own destinies without following a predetermined course. In the film *Kapfupi* (2009), the absence of a mother figure in Kapfupi's family is problematic. The problem arises when Kapfupi and his brother Bonjisi fail to take care of their ailing father. Actually, Bonjisi is angry about his father's inability to walk without being supported when he shouts, "*Baba simbayiwoka. Dai pasina kuti makaramba amai zvinhu zvingadai zviru naniso. Iyezvino makuita kunge makaroora isu*" [Father, be strong. If you had not divorced our mother things would have been in order right now. Right now it is as if you had married us]. At this point, the film's narrative seems to give merit to the qualities of motherhood, but the text fails to rise above stereotypical reference to women as nurturers of humankind and therefore, socialise them to sensibilities of domesticity. Nurturing in itself is not a problem, but the idea that it should be associated only with women, not men, is what makes it a gender-stereotyped image. The theme of nurturing in the film *Kapfupi* (2009) is manifested through a woman whose job is to cook and sell *sadza* (thick porridge) at a shop owned by Jah Bless. One of the central issues is that whenever women are depicted in the film as earning a salary, their jobs are often relegated to menial jobs that are a reproduction of those jobs that women do at a domestic level.

In fact, domestication in itself is a patriarchal frame that socialises women into thinking that they cannot act outside the confines of the home environment. In the film, Bonjisi and Kapfupi hatch out a plan to evade paying money for the food they have eaten. Their trickster antics are clearly reflected in these words: "*Aaah, so. Amai munobhowa sitereki. Ko chii ichi chamaita. Tarisai bvudzi iri riri musadza*" [Aaah, what is this? Mother, you are reckless. What is this that you have done? Look at these strands of hair in the food]. The woman is not given enough time to explain her side of the story. Rather, the manager quickly takes the two boys to the director's office where it is decided that the woman must be fired. In yet another scene, Marabha lies to a girl, telling her that he stays in the low-density suburbs, in order to win her love. It is acceptable in the Shona culture and idiom to lie to a woman so that one's proposal of love is taken seriously: "*Rume resinganyepi hariroori*". [A man who does not lie will not marry a woman]. To confirm the practical application of the idiom, Marabha says to the girl: "*In ndinogara kuG West Mahalape kunogara mabhozida ane salt. Uye ndine train yangu inofamba mutara nemagonyeti akawanda ....*" [I stay in G West Mahalape where the rich stay. I have my own train and I also possess big trucks ....]. The way the girl is easily convinced can give the impression that women do not take their time to analyse situations. They are over-



whelmed by the emotional impact of love so that they are deluded. But this kind of mentality is informed by the way women are socialised to feel that they are the underdogs. In fact, Johnston argues that through the mainstream cinema, “a woman represents not herself” (1973: 25-26) but is portrayed as an extension of patriarchy very deeply embedded in traditional values. Fathers as implementers of those values are not questioned about their decisions for the female child.

Although in the film *Kapfupi* (2009) female characters are accorded a broader frame within which to exercise their freedom, that space is heavily policed by male characters. For example, Marabha threatens to beat his girlfriend Precious if he sees her with another Kapfupi. Furthermore, Precious’s ways of exchanging boyfriends creates a sense of instability and lack of responsible decision-making always associated with women. Moreover, Precious’s lack of clear vision makes her narrative fail to transcend the exploitative frame that is imposed on her kind by the discourse of patriarchy. Contrary to this kind of portrayal, the Precious who is in the film *Mwanasikana* (1995) is endowed with a “voice” that speaks for women emancipation – a “voice” that reawakens society to the exigency of addressing gender inequalities between men and women.

### ***Nhasi tave nehama* (1993): Exploring Gender Problems Caused by HIV/AIDS**

*Nhasi tave nehama* (1993) is a film framed around the problem of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. At the centre of controversy is Shupikai who is married to Rusere. The couple has two daughters. A third daughter has just died of an HIV/AIDS-related disease. Despite the reality of AIDS afflicting the couple, Rusere still insists on having more children: “*Ko hatichaite here vamwe vana?*” [Are we not going to have other children?]. Shupikai is quite aware of the dangers of having more children when it is confirmed that they are infected with HIV. She tells Rusere that it is no longer safe to have more babies when she replies: “*Mwana wedu akafa neAIDS*” [Our child has died of AIDS]. Rusere feels that as father his authority should not be questioned. He expects Shupakai to be a docile woman who simply does what she is told to do: “*Unoziva here kuti uri kutaura nemurume wako?*” [Do you know that you are speaking to your husband?]. Gaidzainwa (1985) writes about how the discourses on women docility have been institutionalised in the Zimbabwean society and culture so that an attempt by women to break away from this bondage is not tolerated. Whenever a family encounters a problem, men are quick to point out the women as the culprits. For example, when Shupikai advises Rusere to stop drinking beer for the reason that it will compromise his health, she is actually blamed for having caused the death of their child: “*Iwe ndiwe wakazvara mwana akafa saka ndiwe une*



*AIDS*” [You are the one who bore a dead child so you are the one with AIDS]. Rusere’s speech is symptomatic of the belief found among some Zimbabwean men who have been socialised to think that women are carriers of diseases. A woman becomes a metaphor of disaster, and the language that describes her condition of being is framed within the discourses of social abjectivity.

In the film, the masculine character who denies the reality of AIDS, Rusere, contrasts sharply with a practical approach adopted by Shupikai. Actually, Shupikai believes that it is possible to live positively with the disease by seeking advice from other victims of HIV/AIDS. When she visits her friend who also has the disease, she receives messages of hope: “*Munofanira kushanda pamwechete kwete kupomerana mhosva. Chero upi zvake munhu anogona kubatwa neutachiona hwe HIV/AIDS. Vamwe vakadzi vanobva vatiza varume vavo. Kukurakura kunoyamura*” [You should work together rather than blaming each other. Any person can be infected with HIV/AIDS. Some women run away from their husbands. Dialogue is important]. The conversation between Shupikai and her friend is provided by the film director as a clear statement to portray that *problems* associated with AIDS cannot be solved if couples blame each other without entering into dialogue. The idea of dialogue is extended further when in the film Shupikai and other women discuss ways of keeping their health safe. However, at home Rusere is very dismissive of any advice that his wife gives him regarding the idea of *living positively* with HIV/AIDS: “*Saka clinic ndiyo yave kundiudza zvekuita mumba mangu. AIDS chirwere chavakadzi nemahure. Ini handinei nazvo*” [So the clinic is now the one telling me what to do in this house. AIDS is a women’s disease and prostitutes’. I have nothing to do with the disease]. In gender discourses, a *hure* or prostitute exists in unmarked territories. She has transcended the boundaries controlled by men usually defined by categories such as “wife” and “daughter” (Chitauro, Dube & Gunner 1994). It follows that a woman referred to as a *hure* is considered independent and therefore dangerous. The attitude and psyche that arrest the image of *hure* is male-sanctioned and thus the word is spoken with a woman in mind, not a man. However, AIDS as part of culture, with its fluid rather than static character, allows for the contesting of discourses of women domination and the challenging of power relations. For example, in Zimbabwe there is an increasing number of women who have taken up the role of looking after the family in cases where the husband is seriously ill or has died of HIV/AIDS. To counter the narrative of male dominance reflected through the character of Rusere, the film provides Baba Munyaradzi, who is prepared to discuss the issue of AIDS with his wife without constructing prejudices against women. The synchronic discourses of Baba Munyaradzi are clearly captured in his statement: “*Mukadzi nemurume vakasave nekuvimbika, muchato onobva waparara*” [If a married woman and man are not faithful to each other, the marriage will be destroyed]. When the film frames the character of Baba



Manyaradzi it is acknowledging that in society and culture there are some men who have moved beyond the constricting boundaries of patriarchy that define gender roles in stereotyped terms. In other words, for positive behaviour to occur in the face of HIV/AIDS men and women should be faithful to one another. Even the traditional healer who is revered for his knowledge of traditional medicines confesses that AIDS is well beyond his ability to cure when he says: “*Kana ini pano handigone kurapa AIDS. Ukaona munhu anoti anogona kuirapa murevi wenhema. Ndinogona kukupai mishonga yekurapa zvirwere zvinototoro mikana yekuti munhu ane AIDS chete*” [As I stand here I cannot cure AIDS. If you hear someone saying that he/she can cure the disease he/she is telling lies. I can only administer medicine that can cure opportunistic diseases that afflict someone with AIDS]. The traditional healer, being male, demystifies and challenges some traditional healers in Zimbabwe who claim that they can cure HIV/AIDS. By extension, the traditional healer also exposes the weaknesses of those men who use their knowledge of traditional medicine to control women.

When Shupikai runs away from Rusere to find peace in the rural areas, she is confronted with another challenge. Here she finds out that her neighbour, Admore, is dying from AIDS, alone. Together with other women, Shupikai attends to household chores as well as helps Admore to seek medical attention. Women show their determination to fight HIV/AIDS through the following song:

*Isu madzimai emuZimbabwe takamirira zvakawanda*

[We, the women of Zimbabwe, we  
represent so many things]

*Kurema kwazvo kunoda madzimai*

[Whatever burden needs women]

*Hazvina mhosva nyangwe zvorema takamirira zvakawanda*

[Even if there are so many

difficulties, we stand for so many things]

Through the above song the identities and roles of women are pronounced. If patriarchal frames of reference were to confine women to the sphere of domesticity, the song gives women multiple voices to describe the various duties that they assume in society and culture. Put in another way, a woman can be a mother, wife, worker, professional and a leader. According to the song, the moral struggle of women is invested within the philosophy of serving humanity not individuals, and that kind of position is enunciated through the following: “*Kurema kwazvo kunoda madzimai. Hazvina mhosva nyangwe zvorema takamirira zvakawanda*” [Whatever difficulties individual members of society face, women can solve them. It does not matter how serious the difficulties are, women have many ways of solving them.] Song is used here as the intertext within the overall discourse of gender



struggles. On another level, the song functions as an *ideologeme* (de Toro 1995: 37) in which the utterances of women refer to the texts that focus on subverting patriarchal structures and strictures that impede participation and advancement by women. An *ideologeme* is the common function which links a concrete meaning of song to the structure of film within the inter-textual space. The dialectic of song in film and film in song in *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993) provides multidimensional ways of carving out the struggles of women in Zimbabwe. The struggle endured by female characters in trying to change the behaviour of their male counterparts for positive change is symbolised by a happy ending of the film that brings Rusere and Shupikai as a family intent on working together for self-sustenance.

### **Film and the Transgressive Nature of Language**

Film is a cumulative product that involves use of spoken words, audio-visual elements of communication and non-verbal signs such as gestures and characters' costumes. All these constitute the film's semiotic system that constantly questions the protocols of representing reality at any given time and space in film. Derrida's (1973) theory of the instability in language suggests that the nature of spoken words and images in film is such that they "differ" and "defer" meanings in every act of enunciation. Put differently, a film's text is a labour of (re)construction by which the film writes its text, modifies and combines its codes, playing some codes off against others – and thus constitutes its system. The system is a product of (de)construction that is a form of textual exegesis – the unpacking of film text(s), a way of interrogating unspoken discourses while aware of the text's discursive heterogeneity. The concept of film "text" – etymologically "tissue" or "weave" – (Stam 2000: 186) conceptualises film not as an imitation of reality but rather as a (re)construction of reality. What it implies is that the stable narratives of patriarchy advanced by characters in *Mwanasikana*, *Kapfupi* and *Nhasi tave nehama* can be challenged by the ability of language to assume a variety of textual interpretations. The understanding is that once a filmic sign is produced, it begins a life of its own independent from its producers and interpreters. Ponzio (1993) notes that the sign's constitutive plurivocality with respect to meaning creation is determined by its state of *otherness*. Otherness implies difference; the sign's ability to change to new forms of meanings – themselves free from ideological containment imposed by frames of patriarchy. Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) theory on the rhizome establishes surface connections and contradictions in imaginative narratives. Rhizomic interpretations motivate a film reader in that "if a rhizome is broken at any point it resumes activity and continues growing, making lines of subterranean connections" (1983: 43). What it implies is that audiences of film are capable of making their own value judgement on



*preferred* readings imposed on them by film producers. However, filmmaker's ways of representing social reality can acculturate viewers to intended norms and values. The idea that film language is productive as well as persuasive, situational as well as pervasive (McCoy 1993) adds an interesting dimension to Foucault's contribution on how power is exercised by film-makers to convince audiences about the ideological goals of a film.

In the films under scrutiny, if the Shona language had been used with the intention of reflecting male dominance over female characters, the same language produced an excess of meanings that began to interrogate essentialised ways of perceiving gender roles. As a frame in itself, the nature of spoken language and visual images that a film narrative adopts can prohibit or liberate the meaning potential of a particular film. On the one hand, it can be assumed that since *Mwanasikana* (1995), *Kapfupi* (2009) and *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993) use Shona as a medium of communication the films are easy to interpret. However, on the other hand, this assumption can be an oversight that does not consider the complex ways in which films construct social reality or how film images can restrict certain meanings from entering the public domain. For example, the visual and stylistic rendition of the film *Kapfupi* (2009) provides much entertainment, but the way the Shona language is used to drive the theme of the film ahead is less plausible when compared with how it is used to express meaning in *Mwanasikana* (1995) and *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993). Furthermore, the film *Kapfupi* (2009) uses Shona to frame female characters that do not involve alternative ways to confront the source of their exploitation while in *Mwanasikana* (1995) and *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993), Shona has been used effectively to advance discourses of women emancipation. In all films, to choose the Shona language is to select audiences and to exclude those who do not understand the language. To this extent, Shona in itself becomes a barrier that prevents cultural meanings from reaching out to those audiences that cannot understand the gender struggles depicted by the films. However, using the Shona language as a medium of communication, the films *Mwanasikana* (1995), *Kapfupi* (2009) and *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993) have succeeded at various and often contradictory levels to frame gender struggles found within Zimbabwe's society and culture.

## Conclusion

This article explores how the three films *Mwanasikana* (1995), *Kapfupi* (2009) and *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993) handle the cultural roles ascribed to men and women by the Zimbabwean society. It is argued that in Zimbabwe there is a great deal that needs to be done to challenge gender-stereotyped images. *Mwanasikana* (1995) depicts how the female child is still viewed as the underdog who should not compete on equal basis with the male child.



This mentality stems from patriarchal influences that cannot be comfortable with the idea of empowering women. But an attempt by patriarchy to put a constrictive frame around women advancement actually incites audiences to question the basis of its power. It is argued that prioritising the female child only for marriage is a violation of human rights as individuals have the right to choose what they want with their lives as long as those rights do not impinge on other people's rights. However, the revisionist sensibility of *Mwanasikana* (1995) in which the female child is accorded the opportunity to pursue education gives a breath of fresh air to the stifling discourses of patriarchy. Contrary to this kind of approach, the film *Kapfupi* (2009) presents its female and male characters with limited alternatives for facing life challenges. The film *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993) portrays the difficulties encountered by families afflicted with HIV/AIDS. The difficulties are compounded by male characters that use their authority as fathers to deny the reality of AIDS by viewing it as a woman's disease. The narrative of the film makes it clear that AIDS is a problem that should not be blamed on individuals. The disease knows no age, gender, class or race. The vision that is provided to the female characters in *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993) is quite redeeming through its ability to fracture male-dominated discourses that underrate the capacity of women to effect social change. In terms of artistic vision, *Nhasi tave nehama* (1993) provides more plausible frames than either *Mwanasikana* (1995) or *Kapfupi* (2009) within which to conceptualise gender struggles in the Zimbabwean society and culture. In a nutshell, what the three films in the Shona language have given us is a glimpse of those grey areas in Zimbabwean society that should constantly be addressed and debated for emancipation of women and the development of society as a whole.

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