

Self-Defence and Battered Woman Syndrome in a Selected isiXhosa Short Story

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Abstract

The fact that there are continued public reports of abuse and violence against women and young girls in South Africa, and elsewhere in the global village, is enough to underline that gender-based violence (GBV) is profoundly entrenched in social and human settings. Considering this, it stands to reason to recurrently contest this challenge relying on isiXhosa literature, among other mechanisms. In fact, violence against women and young girls has been regarded by several scholars, government and non-governmental organisations, and community members as an international crisis. On account of this, this article critiques how self-defence and battered woman syndrome (BWS) are reproduced in a selected isiXhosa short story titled “Umfazi Akayongqongqo” (A woman is not a punching bag). This short story is recognised herein as a primary source of data, while African feminist theory is applied to uncover the complexities pertaining to self-defence and BWS as they emerge as a direct consequence of prolonged incidents of GBV. The findings and discussions indicate that prolonged occurrences of abuse and violence towards women and young girls have the potential to lead to situations where victims of GBV cannot tolerate it any longer, hence resulting in retaliation, self-defence and BWS. While there are contrasting views concerning self-defence and BWS, particularly within the legal frameworks, this article underlines the necessity to strike a balance between these important social, cultural, and political issues in a bid to reasonably solve the conundrum—GBV. The concluding remarks present possible future scholarly discourses that may be considered in an attempt to address this challenge. For instance, it would be prudent to consider ways to decolonise isiXhosa literary scholarship, focusing on re-evaluating traditional canons, challenging Eurocentric voices and promoting indigenous African knowledge systems (IAKS). By the same token, it would be perceptive to examine how isiXhosa literature mirrors and responds to the legacies of

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colonialism, including matters related to identity, language, and cultural representation.

Keywords: African feminist theory; battered woman syndrome (BWS); gender-based violence (GBV); isiXhosa short story; self-defence

Contextual Background and Introduction

South Africa, like many parts of the global village, has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in the world (Moletsane 2023). The reasons for this conundrum are multifaceted and require multi-collaborative efforts in a bid to find reasonable solutions. Women and young girls recurrently face physical, emotional, and sexual abuse within their households and communities (Diko 2023a). The levels of violence against women and young girls have been described as an international crisis by several scholars using empirical evidence (Diko 2023a; Ndlovu et al. 2022; Oparinde and Matsha 2021). Statistically, one in three women in South Africa experience physical or sexual assault, and an alarming number of them face atrocious murders (Diko 2023a). In the same vein, battered woman syndrome (BWS) is a recognised psychological condition that can adversely affect women and young girls who have experienced long-term abuse. In addition to this, many women and young girls in post-apartheid South Africa, especially those of the lower class, find themselves in abusive relationships and marriages (Walker 2006). As a result of this, BWS plays a central role in their responses to the abuse. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the continued public reports of abuse and violence against women are enough to underline that there is, unequivocally, a challenge in addressing this conundrum. It is this reason that induces the initiation of this scholarly discourse relying on one selected isiXhosa short story.

By the same token, in the vast tapestry of modern isiXhosa literature, short stories have always explicated the multifaceted and ever-evolving dynamic forces of amaXhosa society as well as generally lived experiences of the global village. Within this vast literary landscape, isiXhosa short stories continually serve as vehicles for critiquing pressing social challenges, transcending the confines of mere entertainment to illuminate urgent matters of human times. On account of this, it can be accepted that the importance of isiXhosa short stories lies in their ability to challenge and confront profoundly entrenched human and social adversities such as GBV, among others. These short stories serve as powerful conduits through which the subjugated voices of women and young girls in society can find expression and validation. They offer a unique lens through which one can explore, critique and transform prevailing social norms and expectations. Effectively, the importance of isiXhosa literature in this regard cannot be overstated, as it provides a platform for narratives that might otherwise remain silenced or obscured.

With this contextual background in mind, this article applies African feminist theory to one selected isiXhosa short story titled “Umfazi Akayongqongqo” (A woman is not a

punching bag)¹ (Tshayana 2022) with the aim to uncover how challenges of BWS, GBV, and women’s rights are reproduced. Whereas the short story encompasses a range of sociopolitical and cultural issues, the centrality of this article is on the realms of self-defence and the enigmatic BWS. All these issues are meticulously interwoven in the short story and necessitate scholarly deliberations in a bid to contribute to the transformation of women’s and young girls’ rights in the 21st century and beyond. The rationale for undertaking this scholarly endeavour is that the selected short story provides expository perspectives into the roles, expectations, and power dynamic forces between men and women. In view of this reality, this article allows for an investigation of how gendered experiences and prejudices are mirrored and contested in this short story. This denotes that critiquing self-defence and BWS hereunder allows for an exploration of how these themes are perceived, interpreted, and contextualised within different South African communities, with special reference to amaXhosa.² This process of critiquing helps uncover cultural intricacies and challenges stereotypes or misconceptions about amaXhosa communities.³ In fact, Diko (2023a, 97) stresses that modern isiXhosa literature has a long tradition of serving as a forum for social commentary and critique, among other matters. For example, *Ityala Lamawele (The Lawsuit of the Twins)* ([1914] 1981) by Samuel Krune Mqhayi offers social, ethnological and political commentary on the legal system of amaXhosa, while *Amajingiqhiw’ Entlalo (Social intricacies)* (2022) by Anelisa Thengimfene offers social, political, intellectual, and historical commentaries hinging on the contemporary context. In consideration of this, critiquing self-defence and BWS in the selected short story enables literary critics to unravel prevalent social concerns, such as BWS, GBV, and women’s rights. This task can potentially serve as a call to action or evoke dialogues on necessary societal transformations. In pursuit of the aims of this article, the objective is to empower survivors and advocates considering that it attempts to validate the experiences of GBV victims and underlines the significance of their agency in pursuing safety and justice in the South African context and elsewhere in the global village. This empowerment can lead to increased support and resources for GBV survivors. Over and above this, critiques of self-defence and BWS often extend to the legal and policy realms (Walker et al. 2023). For this reason, by underlining flaws or gaps in legal systems and policies related to domestic violence, scholarly dialogues such as this one can advocate for reforms that better protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable through scholarly discourses. With this in mind, the next section concentrates on the review of literature concerning the phenomenon of interest herein.

¹ Going forward, this article will use the original version of the short story’s title—“Umfazi Akayongqongqo” (Tshayana 2022)—and consistency will be maintained throughout the deliberations.

² AmaXhosa, commonly referred to as the Xhosa people, are a Bantu ethnic group native to Southern Africa, primarily residing in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. They are one of the largest ethnic groups in South Africa and have a rich cultural heritage and history.

³ Although this short story is produced in isiXhosa, it must be noted that issues concerning the abuse of women and young girls have no race or ethnicity.

Literature Review

This section has two components. The first component deals with the review of literature pertaining to the notion of self-defence. The focus is on how women and young girls defend themselves against the oppressive systems of gender, and how this concept is generally understood. In the process, notable discourses that pertain to this phenomenon will be synthesised and evaluated. The second (last) section deals with the review of the literature concerning BWS and how it manifests under the occurrences of GBV or gender oppression.

Self-Defence

GBV remains a pervasive global issue that adversely affects millions of women and young girls, threatening their physical, emotional, and psychological security (Diko 2023b). Among the myriad responses to GBV, self-defence has emerged as a crucial dimension of women's and young girls' empowerment and protection (Thuma 2015). This suggests that in addition to broader societal and systemic responses to GBV, empowering individuals through self-defence training is seen as a valuable strategy. This is based on the premise that the issue of GBV is multifaceted and various dialogues such as this one contribute to the discourse on empowerment and protection. Feminist scholars such as Hassim (1993), Yingwana (2018), and Nkealah (2022) have highlighted the importance of self-defence as a mechanism for women's and young girls' empowerment in the face of GBV in Africa and beyond. Concerning this, self-defence programmes have been regarded as a means for women to reclaim agency, resist oppression, and challenge the power dynamic forces perpetuating violence. The setback of women to defend themselves against gender-oppressive structures has adverse ramifications. It can result in increased vulnerability to physical harm, perpetuation of GBV, and obstructed empowerment and autonomy. It is for this reason that Diko (2023b) underscores the link between self-defence training and increased self-esteem and self-efficacy among survivors. This denotes the advancement of women's confidence and improvement in their ability to protect themselves and make informed decisions, potentially contributing to their overall welfare and recovery (Thuma 2015). It must also be indicated that the discussion around protecting women and young girls from GBV should not be necessary because GBV should not occur in the first place. This viewpoint underscores the importance of preventing violence rather than simply addressing its consequences. It suggests a need for broader societal changes, cultural shifts, and proactive measures to eliminate the root causes of GBV.

In parallel, intersectional perspectives highlight that self-defence experiences are shaped by multiple intersecting identities, including race, class, sexuality, and disability (Law 2011). This indicates that the effectiveness of self-defence strategies is influenced by these intersecting factors, underscoring the necessity for tailored approaches. In essence, self-defence training enhances women's physical and psychological preparedness to respond to GBV incidents (Thuma 2015, 59). This is on account that self-defence skills can potentially reduce the vulnerability of women and young girls

and embolden them to take immediate action in threatening situations. In support of this contextual framework, Cermele (2004) claims that self-defence education emphasises risk reduction and situational awareness, which can contribute to preventing GBV incidents from occurring in the first place. Indeed, this is factual on account that emboldening women and young girls with mechanisms to recognise and avoid potential dangers is a valuable component of self-defence training. Over and above this, GBV infringes upon the fundamental human rights and dignity of individuals. Every person has the right to live a life free from violence, fear, and intolerance (Yingwana 2018). Thus, preventing GBV in the African context and elsewhere in the world upholds and respects these inherent human rights. Furthermore, this infringement of fundamental human rights disrupts societal harmony and social cohesion (Boonzaier 2023). This means that communities free from violence are more peaceful, stable, and conducive to growth and development. Ultimately, it stands to reason to contend that reducing GBV advances a safer and more harmonious environment for all. With this in mind, I argue that intensifying legal mechanisms and accountability frameworks is central. Ensuring that perpetrators of human rights transgressions face legal consequences reinforces the commitment to justice and serves as a deterrent against future infringements. This is supported by Diko (2023b) who proposes that engaging in international collaboration and advocacy efforts can amplify the impact of addressing human rights violations, with special reference to women and young girls. Coordinated actions on a global scale, including diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and collaborative initiatives, may potentially contribute to a united front against such infringements.

Some critics report that self-defence places the responsibility for safety squarely on the victim rather than addressing the root causes of GBV (Diko 2023a; Govender 2023; Pillay 2023). As a result of this, there is a concern that placing focus on self-defence may inadvertently perpetuate victim-blaming ideologies (Diko 2023b). In fact, self-defence may not be a solution to this conundrum as access to self-defence training can be limited by factors such as cost, location, politics, and cultural obstructions. In indigenous or rural African communities, for example, access to self-defence training may be restricted due to various factors, including financial constraints (cost), geographical location (availability of training facilities), and political instability. This limitation could prevent individuals, especially those in subjugated or remote communities, from acquiring the skills needed for self-defence. In the same vein, cultural norms and value systems may pose obstacles to the promotion and acceptance of self-defence practices. Some indigenous or rural African communities might view self-defence as contradictory to traditional belief systems or may discourage the idea of individuals taking matters of personal safety into their own hands. This is confirmed by Mayeza and Bhana (2017) who postulate that ensuring that self-defence programmes are inclusive and accessible to all women and young girls, regardless of their backgrounds, remains a bone of contention. This is due to concerns that have been raised regarding the practical effectiveness of self-defence techniques in addressing GBV. Inevitably, Pillay (2023) suggests that these skills may not always be practical or effective, especially in situations of extreme violence or power disparities. These

discourses on the self-defence of women and young girls under GBV conditions reflect the multifaceted interplay and interconnectedness between empowerment, risk reduction and the challenges inherent in addressing gender oppression. While self-defence is a valuable mechanism for some women and young girls, it is not a panacea or complete solution. This denotes that accepting its limitations and potential pitfalls, scholars and practitioners must continue to explore innovative approaches that integrate self-defence strategies with broader efforts to mitigate and address GBV. Empowerment models rooted in feminist theory, with particular reference to African feminist theory, and intersectionality offer promising avenues for understanding the multifaceted nature of self-defence in the context of GBV and for advocating for a secure and more equitable world for women and young girls.

Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS)

BWS is a concept that has evolved over time to describe a pattern of psychological and emotional symptoms experienced by individuals, predominantly women and young girls, who are victims of long-term domestic violence and abuse (Walker 2006). This syndrome has been the subject of extensive research, legal debate, and clinical examination since its initial conceptualisation (Walker 2006, 143). It emerged in the late 20th century as researchers and clinicians sought to comprehend the psychological and emotional effects of chronic abuse on women and young girls in abusive relationships (Hamel 2018). It gained prominence following the landmark trial of Francine Hughes in the 1970s, where evidence of her abuse and psychological distress was central to her defence (Walker 2006).⁴ Consequently, Lenore Walker's pioneering work in the 1970s and 1980s laid the foundation for understanding BWS as a clinical condition resulting from a cycle of violence and abuse. Over and above this, from a legal standpoint, recognising BWS is crucial in cases involving victims of domestic violence. Legal frameworks that acknowledge the psychological impact of sustained abuse may inform decisions related to self-defence claims, protective orders, and sentencing (Valera 2018). From a clinical standpoint, recognising BWS is equally crucial, as it enables mental health professionals to provide targeted and effective interventions for survivors of domestic violence (Diko 2023b). This means that understanding the psychological

⁴ Francine Hughes, also known as Francine Wilson after her remarriage, was a real-life woman whose story gained national attention in the United States (US) in the 1970s. She was a survivor of domestic violence whose case played a significant role in raising awareness about the issue of domestic abuse and the legal responses to it. In 1977, Francine Hughes set fire to her abusive husband's bed while he was asleep in it, resulting in his death. She claimed that it was an act of self-defence and a desperate attempt to escape her abusive marriage. Her trial garnered attention because it raised questions about the legal system's handling of cases involving battered women who resort to violence against their abusers. Her defence team argued that she had suffered years of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband, James Mickey Hughes. The case prompted discussions about the concept of battered woman syndrome, which is a psychological condition characterised by the effects of prolonged abuse on victims. Francine Hughes was ultimately acquitted of murder charges by reason of insanity. Her case became a symbol of the challenges faced by victims of domestic violence and the need for a better understanding of the psychological trauma and stress experienced by survivors of abusive relationships or marriages.

ramifications of prolonged abuse is essential for clinicians in assessing and addressing the mental health demands of individuals who have experienced BWS. To the same degree, clinical recognition of BWS can potentially inform therapeutic approaches, allowing mental health practitioners to tailor their intervention strategies to the specific challenges faced by survivors. This may include trauma-focused therapies, counselling for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and support for rebuilding self-esteem and autonomy. Beyond this, clinicians can play a vital role in documenting and validating the psychological impact of abuse, which can be valuable evidence in legal proceedings.

BWS is characterised by a cluster of symptoms and behaviours that result from prolonged physical, emotional, financial, and psychological malevolence. These symptoms often include feelings of vulnerability, agitation, low self-esteem, and a perceived inability to leave the abusive relationship. Some of the key components of BWS include a state in which women and young girls believe that they have no control over their circumstances and that their actions will not change the abusive situation. This psychological behaviour is associated with a recognised pattern of abuse known as the cycle of violence, which includes phases of tension-building, acute violence, and reconciliation or honeymoon periods (Valera 2018, 735). Victims of BWS exhibit traumatic bonding, where they form a strong emotional attachment to their abuser despite the abuse. This trauma bonding can make it extremely difficult for them to leave the relationship (Valera 2018). Victims who are emotionally bonded to their abusers may fear the consequences of leaving, including potential retaliation or violence. This fear for their safety can further deter them from pursuing help or attempting to escape the abusive and violent situation.

In conjunction with this, the legal implications of BWS have been a subject of significant debate (Hamel 2018). In many jurisdictions, evidence of BWS has been used in criminal trials to support self-defence claims for women and young girls who have harmed or killed their abusers. This defence, in large part, has been based on the argument that the victim's actions were a response to a genuine fear for their life or safety (Yesufu 2022). At the same time, the admissibility and weight given to BWS evidence in legal proceedings vary by jurisdiction. Some countries and states have recognised BWS as a legitimate defence, while others have been more hesitant to accept it (Han and Wei 2023; Vakil 2020). For instance, legal precedents have been established in certain United States (US) jurisdictions that acknowledge the relevance of BWS in litigations of domestic violence. These precedents have influenced the legal landscape, making it more accepting of BWS as a defence strategy (Walker 2006). In contrast, certain European countries like France and the United Kingdom (UK) have been more cautious in recognising BWS as a defence. In some cases, courts may not give significant weight to BWS evidence when assessing a defendant's culpability for harm inflicted on an abuser (Mechanic 2023). With this in mind, recent legal developments have led to greater recognition and deliberation of the relevance of BWS in litigations of domestic violence. By means of a scenario, the treatment of individuals experiencing BWS typically involves a multidisciplinary approach that includes mental health

support, legal advocacy, and social services (Stephey 2023). In this regard, therapeutic interventions may focus on trauma recovery, empowerment, safety planning, and dismantling the cycle of violence. Having said that, I argue that South Africa should forthrightly recognise BWS within its legal framework. This acknowledgment could influence court decisions related to self-defence claims, protective orders, and sentencing, as it considers the psychological impact of sustained abuse. Through the same efforts, South Africa should establish specialised courts that handle domestic violence cases, guaranteeing that judges and legal professionals are well-informed about the intricacies of BWS. This can potentially lead to more informed and empathetic legal proceedings.

While BWS has been a valuable framework for understanding and comprehending the experiences of abused women and young girls, it has also faced criticism. Some argue that it pathologises victims and obscures the responsibility of abusers (Musick 2021; Schuller and Vidmar 1992). In addition to this, the syndrome has been criticised for primarily focusing on heterosexual relationships, potentially downplaying the experiences of LGBTQ+⁵ individuals and men who are victims of domestic violence and abuse (Diko 2023b; Musick 2021). In light of this, BWS has played a crucial role in shedding light on the complex dynamics of abusive relationships and marriages, and the psychological toll they take on victims. Despite ongoing debates and critiques, it has had a significant impact on legal practices and frameworks, victim support, and public cognisance of domestic violence. As research continues to evolve, it remains a critical area of scrutiny in the fields of psychology, law, literature, and social work, with the potential to inform more effective interventions and legal responses to domestic violence. On account of the challenges that concern self-defence and BWS, it is prudent that this specific article applies African feminist theory to “Umfazi Akayongqongqo” (Tshayana 2022) to form the basis of the progressing deliberations that affect women’s and young girls’ liberation, hence the next section.

African Feminist Theory

African feminist theory is a multifaceted and dynamic framework that examines the intersection of gender, culture, and power within the African context (Diko 2023b, 98). It operates as a critical lens through which isiXhosa short stories and other literary works such as novels, dramas, essays or poems are critiqued, buttressing the intricacies of women’s and young girls’ experiences, agency, and challenges in African societies. At its core, African feminist theory contests male-orientated norms and postcolonial legacies that have historically oppressed African women and young girls (Masenya 2016). It appreciates the multiplicity of African cultures, languages, and histories and emphasises the paramountcy of considering these factors when critiquing African literature, with special reference to isiXhosa literature. The application of African feminist theory in this article lies in the fact that it provides a fabric for comprehending

⁵ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning) and the “+” sign is often used to be inclusive of other identities and orientations that may not be explicitly mentioned in the acronym.

and addressing the unique gender dynamic forces, cultural complexities, and historical legacies in Africa, allowing for a more multifaceted scrutinisation of women's and young girls' experiences and social justice issues within the continent. In fact, it encourages women to challenge male-orientated norms, advocates for gender fairness, and drives efforts to improve the stature and rights of women and young girls in African societies. African feminist theory is more relevant now as it offers a lens to examine and address the unique intersectional challenges faced by African women, considering factors such as culture, colonial legacies, and socio-economic disparities. It provides a platform for amplifying variegated voices, challenging stereotypes, and advancing gender equity in a rapidly changing global context.

This theory places women's experiences, voices, and perspectives at the forefront of literary critique. Having said that, the discussions of this article, applying this theory, illuminate the roles of women as protagonists, ensuring that their narratives are heard and valued. In this particular short story, the roles, narratives, and voices of MaMntshilibe and Nosapho as two of the protagonists are given meticulous attention (Tshayana 2022). Given this, "Umfazi Akayongqongqo" (Tshayana 2022) is used to probe how it depicts and reinforces gender ethos, expectations, and conventions within amaXhosa societies, and at a broader social level. Bearing this in mind, African feminist theory critiques how these narratives and ideologies challenge or perpetuate traditional gender roles. It underscores that women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by factors such as race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity, as previously mentioned. Over and above this, it delves into the complex ways these intersecting identities impact the lives of women in isiXhosa short stories, and not necessarily excluding other forms of literature. Therefore, it stands to reason to regard isiXhosa short stories as reproducing instances of female agency and resistance against oppression. This suggests that isiXhosa short stories, when scrutinised meticulously, reveal instances where female characters exhibit agency and resistance against oppressive forces. In other words, isiXhosa short stories are rooted in the cultural and social context of the amaXhosa people. As literary narrative forms, these short stories reflect the lived experiences, traditions, and societal ethos of the amaXhosa community. On account of this, resistance against oppression implies that female characters in isiXhosa short stories may challenge or defy societal ethos and oppressive structures. This resistance could manifest in actions, decisions or behaviours that question or push back against the constraints placed on women within their cultural or social context. Fundamentally, African feminist theory, through its critique, celebrates instances where women in African literary narratives assert their autonomy and challenge societal constraints.

In contrast to this, hegemonic structures play a significant role in maintaining and perpetuating forms of oppression (Schell and Rodriguez 2000). In the context of isiXhosa short stories, among other genres, hegemony might be present in the societal norms, cultural expectations, and power dynamics that influence the lives of the female characters such as MaMntshilibe and Nosapho. This indicates that the idea of female agency and resistance against subjugation in isiXhosa short stories can be viewed as a

form of resistance against hegemony. Female characters challenging societal norms and subjugative structures can be regarded as attempts to disrupt the hegemonic control that dictates certain roles and behaviours for women. By the same token, cultural hegemony is a concept associated with the dominance of a particular set of cultural belief systems and practices that serve the interests of the ruling class (Iwara 2015). In the context of isiXhosa short stories, among other genres, cultural hegemony might manifest in the way gender roles are reproduced and reinforced. Female agency in these short stories could be a means of challenging or subverting cultural hegemony. As a matter of fact, the short stories themselves can be regarded as battlegrounds where hegemonic ideas are both fortified and contested. Having said that, the narratives may reflect and reproduce dominant ideologies, but they can also serve as spaces where alternative perspectives and forms of resistance are articulated.

In a nutshell, African feminist theory critiques male-orientated power structures and systems of oppression. It scholarly investigates how isiXhosa short stories, among other genres, reproduce and contest these power subtleties, as well as the consequences of resisting male-orientated norms. In turn, African feminist critique stresses the significance of inclusive storytelling as it encourages the inclusion of variegated women's and young girls' experiences, including those of LGBTQ+ individuals, women with disabilities, and women from various cultural backgrounds. In addition to this, it is crucial to bear in mind that African feminist theory extends beyond academia to advocate for social and political reform. It seeks to influence public discourse, policy, and activism by bringing attention to gender imbalances and promoting women's rights. In brief, African feminist theory operates as a critical framework that enriches the critique of isiXhosa short stories by prioritising female voices, interrogating gender ethos, exploring intersectionality, celebrating agency and resistance, critiquing patriarchy, promoting inclusivity, and engaging in social and political advancement. In view of this fact, by employing this theory, literary scholars and readers gain profound insights into the vast tapestry of women's and young girls' experiences within African and/or isiXhosa literature, contributing to broader discussions on gender, ethnology, and social justice. With this theory in mind, the findings and discussions of this article are presented in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

“Umfazi Akayongqongqo” (Tshayana 2022) exemplifies that, undeniably, GBV is a profoundly entrenched challenge in South Africa, and possibly, elsewhere in the global village. GBV encompasses various forms of violence, including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, and adversely affects women, young girls, children, and vulnerable populations disproportionately. This is because of a culture of toxic masculinity (Han and Wei 2023). In other words, a culture of toxic masculinity, characterised by the belief in male dominance or hegemony and the suppression of emotions, contributes to violent behaviour and the devaluation of women's lives. Toxic masculinity encourages aggressive and violent behaviour as a means of asserting

dominance or proving one's masculinity. This can lead to physical and emotional harm, both within intimate relationships and in society at large. The textual evidence below calls to attention a profoundly rooted incident where MaMntshilibe is physically abused by her husband, Sukwini:

Hayi tata, ebebuya pha kwamama uNomqhafuzo, enxilile, ze wabuza kumama uba kutheni emnika ukutya okungena nyama, xa umama ephendula, utata waphakama wamqhwaba ngempama, nomama waphindisa, bajijisana, wabe sele esiwa utata, esopha. (Tshayana 2022, 56)

(No father, my dad came back home from Nomqhafuzo drunk, and he asked my mother why she gave him meat-free food, when my mother answered, my father stood up and slapped her, and my mother retaliated, they wrestled, and my father fell, bleeding.)⁶

The above textual evidence is applicable to African feminist theory to examine an incident of domestic violence and self-defence within the context of African culture, with specific reference to amaXhosa. This theory acknowledges that individuals' experiences are configured by a multiplicity of intersecting attributes, including gender, culture, and socio-economic status. In this excerpt, the main characters' identities and actions are influenced by their roles within a patriarchal society. These characters are MamNtshilibe and Nosapho. This excerpt (re)produces traditional gender roles, where the father, Sukwini, is expected to be the head of the household and the mother, MaMntshilibe, is expected to fulfil certain domestic duties, such as preparing meals. This imbalance of power contributes to situations where women are subjected to violence when they challenge and do not live up to the expectations of these roles, as observed when MaMntshilibe retaliates. The mother's act of self-defence and retaliation against her abusive husband can be understood through the lens of BWS as a component of African feminist theory. BWS considers the psychological impact of prolonged abuse on victims, which manifests in moments of resistance when victims reach a breaking point. This means that one of the key components of BWS is the recognition that, despite MaMntshilibe's overall sense of powerlessness, there are moments when she resists the abusive environment. Conventionally, these moments of resistance occur when the victim reaches a breaking point, where the physical or emotional harm becomes unendurable.

By the same token, in the aforementioned textual evidence, when MaMntshilibe retaliates against her abusive husband by physically defending herself, it can be regarded as a moment of resistance within the contextual framework of BWS. Her act of self-defence is a response to the cumulative trauma she has experienced over time, which has reached a point where she is compelled to protect herself. In fact, victims of abuse may endure mistreatment for an extended period, hoping and assuming that the situation will improve, fearing reprisals or feeling trapped due to various factors. In any event, there comes a breaking point where the emotional and psychological toll of the

⁶ All translations provided by the author.

abuse becomes intolerable, prompting them to take action, such as self-defence or seeking help. Given this, I propose that in legal contexts, understanding BWS is essential for recognising that the victim's actions, such as self-defence, are responses to the cumulative trauma they have endured. On account of this, it can influence legal decisions, potentially leading to more compassionate and informed legal judgements that take into account the impact of abuse on the victim. In a nutshell, applying African feminist theory to the above textual evidence allows one to understand the complex interplay, including the influence of culture, gender roles, power disparities and the potential for resistance and empowerment. It underscores the significance of addressing GBV within African societies by challenging detrimental norms and providing support for survivors. As the short story progresses, the following excerpt becomes notable for African feminist scrutiny:

Uthe esajonge loo mbhodamo, wava ngesikhalo esasikrazula loo nzolo yobusuku, sivela endlwini enkulu apho kwaSukwini, kuvakala ukuba sesomfazi. Uxhabashile kananjalo ephuthuma, ngelithi uyonqanda uba uSukwini angabi saqhubeka nokubetha umfazi. Ugagene noMaMntshilibe emnyango, ejakatyula ethwele izandla entloko, esitsho ngesikrakra isikhalo. "Sukwini, indoda ayenzi kanje mfo ndini. Yhini na kwacaca ukuba umenza ingqongqo lo mfazi?" (Tshayana 2022, 58)

(While he was looking at the commotion, he heard a scream that broke the silence of the night, coming from Sukwini's large house, it sounded like a woman. He rushed to stop Sukwini from beating his wife. He met MaMntshilibe at the door, screaming with her hands on her head, crying bitterly. "Sukwini, a man does not behave like this, man. Why are you making this woman a punching bag?")

This textual evidence immediately addresses the challenge of GBV as one of the main characters, Chisana, rushes to prevent Sukwini from beating his wife, MaMntshilibe. This mirrors an acknowledgement of the prevalence of GBV within the community, a central concern of African feminist theory. The male character, Chisana, emerges as a voice of dissent and conscience in the narrative. He confronts Sukwini about his abusive behaviour, challenging the amaXhosa or African traditional gender norms that have allowed such abuse to persist. Chisana's intervention aligns with the African feminist goal of promoting women's rights and protecting them from violence and oppression. As a matter of fact, Chisana's statement, "Sukwini, a man does not behave like this, man" (Tshayana 2022, 61), invokes an appeal to a more positive and unprejudiced masculinity. Fundamentally, African feminist theory redefines masculinity to include qualities like affinity, respect, and non-violence, which contribute to healthier relationships. What is further important to observe from the aforementioned textual evidence is that it conveys empathy for the victim, as MaMntshilibe is depicted as crying bitterly. This illustrates the importance of recognising and addressing the emotional trauma experienced by women and young girls who are subjected to male violence, a concern central to African feminist discourses. Over and above this, the fact that others in the community are aware of Sukwini's abusive behaviour and intervene underscores the idea that GBV is not a private matter but a concern that affects the entire community,

directly or indirectly. On the grounds of this, African feminist theory underlines the role of collective action and community support in combating GBV. In the same vein, Chisana's intervention challenges patriarchal norms that condone or tolerate violence against women. It questions Sukwini's entitlement to use violence against his wife, emphasising that such behaviour is unacceptable and degrading. In essence, this particular excerpt from the short story aligns with key principles of African feminist theory, including the recognition of GBV, the significance of community involvement, the appeal to more equitable masculinities, and the challenge to patriarchal norms. It illustrates the role of modern isiXhosa literature in reflecting and critiquing gender dynamics and advocating for gender fairness within the South African context and elsewhere in the world. Similarly, the following textual evidence in the short story warrants some observation:

Igazi libe lingunjelo ukudlula intsika le kangqphantsi, futhi sele lithande ukurhwaqela. USukwini ube ethe tywaa phantsi kude kufuphi netafile eyaye isentla, ibubutyadidi ligazi phantsi kwakhe. Intloko yakhe ibe ijonge edongeni, engabonakali nokokuba usaphefumla kusini na. Uyithe jwii pha kude ingubo yakhe uChisana, kunye nomnquma lowo waye ewuphethe, wonda ngomhlobo wakhe. Lonke eli xesha uyamkhwaza, "Sukwini! Sukwini! Mhlob'am Sukwini!" koko akubuyi nempendulo. (Tshayana 2022, 59)

(There was a pool of blood, and it was beginning to clot. Sukwini was lying on the ground not far from the kitchen table, there was a pool of blood under him. His head was facing the wall, not even able to see if he was still breathing. Chisana threw away his blanket, and the olive tree he was carrying, he was sorry for his friend. All this time he was shouting at him, "Sukwini! Sukwini! My friend Sukwini!" but no answer came back.)

Analysing this excerpt within the contextual and theoretical framework of African feminist theory, while considering Sukwini's situation and the context of retaliation by his wife, illuminates various dimensions of gender subtleties and power relations within "Umfazi Akayongqongqo." In this passage, Sukwini's vulnerability and powerlessness are patent as he lies injured and unresponsive. The fact that his friend Chisana is calling out to him underscores the urgency of the situation and highlights Sukwini's helplessness. With this in mind, African feminist theory acknowledges that violence can (sometimes) be a response to oppression and abuse. This is against the backdrop that Sukwini's wife's attack on him, as described earlier in the short story, may be regarded through the lens of retaliation and self-defence, particularly since she has been a victim of abuse and was in fear for her safety. Fundamentally, the mention of a pool of blood and Sukwini's unresponsive condition raises questions about the psychological and emotional state of the characters involved—Sukwini himself and his wife, MaMntshilibe. Bearing this in mind, African feminist theory underlines the impact of prolonged abuse on women and the potential development of BWS. Given that Sukwini's wife was acting in self-defence due to an abusive relationship, this highlights the urgent need to address the cycle of violence and trauma. In other words, addressing

the urgent cycle of violence and trauma requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach, including prioritising the safety and well-being of individuals in immediate danger. The aforementioned excerpt further raises questions about the legal and social responses to domestic violence within the narrative's setting. Thus, African feminist theory calls for legal systems that are sensitive to the complexities of GBV and for social structures that provide resources and protection for survivors, especially women and young girls of the lower class. As the short story progresses, the following excerpt becomes worthy of African feminist critique:

Besele kuthe wayi-wayi ngabantu belali, kuba beve isankxwe sikaMaMntshilibe, besithi noko uqhelile ukubethwa akhale, akazange wakhala oluhlobo ebekhala ngalo ngale ntlwa. [...]

Kwangoko, la madoda ebengaphakathi endlwini asele esithi makuthathwe abafazi baye kungeniswa kwenye indlu, kusale amadoda odwa apho endlwini enkulu, kuba besithi le ndoda sele iyikhabile ibhekile. Unyanzelisile utitshala esithi unkosikazi wakhe makakhe avunyelwe ambone, kuba kaloku nguyena obenoba nolwazi oluphangaleleyo ngeempawu zokuphila okanye ukusweleka komntu. Aye ema entla amadoda, esithi akukho mzimba uza kuphathwa ngumfazi, linyala lehlazo elo, ithi indoda idunduluzile, ibhubhile, kuvunyelwe umfazi ukuba abhilabhile umzimba wayo. Uye wanikezela uNosapho, nekwa kungumongikazi kaMzimba, utitshala lowo, waphuma esiya kuhlala nabanye abafazi. (Tshayana 2022, 60–61)

(The people of the village had already begun to gather, because they had heard MaMntshilibe's bellowing cry, saying that even though she was used to being beaten and cried, she never cried the way she cried in this fight. [...])

Immediately, the men who were inside the house said that women should be taken and brought into another house, leaving only men in the big house, because they said that the man [Sukwini] had already died. The teacher [one of the male characters] said his wife should be allowed to see the body of Sukwini, because she is the one who has the most knowledge about the signs of life or death of a person. Men stood up, saying that a man's body that is handled by a woman is humiliation, citing that the man has left them, he is dead, and no woman is allowed to touch his body. Nosapho, who was the teacher's nurse [Mzimba] gave up, and went out to live with other women.)

Observing the provided textual evidence through an African feminist theory allows one to highlight several key themes and issues related to gender roles, power subtleties, and patriarchy within the context of a traditional African village, with special reference to amaXhosa. African feminist theory recognises the variegation of African cultures and experiences, and it strives to contest and dismantle oppressive structures while acknowledging the agency and contributions of African women and young girls. The provided textual evidence begins with MaMntshilibe's bellowing cry, emphasising her experience of being beaten and abused, and her excessive retaliation and self-defence in the situation of abuse. This signposts the pervasive issue of GBV in the short story and broader social contexts, which African feminists actively seek to address. In

addition to this, it is crucial to discern that MaMntshilibe's bellowing cry suggests a history of violence and abuse in her marriage with Sukwini. As such, African feminist theory helps one understand that such abuse recurrently mirrors broader societal norms that tolerate or even encourage violence against women and young girls in Africa. Consequently, MaMntshilibe's self-defence can be viewed as a reaction and response to years of suffering, highlighting the importance of accepting that women who resort to violence may be doing so as a means of survival rather than aggression. This suggests that her resorting to self-defence is not an isolated incident but rather a culmination of enduring hardship over time. Beyond this, by characterising MaMntshilibe's actions as a means of survival, the statement implies that her self-defence is a coping mechanism developed in response to a life-threatening or oppressive environment. This challenges stereotypes that may label such reactions as mere aggression.

In the same vein, it is crucial to bear in mind that the gathering of the village people in response to MaMntshilibe's bellowing cry underscores the communal nature of African and/or amaXhosa societies. In this regard, African feminist theory underlines the significance of community in addressing GBV and broader gender prejudices. Despite this, it is perceptive to question whether the community's response, in this case, is supportive or perpetuating patriarchal norms. This is because their act and behaviour to separate men and women in the aftermath of the incident reflect traditional gender roles, potentially reinforcing gender segregation and control. This implies that by segregating men and women after this incident, the community is implicitly affirming traditional gender stereotypes. It suggests that men and women have distinct roles and responsibilities that cannot overlap, with men being associated with authority and decision-making, and women being excluded from these spaces. This separation further implies that women are not trusted or allowed to participate in important decisions or activities, such as handling the body of a deceased man. This limitation on women's agency advances the idea that they are subordinate and lack the knowledge or competence to engage in certain components of community life. Effectively, the community's response to the incident, by segregating the genders, inadvertently normalises gender oppression and violence. It sends a message that violence against men or women is a private matter to be dealt with within the confines of gender-segregated spaces, rather than as a broader community issue that requires intervention and support for survivors.

Consequently, it can be contested and accepted that gender segregation can serve as a mechanism for maintaining patriarchal control over women's and young girls' lives. When men make decisions separately from women, it allows them to exert authority and maintain dominance in various dimensions of community life. This includes controlling access to resources, decision-making processes, and the narrative surrounding the incident itself. Regarding this, it is pivotal to bear in mind that by separating men and women, the community herein and in the broader social context misses an opportunity for open dialogue and reflection on the incident. In fact, it obstructs multi-collaborative efforts in dealing with social, economic, political, and

historical issues. One would recall that open conversations that involve both genders are central to addressing the root causes of gender oppression and working towards gender equality. It is prudent to note that as the short story progresses, there is an irony in the turn of events, as is evident in the textual evidence below:

Aphakame buphuthu-phuthu, sele esithi makukhwazwe uNosapho kulandlu ebihleli abafazi. Eneneni ufikile uNosapho, wake wathi ukubhilabhila uSukwini, wazifumanisa ukuba zikhona iimpawu zokuphila kuye, nangona intliziyo ibe ibethela ezantsi. (Tshayana 2022, 63)

(They got up quickly, saying that Nosapho should be called from the house where women were sitting. Eventually, Nosapho arrived at the house where she was invited, and when she tried to examine Sukwini, she realised that there were signs of life in him, even though his heart was beating low.)

The initial request for Nosapho to leave the house where Sukwini was based on reasons that women cannot touch the body of a deceased man mirrors traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms in many African societies. In this regard, African feminist theory critiques these norms as they restrict women's agency and promote male dominance. African feminist theory accepts the importance of considering multiple intersecting identities. In this case, Nosapho's gender is central, but her role and status within the community are also influenced by factors such as her social class and gender responsibility. These converging and yet intersecting identities shape how she is treated and perceived. African feminist theory advocates for women's liberation and agency. When Nosapho arrives at the house and attempts to medically examine Sukwini, it illustrates her agency and the importance of her presence in a critical situation—a situation that involves life and death. She challenges the initial exclusion and takes action. The reality that Nosapho is eventually called to medically examine Sukwini suggests that the community values her expertise as a professional nurse and recognises her as a valuable member, even if they initially adhered to restrictive gender norms. With this in mind, restrictive gender norms dictate how individuals should express themselves based on their assigned gender. This limits personal freedom and expression, obstructing individuals from fully exploring their interests and talents. This is in addition to the fact that restrictive gender norms adhere to a binary contextual framework of masculinity and femininity, neglecting the multiplicity of gender identities and expressions. This erasure contributes to the marginalisation of non-binary and gender-diverse individuals.

Over and above this, I argue that excluding women from central domains of society such as healthcare has significant and far-reaching implications, both for individuals and society as a whole. These implications reflect the broader consequences of gender polarity and intolerance. In respect of the selected isiXhosa short story, this exclusion conveys a message that women are less capable or valuable in healthcare tasks, reinforcing detrimental stereotypes and limiting career opportunities for women and young girls. I further contend that women, in general, bring unique perspectives,

experiences, and skills to society that are not represented when they are sidelined from central roles. This can negatively impact the overall effectiveness of the social and human experience. Regarding “Umfazi Akayongqongqo” (Tshayana 2022), it is clear that by sidelining women, healthcare systems miss out on a significant portion of the talent pool. In a broader context, this can impede the recruitment and retention of skilled professionals, potentially leading to staffing shortages and decreased healthcare capacity. Excluding women from central roles results in gender biases in research and policy development. On account of this, certain recommendations can be considered for future scholarly discourses, hence the next section.

Future Implications and Conclusion

Scholarly discourses on women’s self-defence and BWS are important for addressing issues related to violence against women and young girls and providing support for those who have experienced such violence. Bearing this in mind, there is a need for more longitudinal studies and dialogues that track the long-term outcomes of women and young girls who have participated in self-defence programmes or who have experienced intimate partner violence. These studies and dialogues can provide insights into the lasting effects of interventions and experiences. In contrast to this, issues around African feminist theory are crucial for understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by women on the African continent and elsewhere in the global village. It helps amplify marginalised voices, challenges patriarchal norms, and contributes to social, political, and economic equity. This indicates that exploring the intersection of gender, culture, and identity informs policies and intervention strategies that promote gender equality, women’s rights, and empowerment in Africa, fostering inclusive and sustainable development. On the other hand, matters concerning women and young girls should be given special attention by the national government as well as literary critics given that gender isonomy is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of a just and equitable society. Prioritising these issues can ensure that half or more of the world’s population has the opportunity to thrive, contribute to their communities, and reach their full potential. It can lead to stronger economies, healthier societies, and more inclusive sustainable development. By addressing gender disparities, communities create a fairer and brighter future for all.

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