

Portraying Women as the Other: Ndebele Proverbs and Idioms in the Context of Gender Construction

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine the space allocated to women in the Ndebele society using proverbs and idioms as a frame of reference. Proverbs and idioms as part of oral literature constitute a major means of defining women in a traditional set up. A people's language constitutes their worldview, how they conceive and perceive the web of relations between sexes; what they view as natural and immutable in their ordering of the world. Ndebele proverbs and idioms mirror a particular culture and tradition that imbues a spirit of submissiveness, perseverance and domesticity on women. This article argues that women are given the status of the Other in Ndebele society. Proverbs and idioms articulate the culturally scripted roles of women since this discourse defines gender relations. The language contained therein perpetuates the marginalization of women and relegates them to functional objects.

Introduction

A Whorfian view of language sees it as a people's view of the world, the way they grasp reality. It sees language as a mirror of social reality in manifest ways because it provides symbols and ideas about the world. Proverbs are part of the tools of language and 'language is our means of clarifying and ordering the world, our means of manipulating reality', Cameron (1985:108). An analysis of a people's language gives an insight into their outlook on life including the status that they ascribe to different sexes. To that end, this particular approach to language sees it as a reflection of a people's culture,

which is defined, as the totality of the way of life of a particular social group. WaThiongo subscribes to this approach and argues that:

Language carries culture, and culture, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (1994:16)

What comes across in this view of language is that language is human-made and is bound to be infused with the ideology and slant of those who wield the power of defining entities and relations. To buttress the above, Spears in the introduction to his dictionary, *NTC Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions*, observes that:

a culture's vocabulary contains values, fears, hostilities and mistakes. (2000: vii)

It is therefore argued in this article that the Ndebele language is rich with idioms and proverbs that reflect society's thinking and also influences one's thinking about the status of women. Through the analysis of proverbs and idioms, Ndebele society is confirmed to be a patriarchal society that is highly sexist. These proverbs were coined during the pre-colonial times hence the argument that pre-colonial Ndebele society was unambiguously male-centred. These proverbs and idioms therefore show 'gendered inequality' (McFadden et al., 1998:1). Kirk et al observe that patriarchy encompasses male-domination, male-identification and male-centeredness. It includes:

ideas about the nature of things, including men, women and humanity with manhood most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of Other. (2004:29)

Patriarchy therefore is about the arrangement of social life in the eyes of the dominant group. This particular culture privileges the exercise of power 'over' women. Most importantly the Ndebele

patriarchal society has the tendency to binarize and essentialize ways of thinking - it sees society in terms of subject and object, self and other, male and female. In keeping with the above de Beauvoir observes that:

Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. She is not regarded as an autonomous being ... She is simply what man decrees ... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her. She is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute - she the other. (1949:18)

A cursory glance at the Ndebele proverbs and idioms would confirm the phallogocentric nature of this society. However, Robinson et al (1993:114) points out that it does not mean that a woman will not totally have power in the entire Ndebele culture.

The problem of the Other arises out of the need to deal with physical differences, in this case biological differences of sex. It is occasioned by the need to try and speciously understand the other person and frame the appropriate manner with which to develop a relationship. It is premised on the ideas that one's group is better or more civilized than the other - that masculinity (self) is superior to the other (female). The self in this regard represents the ideal human qualities and the Other represents the negative. The concept of otherization is a stereotypical construct hatched for the purposes of hegemony. The Ndebele society otherizes the woman for purposes of oppressing, abusing and objectifying women in society as captured through selected proverbs and idioms. It subordinates women and places them on the periphery where they are eternally infantilized. In this proverbial and idiomatic discourse, Ndebele women are constituted as voiceless, ignorant, docile, functional objects,

undiscriminating, naive, immature, disempowered, irrational and, at times, self-destructively dangerous.

The images of women, whatever their origin, reflect deep-rooted cultural prejudices that border on misogyny. Ndebele proverbs and idioms argue that an ideal woman is one who is married (whatever the marriage environment), docile, coy, submissive, faithful and loyal to the male community when the same is not expected from the males. Thus the advent of colonialism simply sharpened and reinforced an already existent in egalitarian, male-centred society in Ndebele culture.

Ndebele proverbs and idioms as they relate to women and women's space

Ndebele is a language that is very rich in proverbs and idioms. Both proverbs and idioms mirror the elements of culture and in this article it is argued that they play a crucial role in defining women in marriages and in other spaces. A good number of Ndebele proverbs and idioms depict the marriage institution as an institution dominated by cultural values that do not allow women to fully realize and develop their potential. The idea of marriage is that a woman cannot survive on her own as an individual. In other words the essence of marriage is based on the cultural principles that women need to be looked after. This is why a man is quizzed on his power, strength and wealth whenever he asks for a woman's hand in marriage. A number of traditional questions are asked which include:

Uzamgcina na?
'Will you keep her well?'
Uzamvikela ezitheni na?
'Will you protect her?'
Kasoze alale ngendlala na?
'Won't she starve?'

The above traditional questions are popular in marriage negotiations and do not recognize the role played by women in a marriage. In fact, they reduce women to passive objects. They reduce them to dependent, docile and inactive individuals who have no input in the success of the marriage and the family at large. This belief is also cemented by the idiom that says *indoda yinhloko yomuzi* 'A man is the head of the family'. This is borrowed from the old tradition that men do the hunting and therefore they are breadwinners and the sole providers for the family. It is also observed that Ndebele society never interrogates the sexual fulfillment of women in marriage. The traditional questions discussed above negate and completely ignore the sexual aspects of marriage as Ndlovu observes:

This portrayal (of marriage)...seems to be premised on the traditional perception that a woman marries in order to be looked after by her husband. Being looked after is seen from a materialistic point of view - a secure home, enough food and clothes and having children. (2006:147)

From the above discussion, it is noted that as far as Ndebele society is concerned, marriage is not a partnership and it does not empower women, but it makes them first-class dependents of men. Marriage accords women little space and it disempowers them, reducing them to objects that are acted upon by men, the subject. Ndebele society assigns dominant roles to men and they are not expected to take orders from women, as they will argue that *yimi indoda* 'I am the man in charge'. Traditionally, the male figure is associated with authority in the family. When a man decides to listen to a woman, he is ridiculed and blamed for being effeminate. This insignificance of women is also captured by Ndlovu-Gatsheni when he argues that the:

Marriage institution entails a system of endless duties and obligations which women are expected to adhere to. It requires social

non-deviance, social uprightness, moral perfectness, voicelessness and above all, submitting unquestioningly to male leadership in the decision-making process at both household and community levels. (2003:239)

Once in marriage, there is emphasis on the need for the married women to accept and endure the difficulties in a marriage as part and parcel of the whole institution. This is why whenever they encounter marital problems, they are advised that:

Umendo kawuthunyelwa gundwane

'There is no way of foretelling one's marriage'

Umendo kawutshayelwa mathambo

'You cannot predict how your marriage will be'

Akulamuzi ongathunqi ntuthu

'From every home issues smoke'

All these proverbs recognize the fact that sometimes marriage can be stressful on the part of women. However, emotional and psychological stresses are confirmed to be conditions that a woman cannot avoid once married. By and large, the advice being channelled is meant to socialize women into an unfriendly and oppressive institution that is by nature violent and that the best remedy is to persevere. Perseverance in marriage is used as a tool of accepting ill-treatment and abuse as an integral part of marriage. Marriage is also viewed as a prison. Personal freedoms and characteristics are suspended. Assertive, aggressive and boisterous women are tamed by marriage into compromising, coy and quiet women of manageable qualities as one idiom declares that:

Umendo kawulaqhalahala

'Marriage will tame the wild young woman'

The philosophy communicated here is that marriage is sometimes a rehabilitation centre for vocal and outspoken women, which brings them to their proper place. This is a place of docility and in the process women become 'good' wives who are subservient to male authority and male domination. One is tempted to argue that Ndebele women marry to suffer and to be domesticated. Domestication in this article refers to women's exclusion from active participation in the public realm, as well as the general expectation for women to be humble, submissive and subordinate to men in society (Spears, 2000:229). If a woman decides to abandon her marriage, she is heavily castigated and labelled through idioms such as *umabuyemendweni* 'the one unable to manage her marriage' and *umayehlulwa ngumendo* 'the one defeated by marriage', 'a state that is so often seen as struggle and battle' (Zondi, 2005:31). These are derogatory expressions that have negative connotations which persuade women to stay in abusive marriages or to persevere in whatever predicament they may face. In other words, traditional Ndebele society does not encourage, recognize or recommend divorce no matter how abusive the marriage is to women. Women are therefore expected to endure trials and tribulations so as to avoid divorce since societal attitude forces them to believe that a married woman is respected compared to the one who is unmarried or divorced.

Each and every African society has its cultural moral code of behaviour and it is observed that among the Ndebele, male sexuality transcends this code. Ndebele proverbs show how men's numerous sexual escapades are sanctioned and endorsed by tradition. It is advised that:

Indoda libhetshu lomziki

'It is not wrong for man to have more than one sexual partner'

This proverb promotes sexual promiscuity as it allows men to have more than one sexual partner. It allows and finds it acceptable for a woman to share a man. In contrast, women are warned:

Ibele lendlela kalivuthwa

'The girl who gives herself cheaply to men will not get herself a husband'

The Ndebele society argues that sexual expressivity is undesirable in the female but condoned in the male. Women bear the burden of moral uprightness while men are allowed to seek numerous sexual partners freely. It suggests that Ndebele men are entitled to their fun, and therefore exempted from this sexual moral code while 'chastity is esteemed as the apex of feminine decorum'(Wakhweh, 1998:12). In other words, it suggests that 'sexual demure is the measure of a good woman's moral character' (ibid.), while the opposite is valued and encouraged among men. Sometimes, this is taken to the extreme by way of enforced virginity tests.

Among the Ndebele, it is observed that women are not protected from the predicament of pre-marital sex. They are forced by the language of their society to bear all the challenges and pains of men's irrational behaviour of impregnating them and refusing the responsibility. A child born out of wedlock is given a derogatory name especially if the mother decides to take the child to her marriage. He or she is referred to as *izalizelwe* while there is no corresponding term for a child brought by the male from his unsuccessful marriage or relationship. A woman who has children out of wedlock is also referred to as *imitha* and whenever she decides to marry she is already depleted in value and cannot attract good *lobola* 'bride price'. She is looked at in terms of her material worth, how much she will fetch from the would-be in-law. She is therefore a chattel commodified to and for the benefit of men. In contrast, there is

no such stigmatization with men. On fertility, it is also observed that the Ndebele 'traditional language and culture has never considered the possibility that infertility could be laid on the man's door, there is no male correspondence for a man's sterility' (Zondi, 2005:27). Sterile women are labelled *inyumba* and are scorned, spurned and disparaged for a condition not of their own making.

The position of a man in Ndebele society is well defined. A man is the undisputed head of his family and his wife occupies a subordinate position. The man is the master in his home. The society expects a typical Ndebele man to make the woman always conscious of her rightful, subordinate status. The Ndebele thus observe:

Ikhanda elixegaxegayo lofulele' abafazi

'The women will use the weak head for thatching'

This proverb means that a man should not be effeminate, weak-minded and wishy-washy lest the wife makes a plaything of him. In other words this proverb exhorts men to evince macho masculinity (*indoda sibili*) in running their households. Muchemwa and Muponde (2007: xix) expose that this kind of society is based on the insidious ways in which super-phallicism is predicated on physical power, which has led to a culture of women acquiescence, silence and fear. Kirk et al. argue cogently that:

To have power over and to be prepared to use it are defined culturally as good and desirable (and characteristically) 'masculine' and to lack such power or to be reluctant to use it is seen as weak if not contemptible (and characteristically 'feminine'). (2004:29)

Thus the proverb captures a fundamental belief about relations between man and women, husband and wife. It can be analogized to the partnership between a rider (master) and a horse. In this kind of partnership, the whip or knobkerrie is a constant presence

to discourage deviance or show who is in control. Cameron observes that this kind of thinking:

...teaches us what those who use it and disseminate it think women's place ought to be, second-class citizens, neither seen nor heard. (1985:91)

It can also be said that in the Ndebele patriarchal society, to be a woman is to occupy a marginal position as one idiom shows that:

Iqhude yilo elibika ukusa
'It is the cock that announces dawn'

This idiom buttresses the argument that women are not capable of initiating anything and that their presence is to take part or accept what men who initiate the marriage proposal have started. Women's feelings towards men are expected to be bolted up and they are exhorted to play to the dictates of society regarding courtship. To be a woman is to play second fiddle to men and to be negatively marked and pejoratively compared to them. It is not for nothing that general talk in Ndebele abounds about behaviour reserved for women. To be gossiping is to be feminine *ngokwabafazi*, (to be physically weak is to be *umfazi* 'a woman', talking at the top of your voice and laughing loudly *yikuba ngumfazi* 'to be a woman'). Thus the woman is everything that a man is not, that is being soft, fragile, warm, childish, frivolous and infantile.

In view of the negativism that characterizes the portrayal of women, one is tempted to ask why men got to such lengths to pay cattle for such liabilities. The Ndebele also philosophize that:

Induku enhle iganyulwa ezizweni
'A good knobkerrie is obtained in strange places'

Knobkerries from local trees become familiar in the course of time and this detracts from the beauty they are supposed to have. Plucked from far away places, the knobkerries attract the attention and admiration that go with the unknown or new. The analogy used is what is revealing. The proverb means that if one wants to get a good wife it is salutary to look from far afield because her faults would not be common knowledge. This means that a local girl who has been adventurous before marriage is never respected in her locality since everyone in the community knows about her past. However, this is unfair on the part of women because men's escapades are known but never curbed as they seek out women openly. Furthermore, a knobkerrie is a functional tool in the hands of men. They use it to get their way either in dead quarry or won fights. After that they enjoy the benefits on their own. Like a knobkerrie, it is argued here that a woman is a functional tool in the service of men. Kirk et al. buttress this when they observe:

.... to live in patriarchy is to breathe in misogynist images of women as objectified sexual property valued primarily for their usefulness to men. (2004:31)

The woman is seen as the trophy that enhances the status of men. The stranger, more outlandish or esoteric the knobkerrie, the greater the heap of praises showered on the man. At the same time, the larger the bevy of wives one has in a polygamous situation, the greater the respect one wields. Most pointedly the greater the number of children a woman has for a man, the greater her relative worth in the eyes of society. Given the nature of these proverbs therefore, it becomes difficult to run away from the charge of 'thingification' of women. This is not, of course to ignore certain proverbs that try to humanize the womenfolk. Those that denigrate them seem to preponderate over those that see them as human beings outside their sex.

The Ndebele also argue that:

Umfazi ngumkhonto osendlini
'A woman is a spear in the house'

This proverb refers to the fact that a woman is a person you cannot afford to trust at all. She is unpredictable, weak-brained and too easily overcome by emotion so that she acts irrationally even in ways that can be dangerous to the well-being of the home. She can, through her irrationality, in times of quarrel, divulge damaging information that destroys the home. The analogy of the woman to a spear has certain implications for the position of a wife in the home. Letherby poignantly captures the misogynistic attitude of Ndebele society to women when she observes that women are:

... more like children than adults in that they are immature, weak and helpless. (2003:23)

In view of the fact that women are potentially dangerous, this justifies the 'head' of the family, the man, to do certain things without consulting the woman, to arrive at certain crucial decisions that affect the whole family without the input of the wife. The Ndebele idiom *ngiyabona abantwana* 'I am going to see the kids' is instructive. It views the wife in the same light as the child, one who is an adult child with the aberration of growing physically but not cerebrally. Incontestably, these two aspects of Ndebele language reduce women to second-class citizens.

Allied to the essentializing description of the women captured above is the view of a woman as indiscriminating, wishy-washy and given to knee-jerk and scandalous tendencies. In order to capture this, the Ndebele say:

Umfazi kalahole
'A woman has no stranger'

Ndebele society was rigidly certain and coy in its stratification. It would have been outrageous for a woman of the upper class (*enhla*) to fall in love with a man of the lower class (*amahole*). Yet what was ordinarily scandalous for man was not so with women because they could fall in love with virtually anyone however contemptible and lowly esteemed. This justifies the subordinate status of women because it implies that, left on their own, they can bring ruin to society by polluting the purity of the clan or family because of their irrationality. Letherby captures this when she observes that:

Women are considered naturally weak and easy to exploit and, as the subordinate sex, women's psychological characteristics imply subordination. (Letherby, 2003:)

The quote serves to bring out masculinism as an attempt to naturalize patriarchal social relations as immutable in society. Haywood et al. have defined masculinism as an ideology that men use to justify and legitimate male positions of power. It is an ideology of patriarchy and:

stresses the natural and inherently superior position of males, while serving to justify the oppression and subjugation of females, ... of males being naturally more powerful, competent, successful and fundamentally different from females. (2003:10)

Women are not made of sterner stuff and they cannot be entrusted with weightier issues of the family or society because they are hare-brained and treacherous.

The evil influence of women in the running of the family and national affairs has long been taken as a truism in the Ndebele society. Accordingly, they say:

Umfazi kalankosi
'A woman has no king'

This sounds like a matriarchal situation where women have ruling power in the home and in the society at large. However, this is often used to explain the negative influence, the domination, and the audacity a woman has in influencing her husband to do her bidding. If a man in authority makes an unpopular decision, it is because he has succumbed to petticoat influence or bedroom politics. This implies that a man is too sober-minded to make an egregiously unsound decision. That is the domain of the women. This is what de Beauvoir(1949:18) means when she writes that the man 'is the subject, he is the absolute - she is the other'. This binarism helps to entrench patriarchy and separate masculinity as the be and end-all. This frames the woman as the negation of all that is male and lucidly independent. This construction of women in Ndebele society can be analogized to the biblical myth of the influence of Eve on Adam in the Garden of Eden. The Ndebele proverbs and the Edenic myth reinforce the patriarchal/traditional way of absolving the male of all blame and heaping it on women. Both are a product of the masculinist ideology and its privileging of the male. According to Moyana (2006:159), 'this is the flip side of the power of domination...denouncing the oppressed to make them monstrous'.

In the contemporary dispensation in Zimbabwe, this finds expression in the daily talk that Mugabe after the 29 March 2008 election wanted to gracefully exit politics. That this did not happen was because of the influence of Grace, the wife, who insisted that it was not the time to do that. Grace Mugabe becomes the more egregious villain who dissuades the old man not to retire and so culpability is mitigated on the main actor, Mugabe, who is male. In this configuration, Grace becomes a cunning, sly perfidious, Machiavelli who uses the bedroom to poison the decision of the President to the detriment of the nation. This proverb is thus applicable even on the current political situation.

The Ndebele society also believes in witchcraft. The art of witchcraft is passed from mother/grandmother to daughter/granddaughter. The belief, in Ndebele myths, in the riding of hyenas, ant bears and the nocturnal riding of husbands is the preserve of the women and not men. Witches, who are women, can wipe out the new family into which the men marry. They have to be careful in choosing a wife-to-be lest she decimates the whole family. Accordingly, the Ndebele have a proverb that says:

Umswane wembabala awungeniswe ekhaya

'The bowel contents of the bushbuck are not brought home'

This means that the daughter of someone who practises witchcraft should not be brought home lest she destroys the whole family. Thus witchcraft becomes the province of women whose main business is the disinterring of graves nicodemously and wolfing down human flesh. Men have more respectable chores of hunting, fighting and protecting the family. In the cities today young men often derisively dismiss old women as fit for going to the rural areas to hone up their skills of riding hyenas in the sadistic pursuit of innocent sleepers. They say:

Abahambe bayeloya ekhaya

'They should go and practise witchcraft at home'

To this end the female is the antithesis of the male - she is the stereotypical Other, the unfinished being who is left half way on the road to full humanity, being man and therefore less evil and perverse.

Conclusion

In the light of the foregoing analysis it can be argued that Ndebele society through its proverbs and idiomatic expressions trivializes and

disdains women. They are to be treated as eternal children, bothersome, given to wayward behaviour, suicidal, injudicious and inherently myopic. Such people therefore need the 'sagacious' guidance of men through patriarchy. It also means the claustrophobic confinement of women to domesticity is meant to inculcate the ideas of docility and submissiveness. It can therefore be cogently argued that colonialism simply reinforced and buttressed already existent patriarchal systems that denigrate women in the Ndebele society.

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