
Articulation of Women's Empowerment Through Poetry: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

This is a literary study which analyses poetic works produced by Zimbabwe Women Writers. It seeks to establish the position of women as far as articulation of their emancipation and empowerment is concerned. This is done in the light of the fact that Zimbabwe Women Writers is an organisation which represents both the achievements of women and an arena for women to speak out. The Ndebele anthology *Inkondlo* (1998) is analysed and in the course of the analysis, Spivak's (1988) argument of the woman being a subaltern who cannot speak is interrogated. It is the author's submission that contributions in the anthology *Inkondlo* actually deconstruct the feminist way of thinking which guides the publisher.

Key words: women, poetry, subaltern, oppression, feminism.

Introduction

The issue of women empowerment has been a major topic in post-independent Zimbabwe. Many avenues have been opened for women to participate as a step towards their empowerment. Among those avenues, there is business, education, industry and government. This article analyses the position of women literary artists and how they perceive issues to do with their empowerment. The article examines a Ndebele poetry anthology, *Inkondlo*, which was published by Zimbabwe Women Writers. A brief background of Zimbabwe Women Writers and its aims is given below in order to contextualise the anthology as well as the arguments that are advanced in this paper.

Zimbabwe Women Writers and *Inkondlo*

According to Tandon (2007), Zimbabwe Women Writers is the first women's organisation in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa as a whole to address gender imbalances through fiction writing and publishing. It is noted by the organisation that

prior to 1990, when Zimbabwe Women Writers was formed, the state and civil society silenced women and denied them the right to freedom of expression. The silencing was done under the auspices of tradition, culture and religious norms. Those who dared go against these cultural norms were labelled as westernised. Zimbabwe Women Writers thus aims at encouraging the reading of women's writings and to celebrate positive images of women in writing. One may aptly say that the Zimbabwe Women Writers approach is a feminist one where women feel they are unequal with men and seek to rectify the imbalances.

Inkondlo is a collection of poems written by Zimbabwean women between 1990 and 1998. It is an exclusively female collection of forty-two poems written by twenty-four female poets. According to Tandon (2007), Zimbabwean women from all walks of life contributed to the anthology. Various issues are handled by these poets and they include celebrating women's emancipation, calling upon women to fight for their cause and denouncing oppressive systems in society. According to Mguni (2006), Zimbabwe Women Writers has a mandate to fight for the rights of women and to give women a chance to speak for themselves. It is this 'speaking' which will be interrogated in this paper.

Conceptual framework

The study is guided by Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern whom she says cannot speak. The term subaltern can be described as a name for subordinate individuals and groups who do not possess a general class consciousness (Young 1990). Spivak (1988) argues that those who are oppressed, no matter how much opportunity they are given, fail to express their grievances. She asserts that a number of factors contribute to that failure to speak and these include the heterogeneous nature of the subaltern groups which compromises representation. Spivak (1988) concludes that the subaltern, especially the woman, who suffers subjugation as part of the oppressed society and at her level as a woman, cannot speak. This conclusion points to the fact that Spivak (1988) does not seek to celebrate feminism nor does she try to create a new feminism. What she attempts to do is to put questions before those who celebrate such approaches or theories and create an avenue for rethinking. Hence, this paper examines the perceptions that female poets in *Inkondlo* exhibit regarding women's empowerment and oppression.

A critique of *Inkondlo*

One of the main concerns in *Inkondlo* is the reclamation of women's freedom. Women want to be liberated from the male or patriarchal rule. This is despite the fact that women were not only oppressed by their male counterparts but were also treated badly by the colonial system. It is a characteristic of feminism that it does not

critically look at historical factors which have reformed the African cultural system. In essence, what feminists major in is more of a sex war than women's emancipation. However, these women do not realise that in as much as they embrace their emancipation, they still adhere to the traditional roles of women, the very ones that they purport to fight against. Precity Mabuya, in her poem *Ngingumfazi* (I am a woman), celebrates the changes that have occurred in society to the extent that women can also occupy various positions in society. At the end of the first three stanzas, she emphasises her womanhood:

Ngingumfazi, ngingumbalisi...
Ngingumfazi, ngingumongikazi...
Lawe manjinela, ngakuzala... (p.9)
(I am a woman, I am a teacher
I am a woman, I am a nurse
Even you engineer, I gave birth to you)

In the above lines, Mabuya clearly shows the traditional roles of the woman although she celebrates the achievements of feminism at the same time. Being a teacher is not a new experience for an African woman because the mother in the home is the primary educator to her children (Narismulu, 2003). The same can be said for nursing, as primary care is also given by a mother.

Giving birth is one of the gender roles that have associated women with low status according to the feminist discourse. It is ironic that Mabuya celebrates childbearing as a woman's achievement yet the feminist movement which is the driving force of the anthology does not view child bearing as an important achievement. This then poses a problem for the other women who visualise their freedom in a different manner where they see themselves as having no obligations towards the larger society to the extent of bearing children for it. Reverting to traditional roles cannot assist the feminists in achieving their targets, which thrive on the deconstruction of traditional systems. Mabuya also says;

Nansi impucuko ivela languquko
Iguquguquula okwasendulo
Lami sece, ngigodlana layo (p.9)
(Here is development and change
Changing the old ways
I have also engulfed it)

This is a blinkered view of development and change as the roles of the woman have not changed much but only the implements she uses have changed. According to Mama (1999), the education and the nature of careers that women were channelled to in the colonial era were meant to produce suitable wives for husbands who were

doing administrative work in the state. The system, therefore, ensured that these opportunities were in line with the traditional roles of women. Hence, Mabuya's celebration of womanhood does not necessarily use an avenue that endeavours to further the interest of feminism as her concerns are more aligned to the traditional roles of the African woman. However, whether these are feminist concerns or not, the major question is that of being able to speak as well as that of representation.

One would view Mabuya as failing to speak as she does not exercise agency for feminism, an approach which she is mandated to use in her poem. She might be liberal in thought but she seems to stick a lot to the subalternising factors for women. On representation, she embodies the interests of those women who have reached recognizable levels in society. She does not consider the achievements of those who are in the private sphere. The teachers and nurses that she refers to are people who have an education and have achieved some degree of professions in life. In her fifth stanza she says:

Lapho okutshayelwa indizamtshina, sengitshayela
Lapho okukhethwa khona abahle, ngikhona
Lapho okuthethwa amacala, sengiwayetha
Lapho okukhulunywa ezelizwe, sengixwayisa njalo (p.9)
(Where there are pilots, I am one of them
Where there is a beauty contest, I am included
Where the court sits, I preside
Where national deliberations are done, I advise too)

Here, Mabuya still shows bias in representing the female populace. The pilots and presiding officers have really got little to do with the role of women in rural settings where emancipation of the woman could mean a different thing. The demographics of Zimbabwe reveal that most women are still in rural areas. According to Scott (1995), the rural areas are where patriarchal control has remained strong. This argument would then attest to the fact that women in the rural areas are not beneficiaries of this emancipation as they cannot preside over court matters because they do not sit in the *dale* (village court). Even when national deliberations are done, the advice might not reflect the interest and aspiration of all classes of women because the women who are in politics operate from another level. Hence, the women considered to be of lower classes in society may be captured in the following stanza:

Ngingumfazi umntu qho!
Ngazala umongameli
Ngazala udokotela
Ngazala umtshumayeli
Lawe manjinela, ngakuzala (p9)
(I am a real woman)

I gave birth to the president
I gave birth to the doctor
I gave birth to the preacher
Even you engineer, I gave birth to you)

This stanza seems to represent women of all walks of life because giving birth is a biological duty expected of women in any society. However, if feminist movements such as Zimbabwe Women Writers also celebrate this duty, then the woman remains a subaltern because they cannot avoid being associated with their natural duty, a duty which gives them the position of the private sphere as mothers.

In *Umfelokazi*, Duduzile N Mlandeli interrogates a cultural issue that oppresses women. This is the issue of *Inzilo* (sorrow clothing) which requires that women who have lost their husbands should wear black clothes for a year. Mlandeli questions this cultural practice on why it should apply to women only and not men as well. There are some cultural practices that maintain the subaltern characteristics of the woman by putting her in uncomfortable situations which make her lose confidence as society views her in a strange manner. In the poem, Mlandeli expresses this point when she says;

Usemnyama bhuqe
Kusukela ekhanda kusiya ezwaneni
Kazihlubuli izembatho zakhe
Uze uzigoqe nje umnyaka
Lapha ahamba khona
Bonke bameba ngamehlo
Bonke baqhwebana ngaye (p.39)
(She is now pitch black
From head to toe
She does not take off that regalia
Until a year lapses
Wherever she goes
Everyone gives her a sly look
Everyone gossips about her)

It may be justified to say that Mlandeli speaks for the oppressed women. In this case, the cultural practice that is denounced by the poet affects all classes of the society hence, there is no social class that is ignored. Mlandeli attempts to be the voice of the voiceless. According to Furusa (2006), the process of taking away a woman's being through use of cultural custom and tradition de-womanises the woman. Therefore, Mlandeli has identified a cultural custom which de-womanises the woman.

A woman whose husband has died is treated unfairly as only her position as a wife is considered. There are other factors that need to be considered apart from the fact that

the woman is a wife. One is inclined to believe that for any endeavour to succeed, all possibilities need to be verified. In this example, the poet cites the environment in terms of the weather patterns. When it is too hot, there are no alterations to the custom. This results in the widow facing problems during the bereavement process. The poet says;

Kutshisa bhe, ukugeza akubonwa
Kuthiwa azile amanzi
Kutshisa vutha, iqhiye ithe mpa ekhanda
Kutshisa bhe uthiwe mbo ngejali (p.39)
(Hot as it is, she cannot take a bath
It is said that water is taboo for her
In the hottest weather, a head tie is tightly strapped around her head
Hot as it is, she is covered in a blanket)

This shows that the culture the poet is talking about is oppressive to women. They get tied up just because they are wives. Their freedom is limited as even after the burial they dress in black. This kind of sorrow dressing limits some chances for women to flourish in their endeavours as they lose confidence and also as the dress speaks for them. It says in the poem:

Siyakhuluma lesisembatho
Sibika indaba enkulu (p.39)
(This dress speaks volumes)

The poet asks if the same practice would have been effected on the man had the wife gone first. This brings about the unfairness and imbalance of Ndebele cultural practices. In an interview about Ndebele practices with Gogo MaMbila an elderly Ndebele woman (06 October 2010), it was revealed that the men's way of *ukuzila* is simply shaving their heads and it is optional to put on a badge on the left arm. When examining this idea, one notices that shaving the head is usually normal for men, whether they are in grief or not. Hence, when such a man moves around the community, it is not easy to identify him as one in grief as opposed to the widow. The poet advocates that women can also mourn from within their hearts and not through regalia. However, in as much as Mlandeli expresses the lack of necessity for the black dress, she is quick to admit her powerlessness to change culture when she says:

Aluba ngilamandla lamuhla bengizasidabudabula
Lesisembatho esibuhlungu kangaka
Ukuze kwelizayo, kuzile inhliziyo yomuntu (p.40)
(If I had the power today,
I would shred this pain –inflicting dress
so that in the next world,

sorrow will be shown from the heart)

This makes women more of subalterns because even if they attempt to speak, they disadvantage themselves by believing that they cannot change their own condition. This trait is also evident in Makhalisa's poem *Batsho ngani?* (Why do they say so?), where she leaves everything to 'ophezulu' (God) who sees all. At the end of the day, it seems like the subaltern cannot speak because she takes back all that he says through admitting her powerlessness.

Another problem which makes it difficult for the subaltern woman to speak is representation. If only those who belong to the lower classes could represent themselves, we could note a difference in their determination to change things. Being spoken for has problems in that those who give themselves the role of mouthpieces tend to underestimate or make general assumptions about the peasant woman such that they misrepresent them through art. According to Spivak (1988), there is always a danger of misrepresentation when the more oppressed classes are spoken for by the better privileged ones. This issue of misrepresentation is further witnessed as female poets unconsciously reconstruct patriarchal beliefs ironically in a bid to liberate the subaltern woman. The section below discusses how feminist approaches sometimes misrepresent or contradict themselves by seeking male approval and protection yet the idea is to be totally independent.

Reconstruction of patriarchal beliefs in *Inkondlo*: A blind spot in feminism

Feminism is largely based on fighting against patriarchal rule and male dominance in society. Thus, organizations such as Zimbabwe Women Writers focus on the advancement and emancipation of the woman. What one might expect from the anthology *Inkondlo* is total castigation of male power and a radical stance towards the involvement of men in women's lives. However, the female poets in *Inkondlo* seem at some point not to be so concerned about patriarchal structures to the extent that they advocate for the rebuilding of those structures. In a poem titled *Igoli lilolunya* (Johannesburg is rough), Ngoni Moyo talks about women who are stranded due to the fact that their husbands have flocked to South Africa in search for greener pastures. The poet says:

Pho e Zimbabwe omama bayasala lobani?
Bayagcinwa ngubani?
Bayathuma bani?
Bayahlwa ngubani? (p.4)
(Who will remain with the women in Zimbabwe?
Who will look after them?)

Who will they send?
Who will bury them?

Although this line of thought might be influenced by Africana womanism which sees men and women playing complementary roles (Hudson-Weems 1994), it is also a thought which ensures that women are at the mercy of men. They do not seem to do much in the absence of men. This suggests that women in the Ndebele society and indeed in Africa are still subalterns. This inferiority complex has been intensely implanted in their minds. Women were conditioned by colonialism to believe that they depend on men. According to Schmidt (1992), women remained in the rural areas as peasants while their husbands entered into wage labour in urban areas. At the same time, the lands in which these women were meant to do agricultural activities were infertile lands. This led to women depending more on the goods accessed in the cities by their husbands who had money. In fact, even later when women were allowed to work in the cities, they were considered as minors whose wages were supposed to be considered in terms of what their husbands got (Schmidt, 1992). Hence, the dependence of women on men is an idea which is difficult to uproot from the minds of the African woman as it was deeply inculcated by the colonial system. However, it might also be unfair to blame everything on colonialism as traditional patriarchy also encouraged women's dependence on men.

In the poem *Umazakhela* (A female home builder), Sukoluhle Ncube brings out the experience of single women in society. These are women/mothers who were never married but have their own homes. In the poem, Ncube postulates that it is despicable to be a single woman in society. This is revealed when she says:

*Ngezwa omakhelwane bethi
unakaZibonele
ubonakale ebhawa enkulu* (p.6)
(I heard the neighbours say
Zibonele's mother
Was seen in the big bar)

Society snubs and ridicules single women/mothers. In the above stanza, the use of the expression '*unakaZibonele*' means that the woman does everything on her own and just for herself. At the same time, such kind of a woman is seen in the drinking places. Society does not take kindly to that kind of conduct from women. This has prompted Ncube to join society in scorning these women but at the same time, she pleads with society to understand such women. According to the poet, what these single women seem to need is attachment to a male person. It seems they want to be like everyone else in society who is married. Ncube says:

Bayafuna ukuba njengomuntu wonke
Kalikho inina elikuthandayo lokhu
Wonke umfazi ufuna ukuba lemuli (p.6)
(They want to be like everyone else
There is no woman who likes this
Every woman wants to have a family)

Although this poem seems to be upholding social values, it falls short when it comes to representing the woman as an independent creation. Single women are not necessarily unable to care for themselves. The poet makes it sound as if it is imperative for women to have men as part of their lives because if one is alone, they are helpless and seek for survival through unorthodox means. Thus, she says, '*Bayakhala omazakhela/ badinga okungabanceda*' (single women are crying out /they are looking for what can help them). At the same time, Ncube suggests the vulnerability of single women in the stanza where she says:

Uzwa amasela ethi
Umakhelwane wangakithi ngumazakhela
Ulula ukungeneka
Kungcono siyezama khona uncedo
Ngoba ngumazakhela (p6)
(You hear the thieves saying
Our neighbour is a single woman
It is easy to enter her home
We better try to help ourselves there
Because she is a single woman)

Ncube seems to be interested in the position of single women as vulnerable beings. In a way, she advocates that women attach themselves to men so that issues such as public scorn and vulnerability are avoided. This is reconstruction of patriarchy which sees women as protected and owned by the male counterparts. Also, the issue of image is involved when one is attached to a man as society will look upon her as a good woman. Thus, women themselves participate in the reconstruction of patriarchy while at the same time fighting the system through feminism.

The poem *Hamba kuhle* (go well) by Catherine S. Mahaja is one example of a poem which links women's security to the presence of men. It is a dirge that laments the death of a brother who has been a pillar of strength for the family. Mahaja refers to this deceased brother as '*umthuzi*' (shelter). I am not arguing that women should not mourn their lost male kin. However, it should also be seen that women are full of strength and potential on their own. Even if they might depend on men, it should be noted that women can carry on with their lives in the absence of men. The situation presented by Mahaja is reminiscent of the minor status of women during the colonial

era where they were under the authority of their fathers, husbands or brothers. This is what feminism should be fighting against but it seems difficult to rub the idea from the mind of the subaltern woman. However, in Mahaja's poem, the poet seems to have lost all hope in life as this male figure has passed on. She says;

Eqaqeni im' iklinka
Layo nguwe
Ezincwadin' eziseleyo ubucand' okunye
Ngubani ozakuphutshisa? (p.36)
(On the kopje there stands a clinic
It is through your effort
In the documents that you left, you were still pursuing another Project
Who will see this through?)

As one goes back to the cultural institutions that inform society, patriarchy seems to have a lasting effect on the women's view of themselves. Through patriarchy, women tend to believe that it is difficult for them to survive without male figures. Also, the exaggerated colonial patriarchy which insisted that women be minors under the guardianship of their fathers, brothers or husbands made it worse for women as they still cannot think of themselves as mature, long after the enactment of the Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) of 1982 and other conventions that followed. This makes women subalterns as they do not display their very interests by leaning towards representing males in literature.

Mahaja further propagates patriarchy as she also celebrates the deceased's love for women. Patriarchy has it that men are encouraged to involve themselves with as many women as possible. Even in the pre-colonial society, polygamy was rampant. Oral forms also confirm that in proverbs such as '*indoda libhetshu lomziki, liyabelanwa*' (a man is like the skin of an antelope which is shared) or '*indoda yinja*' (a man is like a dog whose sexual partner is not specific). In the poem, Mahaja celebrates this quality as she says about the brother;

Beth' uthand' isifazane
Ongasithandiyo ngubani?
Kulabo abafihla umholo ngebhulungwe?
Ukuba yilikhwa ngokwakini
Ubuzakulahla njani kusegazini (pp.35-36)
(They were saying you loved women
Who does not love them?
Among those who wear trousers?
Being a casanova is your nature
How would you have gotten rid of it when it is in your blood?)

Here, Mahaja represents the patriarchal interest more than she does women. This serves to show that some of the poems in the anthology *Inkondlo* re-create patriarchal beliefs within society while running away from female interests per se. If the organization Zimbabwe Women Writers is really meant to further feminist interests, then feminism itself needs to be revised as it exhibits a blind spot when it comes to the unconscious revival of patriarchy. Another challenge in the anthology *Inkondlo* has to do with social classes that exist in society. The question lies in how these classes are captured and represented in the anthology under discussion. The next section deals with this issue.

Class representation in *Inkondlo*

Class representation is one of the major problems found in literature. Society itself is composed of various classes of people. Even women as a group are not homogeneous. Women also differ in their classes and their orientations. In literature, one would expect writers to represent society as it is, in its different categories. However, no one can tell writers what to write but it is up to the audience to relate with the work that has been written. In the view of African scholars, the writer has a duty in society which is to teach and guide society in the struggle for change (Achebe 1975; Ngugi 1981; Chinweizu *et al* 1980). In the postcolonial discourse, the same role of the writer is maintained as he/ she is said to be the one who connects the subaltern with his history. Hence, it is important to look at how different classes are represented or even communicated with through poems in *Inkondlo*.

Some poems in the anthology *Ikondlo* exhibit some ambiguities. This is due to the fact that some poets belong to different classes at the same time. While they are associated with elitism, they also identify themselves with the less privileged. One can use the example of Makhalisa's poem *Vus'Inkophe* (wake up) where she displays elitist tendencies while at the same time attempting to speak to the masses. According to social classification adapted by Spivak (1988) from Guha (1982), there is a class of people who are both elite and subaltern at the same time. This brings forth the issue of identity where writers tend to identify themselves with their kin when writing yet socially they belong to higher classes.

This results either in misrepresentation of the lower classes of society or it may be the chance for the audibility of the subaltern voice. Such writers and poets are contested by African scholars as the voice of the voiceless. Nonetheless, Fee (in Ashcroft *et al* 1995) argues that the elite cannot speak for the masses because one does not know which voice the speaker uses. According to Guha (1982) as adapted by Spivak (1988), there are some groups who are part of the dominant, yet at the same time they are also oppressed from above. Guha (1982 p.8 in Spivak 1988 p.60) says about this group of people;

The same class or element which is dominant in one area... could be among the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances...

As a result, it becomes difficult to identify poets with particular classes as they seem to be 'floating' as elite-subalterns. This predicament, as seen in the anthology *Inkondlo*, affects poets as their work attempts to speak for the two classes. For example, Makhalisa in the poem *Vus'Inkophe* (wake up) calls upon women to rise up and speak out their concerns through writing. She says;

Vus' inkoph' udobh' usiba lawe...
Ithi thwe indab' ihlabuse
Isiz' oluka Eva usaphokazi
Lutshwaphuluke luhlakaniphe
Lwale ukuncindezelwa (p.48)
(Wake up and pick the pen
Write a very good story
It will help Eve's offspring
To rise and be clever
And refuse oppression)

In the above excerpt, Makhalisa attempts to speak to all women as they all face oppression from both patriarchy and the colonial legacy. However, it is not all women who might have access to the method of speaking which Makhalisa advocates. This is so because some women are illiterate, while others who might be literate are not of a recognizable standing in society. Post-colonial states are such that the underprivileged social classes have tried to fight the same way through because the conditions had changed and society could now seek equal treatment between men and women.

The only problem arises when women themselves fail to know how they can represent those who do not belong to their class. For example, poets such as Mlandeli in *Umfelokazi* seem to be representing all women together with the less fortunate. However, the lack of determination to change institutions that Mlandeli shows is very unfair to the subaltern who is different from the elite. The less privileged are more affected by cultural institutions and this has a bearing on how these women plan to struggle for their freedom.

Conclusion

The questions which can be raised with regards to writers and the subaltern voice include those which were posed by Griffiths (in Ashcroft *et al* 1995: 240) where he says 'how do we know that the subaltern is oppressed? How can that oppression be

spoken?' Griffiths goes on to say that even when the subaltern appears to speak, there is concern as to whether he/she uses a subaltern voice. Spivak (1988) then becomes relevant in that she talks of the subaltern being unable to speak because she is unrepresentable. When one goes back to Fee's (in Ashcroft *et al* 1995) sentiments, it is difficult for one to speak as the other. However, as poets try by all means to speak on behalf of the oppressed groups, they are doing a duty which they should not abstain from. At the same time, as these writers try to represent others, their supposed failure to speak also has a meaning.

According to Spivak (1988), what the work cannot say becomes important. However, this needs intellectuals who will be able to critique the work and unpack the silence. Otherwise, to an ordinary reader, work which does not speak openly does not speak at all. Writers and their work may run the danger of lacking support in trying to change the future as their communication might not be heard. As for women who are more in the shadow as subalterns, it has been proved in the above discussion that they remain subalterns as their representation is problematic. Spivak (1988) proffers that the subalterns themselves are a heterogeneous group in which some are dominant within that group, hence, unlike feminism, the postcolonial view of the woman as a subaltern acknowledges that women cannot totally speak on behalf of each other and they cannot totally liberate themselves from the institutions that they feel are oppressing them. The anthology *Inkondlo* shows some gaps that exist in the ideas of feminism which consequently takes women back and forth as they try to speak for themselves.

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