

# Looking at Women: Feminist Perspectives and Concerns in Three Xhosa Poems<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Feminist scholars are agreed that feminism has various strands and emphases, depending on what is focused on at a particular moment. Janet Radcliffe Richards (1984:13) says in this regard about 'feminism':

The word seems to have no precise and generally recognised meaning, but it has picked up a good many connotations of late, and an unexplained statement of support for feminism may therefore easily be misunderstood, and taken to imply commitment to more than is intended

Elaborating, however, on her argument that there is nevertheless a 'strong fundamental case' for feminism, she says the basic reason is 'that women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex'. Despite the many forms of feminism, there is one recurrent motif that runs through virtually all feminisms to confront various forms of patriarchy. Greene and Kahn (1985:2) state:

Feminists do ... find themselves confronting one universal—that whatever power or status may be accorded to women in a given culture, they are still, in comparison to men, devalued as 'the second sex'. Feminist scholars study diverse social constructions of femaleness and maleness in order to understand the universal phenomenon of male dominance

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a reworked component of my doctoral research, *A Feminist Critique of the Image of Woman in the Prose Works of Selected Xhosa Writers (1909-1980)* (see Mtuze 1980).

There have been divergent views on feminism in African society. Of course the debate is complicated by a large measure of self-interest in some cases, e.g. the affirmation of the dichotomy between male and female, between givers and takers and between the emancipated and the oppressors for the benefit of either males or females. In Africa, women have also suffered under 'male dominance' and from 'systematic social injustice because of their sex'. However, as in other parts of the world, the developing feminisms in Africa have not supported feminisms from abroad uncritically. Arianna Stassinopoulos (1974:160) expresses similar sentiments on the efficacy of some of the tenets of feminism in the 1970s.

I have sought to show that both common and uncommon sense demand emancipation but deny the tenets of Women's Lib. We are different from men—different but equal. The roles which we can play in society are not artificially restricted by some eternal international conspiracy in which all men since the Stone Age have joined. There is no Palaeolithic plot to hold us back. The female woman will assert her right to be free but she will refuse to allow the Libbers to force her to become an *ersatz* man. The frenetic extremism of Women's Lib seeks not to emancipate women, but to destroy society. The hand that refuses to rock the cradle is all too eager to overturn the world. The female woman wants to live as an equal in the world, not to destroy it in the vain search for an instant millennium. Her search for emancipation will improve and reform; Women's Lib will deface and destroy.

The most impressive development in this context has certainly been that of 'womanism' in the African American community. First used by Alice Walker (1983), both the womanhood of the woman and Afrocentricity are emphasised. A 'womanist' is then someone committed to the development of equal interaction between male and female and the survival of a whole people. In its more developed sense it focuses on the richness, complexity as well as the uniqueness and struggles of women's experiences in societies hostile to their womanhood and to them being black.

In confronting the universal of male dominance in all its complexity at a particular moment, feminism has to account for the stereotyping of male and female. This is also true of African feminism or womanism. The main argument in this article is that women's emancipation from their suffering brought about by oppressive relations in society, must confront and change the stereotypical views about men and women. One of the most important stereotypes is that a woman should be silent in society.

### **The Breaking of Silence: Confronting the Stereotype**

The kind of debate and agitation that thunders around the country and the world over, including China, Beijing, more recently, proves Sheila

Rowbotham (1983:29) was not off the mark when she remarked about the deceptive silence at the time, a silence which many mistook for acquiescence and contentment with the status quo:

The oppressed without hope are mysteriously quiet. When the conception of change is beyond the limits of the possible, there are no words to articulate discontent so it is sometimes held not to exist. The mistaken belief arises because we can only grasp silence in the moment in which it is breaking. The sound of silence breaking makes us understand what we could not hear before. But the fact that we could not hear does not prove that no pain existed. The revolutionary must listen very carefully to the language of silence. This is particularly important for women because we come from such a long silence.

Whereas the silence of women has been brought about by stereotypical relations in society, the breaking of silence means that the stereotypes, especially on the silence of women, must be confronted and changed. Irrespective of whether the stereotype represents truths concerning realities of a person or group, people in society must recognise that these stereotypes are all just roles into which they have been socialised. It is because of such socialisation that they accept these stereotypical representations about people as true and that their behaviour and interaction are determined by such socialisation. Sheila Ruth (1980:18) says in this regard:

*Stereotype* is a concept related to role, yet distinct. Defined by one author as a 'picture in our heads', stereotype is a composite image of traits and expectations pertaining to some group (such as teachers, police officers, Jews, hippies, or women)—an image that is persistent in the social mind though it is somehow off-centre or inaccurate. Typically, the stereotype is an overgeneralisation of characteristics that may or may not have been observed in fact. Often containing a kernel of truth that is partial and misleading, the stereotype need not be self-consistent, and it has a remarkable resistance to change by new information.

Commenting on the undesirable constraining effects of stereotyping on a person, De Klerk (1989:5) relates stereotyping to 'perception' or looking and says:

Stereotypes are abstractions, simplifying what otherwise might have overwhelmingly diverse meaning. The expectations stereotypes generate can have undesirable constraining effects on person-perception, and have behavioural consequences. Any pervasive, widely shared expectation about people in a social category inevitably exerts subtle pressure on its members to display behaviours, traits and attitudes consistent with it. Sex-role stereotypes are tenaciously held, well-defined concepts that prescribe how each sex ought to perform. Such sex-role stereotypes generate sex-role standards (i.e. expectations about how each sex ought to act) and the stereotypes and standards reinforce each other.

The mutual reinforcing of sex-role standards and stereotypes bring about perceptions and behaviour into which people are continuously socialised. In terms of the views expressed, woman is a social construct. She is what the male dominated society wants her to be. Anything to the contrary is deviant and is strongly frowned upon. Where these socialisations cause women suffering and pain, women have been breaking the silence. Three recent Xhosa poems which focus on women provide an opportunity to look at how women are either viewed stereotypically or how the stereotype is confronted.

### Mema's Poem

The best and most up to date example of male stereotypic but highly idealistic view of the woman comes from a poem by a very talented and highly educated poet, Mema (1984:30) whose poem reflects current male stereotypical views of women:

#### Umfazi Wokwenene (S.S.M. Mema)

Yiperil' enqabileyo umfazi onesidima,  
Yasotok' inomkhitha cyakhe indima.  
Akonwab' ezimbuthweni zokucukucez' uluntu,  
Uyonwab' akhululeke kwakvenzelwana ubuntu.

Ukutheth' ukuvinjive ubatasele ngezenzo;  
Akuhlala rhuth' ingxowa aqalise ukuluka.  
Bufika nje ubusika selumfumamfum' usapho;  
Akoyik' ukulwalatha—lulibhongo neqhaya.

Wakungen' endlwini yakhe kuthi gungqu  
bubushushu;  
Kubasiwe kuphekiwe, nawe mhambi ulindive  
Ukuncum' akazenzisi kutsh' uzive usekhaya,  
Uyay'qond' intsikelelo yokubuk' abasemzini

Kwindod' akhe ngumlingane akalito ipolisa;  
Kvakuqaleka umlilo akagaleli malahle.  
Akayongive kubantwana bayamthanda  
bemhlonene;  
Bangalwa babe majaja khe kwagxekw' umama  
wabo.

Kwimibutho yokuhlala ulilungu lokuqala,  
Ungumakhi wempucuko engancwasanga luzuko.  
Uyazazi iimbedlenge wanyisa iintsizana;

#### The True Woman (S.S.M. Mema)

She is a rare pearl, the dignified woman,  
Her role is ever attractive to society.  
She never finds happiness in gossip groups,  
She is very happy when generosity is shown

She is reticent but gifted as far as actions;  
When she sits she opens her bag and knits.  
By the breaking of Winter her family is cosy;  
Not shy to point them out—they're her pride.

When you enter her house it is nice and warm,  
There's fire, food and the visitor is welcome.  
Her smile is genuine, it makes you feel at home;  
She realises the blessing of being kind to  
strangers

To her husband she's a friend, not a policeman,  
When trouble starts she does not fan it all.  
No tiger to the children, they love and respect  
her  
They would fight like mad if mama is  
disparaged.

She's the first member of social associations,  
The builder of culture who does not seek glory.  
She knows the needy and feeds the destitute;

Ungunina kwiinkedama kuy' inimba ayikhethi.	The mother of the orphans who treats all alike.
Awunethi umzi wakhe kub' usebenza ngokwakhe,	Her house is solid as she works herself,
Uyalima ahlakule, ze kungasweleki ukutya.	Tills and cultivates so that there's always food
Xa esiya kukh' amanzi akalindani namfazi;	When fetching water, she waits for no womanfriend;

Akukho umenza mvaba, engathuthelwa zindaba	She's not drawn to say things or brought any gossip
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Lingaphezu kwegolide elakhe ixabiso;	Her value is certainly more than gold;
Ayinakuqikelelwa bani eyakhe intengiso.	She is priceless, no one can state her value
Uvunywa sisizive sonke ngendili nangentobeko;	The whole nation confirms her dignity and loyalty.

Liyanungqina nalw' izulu ngokholo	Even heavens confirm her faith and her
nangemfezeko.	flawlessness

Spatial and temporal limitations do not permit a detailed analysis of the poem, however, it is evident that this poem confirms many stereotypical views about women. One issue that women are becoming more and more impatient about is that they are being showered with praises by men who idealise them with the sole purpose of keeping them in inferior positions and statuses. Women become ever more critical of men's idealisation of women and react against male dominance.

Mema views women in their 'traditional' role as determined by Christian tradition amongst others. He idealises women in terms of men's and societal expectations. To achieve this, he uses powerful metaphorical images such as 'she is a rare pearl' and 'her worth is more than that of gold'. This serves to inculcate in women a sense of complacency and satisfaction. He describes the woman's 'attractive' role with the same purpose in mind. Women are, therefore, exhorted to keep this idealistic role.

Mema also invokes the stereotype of the woman as a gossip, as well as the Great Mother. He stresses that the woman is homebound as she is expected to give solace to the distressed, succour to the destitute, and to show hospitality to strangers. Her humility is borne by the fact that she should be a partner and not a policeman to her husband. This means that she should not poke her nose into her husband's affairs for as long as he keeps them away from her.

Mema also clearly highlights the woman's role in social and civic matters. His poem relates intertextually to Proverbs 31:10-31, which brings it in line with a very old stereotype, one that spans centuries and many cultures. People's relationships with and towards women in line with this stereotype ensure that they hold beliefs concerning the stereotype and not concerning the realities of women, how they see themselves and how they write about themselves. This could be attested by the fact that there is a wide chasm between the woman in the stereotype and the woman in the real life

situation. This reality comes out very strongly in Ndlazulwana's poem discussed below. Both the woman's voice and her point of view come out strongly in the latter poem and the dissonance with the male voice cannot be mistaken.

The male bias is unmistakably present in the terms and notions related to womanhood in Mema's poem. To be dignified is an attribute that should function for both men and women. It should not be manipulated for personal gain by men with a view to subjugate women.

Mema clearly limits the role of woman to those things that she should do. Firstly, she should be a perfect mother of all. This stereotype shows the woman as hospitable, caring and homebound. Tong (1993:155) explains this stereotype as follows:

We expect mothers to be perfect, to strike a golden mean between too little mothering on the one hand and too much mothering on the other hand; and we attribute all manner and fashion of evils to imperfect mothers who mother too little or too much.

It is also evident that Mema believes in having different gender roles for men and women. The woman's role is limited to domestic chores. The only other role that could be assigned to women, in terms of Mema's views, is membership of local community organisations and tilling the soil in order to produce food. This is all in line with the stereotype that women should be confined to the private sphere as pointed out by Tong (1993:152):

Dinnerstein observed that the final characteristic of gender arrangements is the tacit agreement between men and women that men should go out into the public world and that women should stay behind, within the private sphere.

There is incontrovertible evidence that women's aspirations and realities point to the fact that women are entering domains that were conventionally monopolised by men. They are out in the armies, on the roads as drivers and some even piloting aeroplanes. A large number of women hold executive positions in industry and big business. While these realities spell progress, in society they are not attractive because men feel threatened and the power of convention especially in a stratified patriarchal society such as the African society, militates against such inroads onto what used to be considered as male preserves.

The bottomline in this kind of stereotyping is that 'women ought to remain in the household' (Garlick, Dixon & Allen 1992:6). Society deliberately creates a public/private paradigm to keep women in subservience as attested by Garlick, Dixon and Allen (1992:6):

The paradigm prevents the actions of women from being considered according to the same criteria as those of males. Their deeds may be identical, but the interpretative act takes these identical endeavours and assess them according to the public/private paradigm.

The oppressive nature of this paradigm is further evident in the comment that:

When the women do enter the world of the public action, their status in the public world *cannot* match that of the males because, according to the paradigm, they do not belong there, striding elegantly in the world of the mind and masculine creativity (Garlick, Dixon & Allen 1992.6).

Some of the stereotypes thrive on vague generalisations. Women are associated with gossip whereas men also gossip. Generosity is associated with 'good', 'kind', or 'true' women (to use Mema's words) whereas men also need to be generous. One can only conclude that even the generosity that women need to show is devoid of power and authority. In short, they are not fully empowered to go out and work and take proactive steps to show generosity themselves.

One of those restrictive generalisations is that a true woman is of necessity reticent. Why should men not be reticent? Surely this is some kind of muzzling, or, to put it conversely, reticence is equal to passivity.

The perfect mother stereotype holds that a woman should knit to keep her family warm in winter. It ignores the fact that thousands of women are keeping societies together with their work in various areas and domains - from factories, industry, 'domestic work', to executive jobs including the public sector. Women would definitely not like to be limited to just being 'bashful' and just to be actively engaged in knitting, in the same way that husbands also have responsibilities concerning a 'cosy' family in winter.

Women reject the 'good wife' stereotype in spite of its pseudoflattey. As can be seen from the following comments by Simone de Beauvoir (1987:207) it has far reaching implications for womanhood:

Deprived of her magic weapons by the marriage rites and subordinated economically and socially to her husband, the 'good wife' is man's most precious treasure. She belongs to him so profoundly that he is responsible for her. He calls her his 'better half'. He takes pride in his wife as he does in his house, his lands, his flocks, his wealth, and sometimes even more; through her he displays his power before the world. she is his measure and his earthly portion

It is obvious that stereotyping is driving a wedge between the woman and the man's role. Who is responsible for the 'nice and warm' house as well as the 'fire, food' and to let the visitor feel welcome? Does a husband not have an

equal responsibility to set up a house, to see that there is fire and food? The smile that welcomes people and make them feel at home, surely is also the husband's responsibility in the same way that he must also show kindness to strangers.

The remarks about women not being policemen to their husbands and their participation in social organisations raise many questions and could have far reaching implications. Why is she not a policeman to her husband? Can he still sleep around as he likes? What about the trust between husband and wife? These are only some of the questions that are begged by the abovementioned assertion.

Men should also have the same concerns for food. They need not fetch it, but in our industrial age, they can see that the municipal services provide water for all. One can only agree with Garlick, Dixon and Allen (1992:67) that

the public/private paradigm with its gender component sets values on our expressions and the paradigm does not simply articulate a boundary between two spheres, but it places a positive normative value on that division.

### Ndlazulwana's Poem

Mema's idealism, contrasts radically with the attitude of one of the most modern women poets, Nobantu Ndlazulwana (1986:27) whose poem, 'Ubufazi' (Womanhood) reflects female protest against male domination more overtly than the female novelists have done so far:

#### Ubufazi (Nobantu Ndlazulwana)

Mandibe sisichenge phezu kwelwa na;  
Mandibe yindawo yengqushu na;  
Mandibe lidini lenkohlakalo na;  
Kuba kusithiwa ndinkene-inkene ndingumfazi?

Ndiyayizam' imizam' iphumelele,  
Ndiyavifezekis' iminqwen' izaliseke.  
Kodiv' amalungel' andina'wo  
Kuba kuthiwa ndibuthathaka ndingumfazi.

Asingabo bonk' abafaz' abacudiselekileyo,  
Ayisithi sonk' abant' ababandezekileyo,  
Asingomzi wabafazi wonk' ohluphekileyo.  
Kwilizive labafazi kulapho ndivela khona.

#### Womanhood (Nobantu Ndlazulwana)

Should I hang precariously over a cliff.  
Should I be the trampling ground:  
Should I be the sacrifice of wickedness.  
Just because they say I am weak. I am a woman?

I do achieve success in my efforts.  
I do realise some of my wishes.  
But I am deprived of all the rights  
Just because they say I am weak. I am a woman

Not all the women are oppressed.  
Not all of us are deprived.  
Not all the womenfolk are destitute.  
I come from the world of the women.

Amalinge am awa phantsi,  
Imiyalelo yam ayinamzalisekisi,  
Imizabalazo yam ayinanzwa bani  
Kuba kuthiwa andinamandla ndingumfazi

All my efforts are in vain,  
My injunctions none will fulfil,  
My struggles none will take heed of  
Just because they say I am weak, I am a  
woman

Ndlazulwana vehemently challenges the treatment meted out to women. She sees the women as being exploited, abused, and sacrificed as the weaker sex. Her indignation at this stereotype of the woman as the weaker sex is confirmed by the refrain at the end of every stanza: 'Kuba kusithiwa ndinkene-nkene ndingumfazi' (Just because they say I am weak, I am a woman).

Similar ironic use of the affirmation of womanhood (against both white male and white female) is present in Sojourner Truth's speech in the United States of America in Akron, Ohio, in 1852 when she argued for the equal rights of Black women (see bell hooks 1981:160):

.... Well, children, whar dar is so much racket dar must be something out o' kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de niggers of the Souf and de women at de Norf all a talkin 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin 'bout? Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best places . . . and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! .... I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear the lash as well—and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear—and ain't I a woman?

The refrain in Ndlazulwana's poem (as in Sojourner Truth's expression, 'ain't I a woman?') indicates that this statement is used to keep women out of certain activities in society as well as to subject them to various kinds of subjugation. They are not allowed to hold certain positions wherein they could take decisions on their life and fate. Instead they have to rely on men and endure untold wickedness from them. Male dominance ensures that women are relegated to and kept in inferior roles in society. Because they cannot be productively engaged in society, women experience themselves as 'hanging precariously over a cliff, being the trampling ground and being the sacrifice'.

There is something else in the refrain that cries out for comment. This is the statement 'they say that I am weak...'. Firstly, Ndlazulwana clearly shows that she does not support the stereotype that women are the weaker sex. While she rejects the imputation by others, especially because the attribute 'weak' implies both physical and intellectual weakness, her statement proves beyond doubt that she has been subjected to all these stereotypes through socialisation. In her own culture but on a more universal level, Erika Coetzee (1990:33) articulates this as follows:

Approaches to stereotypes as tools of socialization have stressed the social construction of role models and the ways these are internalized by children as part of 'growing up'.

Ndlazulwana also uses several images to indicate women's denigration: 'the trampling ground' and 'the sacrifice of wickedness'. In the whole poem, she depicts women as fulfilling their role as adequately as men but, notwithstanding, the women are discriminated against.

More importantly, Ndlazulwana describes this experience as 'wickedness' which is perpetrated against women. This is a serious accusation against men. The notion of wickedness in African society involves cruelty to others, something which is strongly condemned. Ndlazulwana deliberately uses a word that sharply attacks the kind of treatment meted out to women.

Efforts and wishes can not be realized because women do not enjoy the same 'rights' as men. Obviously, a rights culture will advance the equality (not the sameness) of people; equality in various settings in society, work, pay and relationship. Women need equality in the eyes of the law, equality in religious matters and equality in all matters affecting their well-being.

Ndlazulwana's cryptic remark that all women are not oppressed seems to refer to women who have liberated themselves from oppressive stereotypical exploitation as well as to being discriminated against as a black person.

The final lament is a lament in which the powerlessness of the woman is expressed and the content of the refrain functions as a boundary which is not to be crossed. That this boundary can in fact be crossed is indicated in the penultimate stanza where the poetess points out some women who have escaped subjugation.

It is obvious from Ndlazulwana's poem that black women suffer a double oppression. They are oppressed as women and also as blacks. Bias and prejudice in stereotyping always go against the outgroup as pointed out by the report of the East European Area Audience and Opinion Research (1980:4):

The employment of this research tool is based on the observation that, as a rule, people ascribe more flattering characteristics to their own social, religious, national etc. group than to other groups. Consequently, characteristics projected to Jews, Blacks and Gypsies were expected to show the amount of prejudice that exists towards these groups in Europe.

From Ndlazulwana's poem it is clear that her autostereotype or self-image is positive. She does everything to show that she is a full human being but she meets opposition against all her laudable efforts. Despite this positive self-image, women are projected as weak and deviant from the norms of maleness. What Gerwel (1987:91) says about racial stereotypes concerning Coloureds, can equally be applied to women.

There is in these works a consistent representation of coloureds as a different social category characterised by deviant social behavioral patterns, a comical and pathetic falling short in the living of imitating cultural patterns, emotional bankruptcy or childishness and in general, an unfaithfulness to the fullness of humanness<sup>2</sup>

In male dominated society, women's 'efforts' and 'success', the realisation of their 'wishes', their 'injunctions' and 'struggles', often cause them to be viewed 'as a different social category'. To them are ascribed 'social behavioral patterns' deviating from male norms. Often this also causes them as stereotype, to be the objects of male jesting, to be viewed as people falling short of living according to male determined 'cultural patterns', not to be able to express their emotions, to act childishly or not to be fully human. Ndhlazulwana's protests beg the question why women remain in their subjugated positions (in home and larger society) and, as she herself says, why no-one takes heed of women's struggles, injunctions and efforts. They rather stay on at their married homes and put up with denigration in spite of the harsh treatment. Why don't they decide to break ties with the abusive husbands, protest against oppression and exploitation and lead independent lives? The reasons why they stay on in these relations are multiple. One of the main ones is socio-economic reasons and not masochism Ronelle Pretorius (1987:102) convincingly argues that:

Psychoanalysis attributes the behaviour of women who stay in an abusing relation to masochism, and thus reinforces the stereotype of women 'coming back for more'. Socio-economic reasons for staying on are ignored and the theory promotes an attitude of blame-the-victim

The culturally oppressive stereotype must be rejected and the real reasons identified and dealt with. Another strategy would be for women to develop different categories which would account for their own behaviour, wishes, efforts and struggles. Duckitt holds this view and says that women should 'try to present themselves as category inconsistent in some other important respects'. He points out that, 'followers' needs can be satisfied more effectively by new social categorisation, intergroup norms, or behaviours' (Duckitt 1991:129).

Tong (1993:30) advocates 'androgyny' as a solution to the problems besetting the relations between men and women:

<sup>2</sup> Daar is in die betrokke werke 'n konsekwente voorstelling van gekleurdes as 'n onderskeie sosiale kategorie gekenmerk deur afwykende sosiale gedragspatrone, 'n komiekklike en patetiese tekortskieting in die uitlewing van nagebootsde kulturele patrone, emosionele bankrotskap of kinderlikheid en in die algemeen 'n afvalligheid van die volheid van menswees.

But recently, some liberal feminists have provided us with another approach. This last is a conceptual approach that counteracts the inclination to think less of a person on account of the person's gender. The concept I refer to here is that of the androgynous person (from the Greek words for male [andro] and female [gyn] respectively). If we think the issue through, one fundamental way to ensure that no person will be discriminated against on account of his or her gender is to guide persons to exhibit both masculine and feminine gender traits and behaviors.

For Ndlazulwana, however, the poem can also be read as not closing with a hopeless lament. The foregrounding of injunctions and struggles suggests the answer: women should free themselves from their oppressed situation.

### Satyo's Poem

Among the male writers who have said anything about the Xhosa woman, Satyo (in Mtuze & Satyo, 1986:48) is certainly the most outstanding as far as articulating the woman's dilemma especially in the past political set-up when children had been detained, killed or sentenced to death for politically-related crimes.

#### Umama oNtsundu (S.C. Satyo)

Uthando olusithonga  
Lukamama—  
Umama oNtsundu.

Intliziy' isemafini,  
Ezinkwenkwezini phaya,  
Nangona phof' ebhajisiwe  
Ziinzingo zobulawulwa

Intliziy' umnqwen' ifun'  
Ukubhabhel' empumelelweni—  
Ewe, intliziyo, ingqondo,  
Ubuntu bale ndlezana  
Buyankcunkca ..

Nokub' umnyeph' uyamxinzelela  
Umama. ... umam' oNtsundu.  
Konke ngenxa yeyakh'  
Imvana.

Le nyibib' umama nangona  
Ilalisw' uqweqwe kukuqhotswa.  
Kughotsek' ukhoko olo kuphela.  
Yon' intliziyo nomphefumlo  
Zikhwapheke khu.

#### The Black Mother (S.C. Satyo)

The thunderous love  
Of a mother  
The Black mother.

The heart is in the clouds,  
There in yonder stars,  
Although she is hoist  
By miseries of subjection

The heart's desire burning  
To fly up to success—  
Yes, the heart, the mind,  
This kind woman's humanity  
Running at a steady pace

Even when the white man oppresses  
The woman, ... the Black woman.  
All because of her own  
Lamb.

This lily the mother even though  
Her skin is fried to crust,  
Only the crust is fried  
The heart and the soul  
Enjoy total protection.

Akuzala lo mamandin'  
Ukhokhotyiswayo,  
Akhuse ngapha ukhokhotyiso,  
Akhuse ngapha ukhobokiso,  
Ze lowo uzelweyo angaqali  
Abon' ubuntlini-ntlini  
Bentlalo. esenofokoto

When she gives birth, this woman  
Who is abused and battered,  
She wards off this side the abuses.  
And wards off the other enslavement.  
So that the newly born at first  
Should not see the misery  
In his life when still so young

Lo mam' umama ayifundis' imveku yakhe  
Ukumemeth' ithemba—  
Inkxaso-mphefumlo  
Yongonyanyefweyo.

This true mother teaches her baby  
To hold on to whatever hope—  
Sustainer of the soul  
Of the victimized

Amfundis' ukuthana  
Ntsho-o-o-  
Nenkwenkwezi ukuz'  
Umphefuml' u-u  
Phuncuncu  
Kudaka abekwe kulo  
Ngabom umam' emama.

And teach it to  
Stare without flinching—  
At the star so that  
The soul may  
Be released  
From the mire it's dumped in  
Wilfully, this true mother.

Ithole lomam' ontsika,  
Lisungula mayana nje  
Ukuxatyangelwa kolonwab'  
Olumagagaga.

The child of mother steadfast  
Will start slowly subtly  
As steadily the gaps are filled  
Amidst that scanty joy

Satyo is neither idealistic nor overtly condemnatory with regard to the role of women. Instead, he, in a calm and collected manner, shows how women had to cope with the vicissitudes of life especially in the past political context. As pointed out earlier, the political pressures of the time were always a source of great frustration to all concerned. The hurt felt by black women is even greater than that of men, given that their children had bitter experiences since the start of the political upheavals in the country. Women were responsible for supporting their dehumanised husbands throughout the years. Then they were charged with the further responsibility of nurturing their children in a strife-torn country, in the same way that they had to stand by their husbands during the colonial times and during the ensuing resistance to white domination. The youth are the leaders of the future, therefore, the mothers must cushion them from the hard knocks of life and teach them hope, love, and equanimity. This whole exercise, as pointed out by Satyo, had not left the Black woman unscathed: 'Her skin is fried to crust'.

One can see from Satyo's poem that the black woman has been entrusted with a fresh responsibility of bringing up and giving direction to an offspring that is riddled to the marrow by the destructive blows of present day life. She must nurture them and cushion them from the merciless onslaught until they can find some meaning and enjoyment in their lives.

Total sacrifice is still part of the contemporary woman but this is now for a cause greater than washing pots and sweeping floors occasionally interspersed with idle gossip and cringing to eke out some existence. No doubt, Satyo is trying to influence the way we look at women by constructing other models and images of womanhood.

The mother's love is, metaphorically speaking, 'thunderous' because it occasionally explodes into loud bursts in order to make its presence felt in what could be regarded as a sea of lovelessness. It is situated in the clouds, high above any elements of restraint and bondage that are caused by the miseries of subjugation. She is hoisted and ensnaked but her love towers freely in the open skies. This is an indication that despite the thunders of subjection which she experiences, she can still hoist and uplift her love to be overwhelming, of belittling of transcending subjection.

The stanza beginning with 'the heart's desire ...' is an indication of how this thunderous love can transcend and even eradicate miseries, because of her 'heart's burning desire ... success ... in both heart (passion) and mind (cognition).

The stanza beginning with the words 'Even when the white man oppresses ...' clearly focuses on the ravages of dual oppression on black men and women but since only 'The woman, ... the Black Woman' is mentioned, her oppression is foregrounded. The juxtapositioning of the white oppressor on the one side and the oppressed black woman on the other is used as a conscious gap-making which has whole stories of content and experiences of Black South African women. Between the oppression of white women experienced at the hands of white patriarchy and that of Black women lies an area fertile with denigration, dehumanisation and dominance which white women have certainly never been exposed to.

The notion of the Lamb (note the capital letter) is dual in connotation. While the sacrificial Lamb, Christ, is implied as the epitome of all suffering, the primary consideration of the poet is to refer to the woman's children who have to be sacrificed on a daily basis on the altar of injustice. Paradoxically enough, the mother is also leading a sacrificial life of suffering and dehumanisation as attested by such images as 'frying' and 'warding off the blows' and various other abuses alluded to in the poem.

Reference to the total protection and the freedom of the heart and soul in this poem stresses the power of hope in despair. The woman experiences external pain against which she is bound to protest, but she also takes courage from the fact that her faith keeps her intact. This does not imply that one must be content with having one's heart and soul protected and not provide opportunities for one's 'heart and soul' to realise themselves in society and to counter male dominance. Woman's plight, as can be seen from the images constructed, is beyond hope but she is sustained by faith alone as she keeps hoping against hope.

As said above, Satyo is re-presenting and re-interpreting the woman's role and in this way creates new models for us, in line with what Garlick, Dixon and Allen (1992:6) say:

All description of human action by artists, scholars, news media, or the gossip over the back fence entails interpretation. In order to interpret we empty paradigms, models of how the world functions so that we can organise the vast variety of human experience ... The process of organizing the experiences so as to be able to re-present them, though, entails working with particular perceptual frameworks on the part of both the re-presenter and the one to whom the events are re-presented

The new images and models challenge the status quo and compel the oppressor to face the historical reality, an act that 'leads to a meditation on the experience of dispossession and dislocation'—psychic and social—as pointed out by Williams and Chrisman (1994:122).

It is obvious that abuse, battering, and all the negative attitudes that women have to endure, demand positive counter measures. The poet does not advocate violence but holds out fortitude as the best form of resistance when all else had failed. This is the model that Satyo presents to the world.

It is remarkable to note that Satyo is bent on eliminating revenge and vindictiveness and avoids the tendency to pass on one's hatred of one's adversaries to one's off-spring.

Beyond the hope as sustenance for the freedom of the soul, the poet clearly criticises the conditions under which women must live. 'Staring at the star' signifies someone steadfastly holding onto the hope of imminent salvation through God's mediation. An allusion to Bethlehem's star of freedom cannot be denied here.

It is clear that the woman in Satyo's poem has shifted from the predetermined roles assigned to her by social norms and expectations as manifested in Mema's poem. Shifting contrasts radically with the fixing that goes with stereotyping as evidenced by Homi Bhabha (1994:66):

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation, it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition

The advocacy of a 'free spirit' cannot be equated with cowing down and capitulation. The history of the liberation struggle is full of women who proactively took up cudgels against the system with a view to discarding oppression. These women have gone against the grain of the narrow code

and defied the stereotypical expectations of their societies in order to impress their own stamp of authority on what they consider right and wrong.

Satyo's poem takes cognisance of this role but goes beyond the state of war to depict the women as resolutely epitomising active resistance, to put it paradoxically. It is through this resoluteness and active resistance that the gaps in the lives of the new-borns could be filled with therapeutic joy.

## Conclusion

The three poems have clearly indicated that we have gone a long way from merely idealising women to realising aspirations, struggles and the pain and suffering they have gone through as they fought side by side with the men who appear to be, sometimes, quite reluctant to grant them full equality in a non-sexist and democratic new South Africa. It is evident that those who are sympathetic or empathetic to the cause of black women are greatly concerned about their exploitation and oppression. The main problem is that society functions with stereotypes which, if they are not changed, will continue as cultural patterns into which people are socialised and which will continue the vicious circle of denigration and exploitation. In the context of the stereotype, we can now identify this to be due to both sexism and sex-roles.

Sexism, Lisa Tuttle (1987:292) argues, is

... constructed by analogy with racism, first used around 1968 in America within the Women's Liberation Movement, now in widespread, popular use. It may be defined as the system and practice of discriminating against a person on the grounds of sex. Specifically, it refers to unfair prejudice against women (sex-roles), the defining of women in regard to their sexual availability and attractiveness to men (objectification), and all the conscious and unconscious assumptions which cause women to be treated as not fully human, while men are identified as the norm.

From the above definition, it is evident that stereotyping is the labelling agency of sexism which is the implementation agency. Some of the discriminatory practices manifest themselves in the various sex-roles which Lisa Tuttle (1987:293) explains as follows:

The concept of sex-roles (which might more appropriately be called gender-roles) was developed by sociologists as a way of describing the appropriate social functions filled by men and women. Behind the term was the assumption that there were certain traits and qualities which were naturally masculine or feminine, and which explained why women were best suited to the 'role' of wife and mother and supportive companion, whereas men were suited to a much wider range of roles as an individual in the world.

Stereotyping is to be rejected precisely because it is as restrictive as it is an inaccurate reflection of those concerned, since 'actual behaviour is likely to be more varied than is suggested by social myths or stereotypes' (Gayle Greene & Coppelia Kahn 1985:18).

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