

The African Woman in Jolobe and Mema's Poems: A Critical Comparison

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Introduction

One of the functions of poetry is to ensure the survival of art in man (sic), to say the most probable things in the least number of words, and to make it as fresh in tone as the poet can (Jones 1973:138).

Jones could not have said it better, for what has inspired me to make this analysis of the two writers' selected poems is the artistic qualities observed in them that suggest both aesthetic sensitivity and the ability to integrate previous imaginative experience into the process of composition. Both poets use language which is packed with emotion and feeling. They each evoke vivid images in a manner that enriches their poetry and gives it a peculiar freshness. The three poems selected for this study—Jolobe's '*Unomhi*' and Mema's '*Ubuhle benene*' and *Wabulaw'apho Lawundini*—are undoubtedly among the finest Xhosa poems. I feel that their literariness can only be fully appreciated when they are placed side by side.

This paper intends to give a critical analysis of the linguistic and literary aspects employed by each poet so as to reveal the differences as well as similarities in their approaches and in their objectives.

Differences

What makes this analysis a stimulating and provocative intellectual exercise is the striking diversity of opinion between the two poets in their appreciation of the African woman. By merely looking at the titles, one is bound to realise that Jolobe's '*Unomhi*' implies feelings of love, affection, attachment, delicacy and purity for the woman whereas the same cannot be said of Mema's '*Ubuhle benene*' and '*Wabulaw'apho*

Lawundini'. The titles to Mema's two poems do not convey any feelings of attachment to this Gcaleka girl and one would be inclined to think that the poet is referring to just a piece of dead wood or any other object. Mema distances himself from this woman and there is no indication that the poet attaches any significance to her. Moreover, '*Wabulaw'apho Lawundini*' also suggests a sadness and despair which some sensitive readers may not associate with a woman's beauty.

Jolobe and Mema are both talented poets who have a way with words and their images are skilfully selected to effectively stir a reader's imagination. Conversely, it is precisely through these images that the two poets' diverse and contrasting viewpoints are highlighted.

In '*UNomhi*', Jolobe—who is generally known for writing poems on subjects that especially appeal to tender feelings—sticks true to form. He uses a very soft and touching tone of voice when describing the beauty of the woman. In the opening lines of the first verse, for example, the poet evokes images of the most beautiful, solemn and moving times of the day: sunrise and sunset. He writes:

*Ubuکه njengentsasa,
Ekwazole njengorhatya
Enobuhle benyibiba,
UNomhi.*

She is as lovely as the rising sun,
As humble as sunset,
And as beautiful as the daffodils,
Unomhi.

The metaphor *inyibiba* appeals to most of our senses—the movement and sound of bursting buds (hearing), the sweetness of nectar (taste), the brightly coloured petals (sight) and the fresh scent of pollen (smell). The images of nature he has carefully picked are elemental and close to the beauty he is describing: tenderness, innocence and love. We are inclined to think that the poet fully commits himself to delicacy in the poem and the lyrical quality of his verse conveys deep feeling.

In contrast, when you look at Mema's two poems in this study, the tone changes dramatically to a contemptuous one. In Mema's view, the sight of a beautiful woman evokes feelings of contempt, and his thoughts penetrate through external appearances to the deceitful and artificial beauty of the modern woman, emptied of all her Africanness through imbibing Western ways. Mema thus employs poetic forms that produce a pungent work of satire. Satire is defined by Abrahams (1975:167) as 'the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn'.

This definition thoroughly befits Mema's intentions as illustrated by the following lines taken from his '*Ubuhle benene*':

*Ndajong'eso sifuba sithetha sithule
Sithuthumbis'isoka sibethe ligule
Mn'andithethi ngofononontiso lwebele lelaphu
Oluqum'ubumbaxambaxa bebele lehagu-
Ndithetha ngebele lentombi ingelolahule.*

I watched her breasts with their silent language,
Which pains the lover's heart and makes him sick,
Not the fraud of the deceiving cloth
Which covers the pig's long flapping udders,
But the virgin's breasts, not those of a whore.

The positive connotation in praise of the woman in the first two lines is overshadowed by the negative, diminishing and dehumanising image of the pig that follows in the next three lines. There is nothing appealing about this imagery, for it conjures up the derogatory attributes that we associate with pigs and the pigs' sty: wild behaviour, wallowing in dirt, insatiable greed and the obnoxious stench of garbage. Like Jolobe—who uses them in a more romantic context—Mema is capable of exploiting all the senses at his disposal: sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch.

Mema's two poems reveal a rejection of romanticism and modernity in favour of traditionalism.

One could argue that Mema finds the sight of the educated African woman repulsive. Such a vision appears to rouse in him memories of social immorality resulting in the degradation of traditional attributes of beauty. However, this prompts one to wonder if the poet feels the same way towards educated men. If not, then it would appear that he uses double standards in castigating educated women while sparing educated men for embracing Western values. This is evident in Mema's opting for tradition as seen in his '*Ubuhle benene*' in which he writes as follows:

*Ibisuka emlanjeni ithwele ingqayi yamanzi;
Uluthi lwayo lwabetha ndangumkhanzi.
Yayikhetha-khethiwe lichule lokubumba;
Yaqaqamb'intloko yam yafun'ukudumba.*

The woman was from the pond carrying a bucket
of water on her head,

Her beautiful physical appearance struck me
Motionless like a tick,
Her features exhibited the skill of an architect,
My head throbbed with excitement bursting with emotion.

In this context, the poet finds the sight of a Gcaleka girl engaged in her traditional chores to be pleasing. Thus the symbol of the bucket of water on the girl's head is idealised and such other metaphors are exploited to articulate the poet's emotional fulfilment and attraction towards her. It should be realised that in most African societies '... culture has been used to justify the continued oppression and marginalisation of women, and as the rationale for perpetuating negative attitudes and behaviour towards women' (Njoki Wainama 1993:8).

Most people would readily agree that, to meet the needs of a society at a given time, culture is dynamic and socially constructed. But surprisingly, some of the cultural traditions can be done away with in some sectors of society while being strictly adhered to in others. For example, among the Xhosa people, changes can be made in the duration of the initiation ceremony with regard to men whereas, when it comes to women, tradition remains tradition and culture, culture—it never changes! Hence, to Mema, women have to remain eternally locked in stereotyped female roles. While men may change their own traditions to suit their purposes, the fact that women's traditions remain the same, may be ascribed to men wishing to keep them in their traditional roles. To keep this barrier in place, the educated woman in Mema's '*Wabulaw'apho Lawundini*' is presented as follows:

*Yayihlis' isitalato kwidolophu yaseKapa,
Inzwakazi ingahambi izibhij'okwequngequ.
Zazimnyama khac'iinwele eqhamile namashiya,
Yayileshez'imisebe kuloo mehlw'ang'ayozela.*

She was walking down the street of Cape Town,
Twisting her body like a gecko lizard,
With pitch black hair with bushy eyebrows,
Artificial eye lashes moving about on the enticing eyes.

Yayingentl'iyiguzu ngomlomo iyingqanga.

She was as pretty as a gooseberry,
with the mouth coloured in red lipstick.

While the metaphors employed by Mema may be inferences of emotional feelings towards the woman, any sensitive reader would be sceptical of any such claim

due to the subtle linguistic implications conveyed by some of the Xhosa words the poet uses. For example, it is commonly known that if one is descending a steep road, in Xhosa we use the verb—'hla'. And yet, in this context, the poet has decided to attach a causative verbal extension—'is-' to the verb. This immediately changes the meaning, making it negative. The verb implies an undesirable and unacceptable action that is frequently done without any valid reason. Hence, the action may be associated with anything—including immorality!

In this context, even the use of the noun 'inzwakazi', which is commonly known to be used to refer to a woman one admires, is ironic, i.e. if one considers the simile she is compared with: 'izibhij'okwequngequ', which is a hideous and despised species of reptile.

Not only do such expressions as 'Izibhij'okwequngequ' and 'Yayileshez-'imusebe ...' carry negative connotations. The images they deliberately evoke appear to make a mockery of beauty compounded with make-up and cosmetics. Thus, in commenting on the Gcaleka girl in his 'Ubuhle benene', the poet writes:

*Yayintle nangozwane loo nzwakazi yamandulo ...
Yayicwayiz'okwembabala ifanelwe lidombo
Ingazani namajikazi indalo kuyo iyihombo (e.a.).*

She was pretty from toe, that traditional beauty
Tiptoeing like a wild animal in its natural habitat,
Without earrings but in her natural beauty.

The phrases underlined are typical of Mema's perception of the African woman. The poet thus adopts a conservative outlook that allows for no compromise between tradition and modernity implying Western influence.

Jolobe's positive portrayal of women, on the other hand, would appear to ridicule Mema's negative depiction. This is magnified by Jolobe's employment of metaphors that seem to elevate women to a status higher than that of men. In his 'Unomhi', Jolobe writes:

*Inkwenkwez'icocekile
kwanombethe. Nobu bomi
abumathwa nobunyulu
KuNomhi.*

The star is pure,
As well as the dew. But this purity
can never be equalled with the innocence of
Unomhi.

The metaphor 'inkwenkwezi', which is a symbol of light, stimulates the reader's imagination into visualising a woman shining with a divine brightness. This

image is then reinforced by the metaphor 'mbethe' which symbolises purity and freshness. At the level of the senses, this makes the woman glow with life. Both metaphors appeal to the senses of sight, triggering feelings of love and kindness.

By contrast, Mema's criticism of women in 'Wabulaw'apho Lawundini' gathers momentum and builds up to a crescendo as we get one horrible image after another, systematically transforming and disfiguring this beautiful woman until she is no longer an attractive human being but a veritable pig! This gradual transfiguration takes place as follows:

*Entangeni unnumzana waziphosa ebhedini,
Yaquakeza intokazi ilungiselel'ukuphumla;
Ncothu zemk'iinwele kwavel'amaqathalala!
Yalandela imisebe, washiywa luval'umfana.*

*Kanti ezi nwele zintle zambathise lo mqwebedu!
Kanti le misebe mihle bubuqili bakwamLungu!
Bhuncu aphum'onke amazinyo afakw'ekomityini,
Washwabana loo mlomo obuncumeza emini.*

*Endaweni yezo mpondo ezidala undileko
Kwabhaxaz'iminxebe, amabel'emaz'ehagu.
Satyhwezela isisu kwakusuka iziminxi,
Yalukuzel'imilenze yakuphum'ekukhonxweni.*

In the bedroom the respected gentleman threw
himself onto the bed,
She went about preparing to rest
Plucked off her artificial hair, leaving her
natural hair unattended,
Followed by the removal of artificial eyelashes
And the young man got frightened.

Is it possible that this beautiful hair is covering
this hard dry ground!
And these beautiful eyelashes the deception of the
white man!
The artificial teeth were removed and put in a cup,
And shrank the mouth that has been attractive
during the day.

Instead of the dignified virgin's breasts,
Flapped the strings of the pig's udders,
Flapped the stomach after the girdle has been removed,
And flapped the legs when relieved from
the stockings.

Apart from the derisive images Mema employs in these lines, his powerful imagination, his mastery of language, his well developed sense of humour and his capacity for dramatisation are artistic qualities that cannot be overlooked. Mema's satirical approach, ornamented by the two ideophones, '*ncothu*' and '*bhunco*', add a dramatic touch to the deceitful beauty he is trying to ridicule and provides a distinct emotional appeal to the reader. Ngcongwana (1988:142) says of the power of the ideophone that it '... cannot be readily equalled by a simile, a metaphor or any other conventional figure of speech'.

Mema's genius is seen in his ability to effectively manipulate his material for the purposes of satire. The removing of artificial hair and teeth by the woman is so dramatically expressed that one cannot help laughing at the humour of it. The idea is then complemented by the employment of another powerful oral technique in which the satirist uses rhetorical questions to articulate his dismay. He writes:

Kanti ezi nwele zintle zambathise lo mqwebedu.

Is it possible that this beautiful hair is covering
this hard dry ground!

The metaphor '*umqwebedu*' provides images that would not be associated with beauty, for they suggest a barren, neglected and arid piece of land—thus negating the woman's beauty. Similarly, the expression '*Washwabana loo mlomo ...*' evokes images that transform the woman from a beautiful and elegant lady into an old granny with a shapeless mouth.

Mema's capacity for dramatisation is magnified by his employment of another powerful oral technique, onomatopoeia, which is closely related to the ideophone. The definition that Doke (1927:255) gives to the ideophone supports this relationship thus: '... [the ideophone] is a word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate in respect of manner, colour, sound or action'. Cole (1955:370) takes this view further when he distinguishes between the two forms as follows:

Although comparable to a certain extent with the onomatopoeia of European Languages, there is this important distinction: idiophones are descriptive of sound, colour, smell, manner, appearance, state, action or intensity, whereas onomatopoeia are descriptive of sound only.

From the above quotations we can infer that both ideophones and onomatopoeia help to depict or imitate, thus dramatising what is being conveyed. Being acutely aware of this, Mema exploits both devices and use them as powerful tools to wield his satire, using onomatopoeic expressions like:

<i>Kwabhaxazel'iminxeba ...</i>	Flapped the strings ...
<i>Satyhwephezel'isisu ...</i>	Flapped the stomach
<i>Yalukuzel'imilenze ...</i>	And flapped the legs ...

Although these appeal to our sense of hearing, the sensation is channelled to the visual, nauseating sight of a pig: wild, dirty, stinking, soulless and out of shape. Derogatory as these images may be, one cannot avoid noting the dramatic excellence with which satire has been conveyed in these lines—with the images working in relay to reinforce meaning. The poet's sense of humour is also evident—especially in the way the woman's beautiful breasts are reduced to unattractive and insignificant strings. There is no doubt that all the onomatopoeic expressions cited above excite the readers with a sense of humour.

Contrary to Mema's attitude towards the educated woman, Jolobe's images are indicative of his deep feelings for the African woman in general—educated or traditional. Compare the following line from Jolobe's poem with Mema's lines above:

<i>Abubus 'mazwi akhe.</i>	Her speech is as sweet as honey.
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Instead of nauseating images, Jolobe presents us with a honey-like sweetness, thus exploiting the vivifying and appetising element that elicits salivation from the reader. The image appeals to the sense of taste and the reader may imagine the woman glowing with beauty, warmth, purity and innocence. The reader feels that Jolobe does not only sympathise with the woman but empathise with her as well.

Mema sounds like an educated man who has suddenly become highly aware of the necessity for his race to preserve its own culture and identity. Although the wisdom of this cannot be disputed, one wonders why he deliberately picks on women as being solely responsible for the preservation of African tradition. Are men exempt from this exercise simply because they are innocent by virtue of being men?

Similarities

Although the tones as well as structure of the poems differ, they share certain qualities. The first similarity is that both poets are highly selective in their use of words. Suffice it to say that they both draw on the same materials and sources and utilise similar techniques in their use of images. For example, both poets develop their insights

through series of unmistakable correlations and their images display a link between the human being and the environment. In this, they are in agreement with Jones (1973) who holds the view that '... a good poet does observe the surrounding world and ultimately finds instances in it reflecting a personal interpretation of experienced reality'. Compare the following lines from Mema's poem with those of Jolobe:

*Yanele kundikrwaqula yavumela phantsi,
Ndibethwe ngumbane umzimba wanenkantsi;
Loo mehl'atshawuzayo anga zizabhokhwe,
Umzimba wathuthumela uzele ziintlantsi (Mema).*

She just glanced at me and responded quietly,
I was struck by lightning and my body cramped,
The flashing of the eyes were like cracking whips,
My body shook, sending out crackles.

*Ubuکهka njengentsasa,
Ekwazole njengorhatya,
Enobuhle benyibiba,
Unomhi (Jolobe).*

She is as lovely as the rising sun,
As humble as sunset,
And as beautiful as the daffodils,
Unomhi.

Both poems exhibit similarity in the way the presentation takes advantage of varied African as well as European influences. Jolobe, as described by Sirayi (1985) '... is a country poet for whom rural images are not only pleasures or sources of symbol, but part of a necessary way of living'. This description fits Mema very well too. Despite the diversity of opinion, one readily notices an element of similarity in the two poets' view that an African woman has to impress a man by overt obedience. This idea is embedded in the African traditional mode of life. The following lines portray this idea:

*Yajonga phambili le nzwakazi ngenzolo;
Lwang'uthabatheko lwam lolomhla nezolo (Mema).*

The beautiful lady looked ahead with dignity,
My love madness was something she was used to.

Mema further writes as follows:

Yandiphendula ngembeko ngelizwi elikuphola.

She replied respectfully with a soft voice

Compare this to:

*Unohloni njengocwethe,
Uhlonel'ikhaya lakhe (Jolobe).*

She is as shy as a small mouse,
She respects her home.

One can clearly see that a woman in this society is regarded as a second class member. Maleness is the norm, while femaleness is a deviation from the norm. It is unfortunate that this kind of injustice is also propagated by Christianity. This explains why Mema is so critical of the woman who confidently walks down the street, thus exhibiting character traits of those women who refuse to be limited by conventional expectations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that the two poets' viewpoints and attitudes towards the African woman differ remarkably. This is evident from especially the linguistic implications of the words they use. Notwithstanding Mema's derogatory representation of women, his satirical excellence is cause for admiration.

The role of a poet in society is '... to help us discover ourselves, teach us who we are, where we come from and help us redefine our culture from time to time' (Mphahlele 1986). Mema, like most artists, seems to be totally committed to fulfilling this role. Unfortunately, he does this by refusing to reconcile himself to the inevitable disintegration of cultures that used to be self-sufficient before the advent of alien forces in South Africa. Culture and tradition as defined by Malange (1993), '... is the preservation of one's right, identity, self respect, place in society, one's belief etc.'. However, no culture is ever static and closed to influence and change. All culture is thus open and dynamic, seeking to preserve that which is good in it, and to challenge that which is not fundamental or essential to its needs. As a dynamic entity then, any particular culture influences and in turn is influenced by other cultures it comes in contact with. And in our day and age, it is nearly impossible to always distinguish what is exclusively African culture from, say, European culture in every aspect and mode of life.

Mema is himself a victim of the effect of these alien influences on our cultures. This is evident in the structure of his poems in which the elements of the European satiric tradition are fused with his oral legacy. Unfortunately, he does not allow women the same license to borrow what they like from the Western way of life. Instead, he appears to be entertaining the cosy idea that male experience is the standard of human experience.

To get a clearer perspective of the kind of comparison this article dealt with, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1981) words may be most appropriate: 'How we see a thing—even with our eyes—is very much dependent on where we stand in relation to it'.

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