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THE ROLE OF FOLK-TALE IN NDEBELE LITERATURE: THE CASE FOR *INHLAMVU ZASENGODLWENI*

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Abstract

*The influence of folk-tales in Ndebele narratives is much greater than most critics of Ndebele literature acknowledge. To those who are familiar with Ndebele literature, the influence is not hard to see when one examines the plots and actions of the main characters in the narratives. The folk-tale of Chakijana and the Cannibals, for example, is made use of by Amos Mzilethi in his novel *Uyokhula Umfana* while N. S. Sigogo's *Gudlindlu Mntanami* exhibits well-known themes of an innocent victim which feature in many Ndebele folk-tales. It is important, therefore, that any analysis of these narratives should assess the extent to which the narrative may be better understood by examining the theme or plot of the folk-tale around which it is built. If this is not done, it may result in having a limited view of the narrative that is being analysed.*

IT IS MY contention that the novel *Inhlamvu ZaseNgodlweni* by E. M. Ndlovu has not been accorded its full potential as a political protest because the critics of this work fail to realize that the novel attacks the colonial regime. Albert S. Gerard, for example, views this novel as an educational novel, placing it in the same category as Amos Mzilethi's *Uyokhula Umfana* and Lassie Ndondo's *Qhapela Ingane*: Gerard says this about these novels:

A peculiar variety of the educational novel is the parallel lives story, which seems to be proper to the Ndebele novel perhaps in imitation of Zulu models. The pattern is based on the contrast between two characters. One is brought up in an upright family, becomes a bright student and later a prosperous and respected member of the community with a strong interest in church affairs: the other is the very picture of evil: he grows more and more unruly, becomes addicted to such disreputable occupations as card playing, keeps bad company and turns to heavy drinking until he becomes a full grown criminal who ultimately falls into the hands of the police.¹

Gerard — and even some Ndebele readers — fail to realize that Ndlovu models Mzondiwa, one of his central characters, on a folk-tale

¹ A. S. Gerard, *African Language Literatures: An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (London, Longman, 1981), 238.

figure. The model folk-tale character is presented as a fool or clown, but a careful analysis of what the character does reveals that he is much more than what the outside appearance gives: he is an intelligent character. It is also important to realize that in an educational novel the central character goes through a learning process. By the end of the novel the experiences of the central character enable that character to reform his ways. This is what happens to the central characters in the other two novels *Uyokhula Umfana* and *Qhapela Ingane* but not in *Inhlamvu ZaseNgodlweni*. In Ndlovu's novel the central character, Mzondiwa, is not subjected to an educational process and consequently he does not emerge as a reformed character at the end of the novel. Instead he emerges even more determined than before to continue his fight against the colonial regime.

Ndlovu could not, however, allow the fight against the colonial regime to be done openly because the time this novel was written (1950s) the colonial regime had a tight grip over the Black people. Any writing that seemed to undermine the authority of the regime would not be published and its author would be in danger of being harassed. It is for this reason that Ndlovu creates a character whom no one will suspect can be politically conscious. When that character commits acts of violence, not many people are able to link them with political consciousness. One has to read between the lines and try to understand the actions of this character from all possibilities of creation. There is no doubt in my mind that Ndlovu has used a roundabout method of protest in order to avoid being discovered by the authorities. This fits in very well with what Gerard describes as the weapon of the powerless, a subdued irony and a symbolic obliqueness, which the reader will perceive but which the critic will be wary of discussing openly.

It must be emphasized that, in the case of *Inhlamvu ZaseNgodlweni*, it is not every reader who is able to perceive the political protest made by the writer, hence the conflicting oral comments made by the readers of this narrative. This article therefore seeks to assist the reader of this novel to see deeper into it than meets the eye.

In creating Mzondiwa, a character who appears to be a fool or a clown and yet displays a lot of intelligence, Ndlovu appears to have taken his cue from the Ndebele folk-tale entitled 'Qalani'. The portrayal of Mzondiwa in many ways resembles that of Qalani who is the central character of the folk-tale of the same name.

The tale of Qalani is the story of an unusual boy who speaks while he is in his mother's womb. When he is born he rushes to the cattle kraal where his father is skinning a beast. He pleads with his father to be given his share of the meat. On receiving his share, he leaves home without informing anyone where he is going.

On his journey he meets a variety of people who ask for favours from him and he obliges. The people who ask for favours do so because they

regard him to be a fool from whom they can get whatever they want. For example, they ask him to share his meat with them and also to use his tools. But after these people have benefited from the use of Qalani's property, he demands that they compensate him. They try to find excuses for not doing so, but Qalani is adamant and in the end they find that they have no choice but to compensate him.

At the end of his journey Qalani possesses a big ox that he is herding in the veld. He meets an old man; the two of them decide to pass time together and Qalani offers to slaughter his ox for their meal. But before they can roast their meat they are attacked by the Zimus (legendary cannibals that have a strong appetite for human flesh). The old man is killed and eaten by the Zimus while Qalani escapes into hiding. While Qalani is in hiding he warns the Zimus that he would revenge the death of the old man. The Zimus hear his voice but are unable to discover exactly where he is hiding. In this way Qalani survives the attack of the Zimus.

A few years later, after the killing of the old man by the Zimus, Qalani decides to brew some beer and he invites all the Zimus to the beer party. All the Zimus come and have a nice time. At sunset Qalani persuades the Zimus to move into his big hut where he has already lit a fire and they all gladly move into the hut. While they all sit there drinking and enjoying their conversation, Qalani sneaks out and secretly closes the door and sets the hut on fire. All the Zimus are killed in the fire.

The following day Qalani went to the homes of the Zimus and took away all their livestock and returned to his family. Qalani was received like a hero at his village.

It is important to point out the relationship between the Zimus and Qalani's society in the folk-tale world. The Zimus were a menace to that society: lone children were always in danger of being eaten up by them. The elimination of so many Zimus at one go was therefore a great service to that society. Qalani's contribution to his society must be seen in this light. When Qalani returns to his village as a hero his society begins to reassess him. They begin to realize that he is not the fool they thought he was and they begin to realize his intelligence and foresight.

The portrayal of Mzondiwa in *Inhlamvu ZaseNgodlweni* resembles that of Qalani in many ways. Mzondiwa, like Qalani, runs away from home and appears not to be clear about his destination. Mzondiwa, however, is not as fantastic as Qalani because by absconding from home to a mining town of Nungwa he is doing what was common to the boys of his period, i.e. the 1950s. But Mzondiwa, like Qalani, is perceived as a fool by those who meet him. It is for this reason that the mine captain takes him to the pastor's house where he hopes he will be rehabilitated and reformed. The pastor's wife also describes him as a mad man. When Nkanyiso, a boy from Mzondiwa's village, learns that Mzondiwa is staying at the pastor's house

he feels sorry for the pastor's family for the problems they are going to experience in accommodating this crazy boy.

Mzondiwa's craziness is confirmed the following Sunday when he goes to church with the pastor's family. When Mzondiwa sees the pastor baptizing children he thinks the pastor is washing the children. He cannot contain his emotions so he shouts in surprise at the mothers of those children who cannot wash their own children until the pastor does it on their behalf. This behaviour of Mzondiwa makes everyone in the mining town conclude that Mzondiwa is not normal and that anything he does or says should not be taken seriously. This gives Mzondiwa license to do and say anything that he wants and it is under this license that profound statements and actions are made by Mzondiwa.

Firstly, Mzondiwa tells Nkanyiso, who is a staunch Christian, that the pastor and his wife are hypocrites because what they preach is not what they practise. Mzondiwa makes this assessment after spending a week with the pastor's family. Nkanyiso does not believe what Mzondiwa says, but towards the end of the novel Nkanyiso discovers that the pastor is indeed a hypocrite because he preaches against beer drinking and yet he drinks in private; he preaches against consulting traditional healers yet he goes there by night. When Nkanyiso makes this discovery, he is so heartbroken that he leaves the church at Nungwa and returns to his village.

By portraying the situation in this way, the writer, in my view, is implying that even if people think that Mzondiwa is a fool, Mzondiwa has a much better insight into things than those who regard themselves as normal people.

Secondly, Mzondiwa is involved in many fights during his stay at the mining town of Nungwa. However, his fights are directed mostly against those who work for the colonial regime. He fights them because he sees injustice in the system they are working for. As readers of this novel we arrive at this conclusion by examining the comments that are made by some of the characters after Mzondiwa has been involved in the fights. Mathebe, the pastor's wife, was quick to make a comment after hearing that Mzondiwa was involved in a fight with Mphini:

Many people are pleased to learn that Mphini was beaten up by Mzondiwa. They say Mphini is a proud man and a friend of the police. It is indeed proper that people should hate a person who is a friend of the police because people hate the police. However, people hate the police because they do not know that their function is to fight crime only. (p. 49 — author's translation)

It is important to notice how the people view the police. They see them as agents of oppression. The police have failed to gain the support of the people. Mathebe, however, as a wife of the pastor, must not be seen to be against the police, hence the rider of the last sentence. But the damage has already been done because she has already said, 'it is indeed proper

that . . . These comments therefore, demonstrate that Mzondiwa is not just fighting individuals but fighting a system.

A few months after the fight between Mzondiwa and Mphini, Mzondiwa is again involved in the assault of a detective named Dick. He fights Dick because Dick has arrested Nkanyiso, Mzondiwa's friend, because Nkanyiso had bought goods from the black market. Nkanyiso did it out of ignorance, so he tells the pastor's wife. The pastor's wife tells Nkanyiso that this is a way of life for most Black people because black markets offer them some relief from the system that oppresses every Black person.

The pastor's wife is thus aware that the Black people are oppressed by the colonial system, although she may not necessarily agree with measures of redressing the injustice. Furthermore, the statement vindicates Mzondiwa's actions of fighting those that prop up the oppressive system. In this way it is safe to argue that Mzondiwa is politically conscious.

Thirdly, Mzondiwa and his associates are involved in robbing a White businessman who operates a beer garden for Black employees in the mining town. They waylay him at a month-end after he had just collected the day's takings. They take all the money but leave him unharmed. The robbers are never found and the money is never recovered.

The existence of a beer garden in the Black township must be seen in the light of the situation prevailing in the country. The only form of entertainment provided for Black workers is beer. This beer not only takes away their meagre salaries but keeps their minds drugged so that they cannot have time to think about their problems. The beer garden, therefore, is there to exploit the Black workers. The attack on its proprietor is an attack on the whole system that exploits the people.

In all these situations Mzondiwa is involved, but the authorities view these acts as acts of thuggery and nothing else. Mzondiwa, whom they regard as a fool, cannot have the foresight to fight the system; this is implied in their reaction to what he does. They feel that Mzondiwa is not intelligent enough to see beyond the surface level of things. In this way Mzondiwa's actions are perceived in the same way as those of Qalani in the folk-tale. He is not seen as being a threat to the system. This explains why, even when he is arrested, he gets away with a light punishment.

The failure of the state to punish Mzondiwa severely gives Mzondiwa an opportunity to continue perpetrating acts of violence. He thus emerges as a hero who is cunning and is able to outwit the sophisticated colonial system. In this way Mzondiwa gives hope to those who are fighting against the colonial regime. Mzondiwa's successes encourage them and they have firm hope that the colonial system can be challenged because Mzondiwa has succeeded in eliminating some of the agents of the colonial regime.

After examining all the activities in which Mzondiwa is involved, a clear pattern begins to emerge. Mzondiwa does not just kill anyone but

selects his victims according to their involvement with the colonial regime. It is reasonable to conclude, from what has happened, that his aims are to bring about the downfall of the colonial regime by destroying all those who prop it up. The authorities at Nungwa only begin to realize this at a time when Mzondiwa has already hatched new plots. He sneaks out of Nungwa and out of the country before the law-enforcement agents apprehend him. Like the legendary Qalani in the folk-tale, the authorities hear about the whereabouts of Mzondiwa but are unable to catch him. As Mzondiwa flees the country, some of his colleagues are killed in the skirmishes with the supporters of the regime. Mzondiwa survives the hazardous journey and reaches his destination, Johannesburg, in South Africa.

In presenting Mzondiwa in this manner, Ndlovu is careful not to appear to be openly advocating the downfall of the colonial regime. It is for this reason that he allows Mzondiwa to wear the mantle of a criminal who is sought after by law-enforcement agents. But the fact that Mzondiwa is allowed to outwit them in spite of his rural background, and the fact that he is uneducated, should be an indication that the writer does not regard him as a criminal.

Mzondiwa escapes to South Africa, following the route taken by most of the young men of his period who went there in search of greener pastures. Here again Mzondiwa will be viewed in the same way as those other young people who jumped the borders into South Africa, and thus his political consciousness is minimized. But a critical reader will be able to notice differences in his actions.

Firstly, since Mzondiwa has spent all his time at Nungwa fighting the agents of the colonial regime, it is unlikely that he will change from this stance. Secondly, before leaving for South Africa, Mzondiwa visits his parents at Ngodlweni where he leaves his clothes and instructs them to keep them for him until he returns from South Africa. This could imply that he is not going to work in South Africa — otherwise why would he be so concerned about these old clothes. Thirdly, during the period when this novel was published, the 1950s, South Africa had taken the lead in fighting for political freedom for the Black people. It is reasonable to assume that those who were engaged in similar activities to those of Mzondiwa would want to go to South Africa to acquire new tactics. Mzondiwa is, one assumes, on a learning mission; when he returns, as he has promised his parents, he will be better equipped to topple the regime.

It is on the basis of the above argument that I view the portrayal of Mzondiwa as being parallel to that of the folk-tale character, Qalani. The reader, once the presentation is seen in this light, is being invited to see the actions of Mzondiwa in terms of those of the legendary Qalani. Mzondiwa will return to rid his society of the menace of colonial oppression just as Qalani rid his society of the menace of the Zimuz — the legendary cannibals that had insatiable appetite for human flesh.

The element of protest is thus achieved through Mzondiwa's failure to reform when he is placed at the local pastor's house where he was expected to be rehabilitated. The implications of the rehabilitation were that he would have been taught to accept authority and not question those in positions of power. This view comes out through what the pastor's wife says when she explains why Mzondiwa has been sent to their house. She says that he has been sent there in the hope that he will be reformed, because a boy of similar character who had been sent to the pastor's house before Mzondiwa was working then and his White employer was full of praise for him.

Mzondiwa's failure to reform should be viewed as his refusal to submit to an unjust system. The writer does not punish him for this course of action but provides him with plots that enable him to outwit the sophisticated colonial system. This, in my view, is a clear indication of where the writer's sympathies lie. The writer is not putting Mzondiwa through an educational process; instead, he wants him to continue with his original mission to the end. When the novel closes there is great hope that Mzondiwa will return in full force to smash the colonial regime. He, like Qalani in the folk-tale, will hatch new plots to outmanoeuvre the agents of the colonial regime.

The reader of this novel is invited to view the actions of Mzondiwa in line with those of the folk-tale character by the constant reference to folk-tales that is made in the narrative. Mzondiwa refers to the sermon in church as *ingane kwane*, something that is incredible. Other characters, too, refer to incredible events or situations as folk-tale. This, however, is not to say folk-tales are inferior stories but that their stories are not to be taken at their surface level. Clearly the story of Mzondiwa is to be viewed from a similar point of view.

Readers who fail to see similarities between Mzondiwa and the folk-tale character Qalani often dismiss Mzondiwa as a thug or a crazy character. They end up blaming his parents for their failure to embrace modern European education and they conclude that Mzondiwa's problems originated from his parents' failures. They fail to realize Mzondiwa's potential in ridding his society of colonial oppression as already demonstrated by his fights against those who support the colonial regime.

This view about Mzondiwa's role is supported by the outcome of Nkanyiso's endeavours. Nkanyiso has adopted European education and aspires to their way of life. He has become a staunch Christian and strongly believes in the uprightness of the church leadership. However, at the end of his stay at Nungwa, Nkanyiso has lost faith in the colonial regime because of the way the Black people are treated by the colonial police.

When he is arrested for buying goods from the black market he is beaten up by the police even before being proved guilty. He discovers that the authorities do not talk to Black people nicely, nor do they listen to

what Black people say. But when a White person speaks, his word is law. The narrator says:

When Nkanyiso's employer was told about Nkanyiso's crime he dismissed it outright and argued that if Nkanyiso had indeed bought stolen shoes he had done so out of ignorance. He then insisted that Nkanyiso should be set free. Consequently Nkanyiso was set free.

This kind of treatment of Black people by the colonial authorities made Nkanyiso change his attitude towards the regime. He began to refuse to co-operate with the police.

Although Nkanyiso was now lukewarm towards the colonial regime he continued to embrace the White man's religion, Christianity. When he was disappointed by the hypocrisy of the church leadership he broke away from the orthodox church and formed his own church which was free from hypocrisy. His church was prosperous during his life-time and had a huge following, but after Nkanyiso's death it also crumbled. It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that Nkanyiso's endeavours come to a dead end. The writer does not perceive this character as having a future, unlike Mzondiwa who is expected to return to Ngodlweni and continue the struggle.

The portrayal of these two central characters, Mzondiwa and Nkanyiso, forces me to conclude that Mzondiwa should not be viewed as a thug but as a hero. He will return like the legendary folk-tale character. It is reasonable to conclude by crediting E. M. Ndlovu with a foresight that predicted the events of the Zimbabwean war of liberation. The politically motivated Blacks were going to sneak out of Rhodesia into the neighbouring states where they acquired weapons and new skills to fight the colonial regime. This was already happening in the 1950s, though on a very small scale, and, like Mzondiwa, they promised to return and did so in the 1970s. It was not easy for most readers at that time to see this possibility, but the careful protection of Mzondiwa by the writer makes this view possible.

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- N. S. SIGOGO, *Gudlindlu Mntanami* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, in association with the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau, 1967).