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URBAN CHARACTERS: CHARACTER DEPICTION AND PERCEPTION BY SOME VHAVENDA AUTHORS

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Abstract

Urban and rural characters are perceived differently by some Vhavenda authors. This article examines the perception of urban characters expressed in three novels by three different authors, I. P. Demana, E. S. Madima and E. T. Maumela. These authors present common stereotypes of urban characters as untrustworthy, scheming and dishonest, and contemptuous of those with rural backgrounds. Rural characters are presented as naïve and foolish in their dealings with urban characters. People who move from the rural areas to urban settings as migrants are depicted as dropping the moral values of their rural settings.

THE PURPOSE OF this article is to show how some Vhavenda authors perceive urban characters. There are very few narratives in Tshivenda which portray urban characters in their development of themes. This is due to the fact that almost all authors writing in Tshivenda so far have been living in rural areas and lack experience of urban life. A brief overview of the depiction of characters by I. P. Demana, E. S. Madima and E. T. Maumela is provided and thereafter an evaluation of how these authors perceive urban characters is presented.

In this article, 'characters' imply imaginary persons who perform the actions that constitute plot in a literary work. They act as a vehicle through which the message is passed over to the receiver. Characters are therefore essential in the development of plot and theme.

One of the issues raised in this article is the uncritical acceptance of rural stereotypes of urban characters. Authors cannot totally avoid using popular stereotypes because this is influenced by the period in which the literary work is written. On incorporating a popular stereotype, a creative author should challenge it and try to recreate it into a convincing individual.

Characters' actions are influenced by setting. The same character will act differently in different settings. Characters in urban areas would act differently from those found in rural areas, because in urban areas large numbers of people are concentrated in relatively small areas, which are characterised by the modern life, whereas in the rural areas, there is a low ratio of inhabitants to open land; rural people adhere to farming as a way of life and are still guided by tradition.

By 'urban characters' in this article is meant those characters who reside in urban areas. Urban settings can be divided into two types in this regard. One type is the urban setting which has recently developed in rural areas as a result of the establishment of homelands for different ethnic groups. These urban settings are greatly influenced by rural life. Characters in these settings fall outside the scope of this article because they are still influenced by the traditional life. The second type is the urban setting which has long been established and is little influenced by rural settings. Here we can refer to urban settings such as Pretoria, Johannesburg and Vereeniging. These settings, and characters influenced by them, will form the focus of this article.

It is possible further to sub-divide the characters found in urban settings into those who are permanent residents of these areas and are in no way influenced by rural life, and those who, because of apartheid policies or for economic reasons, were not permanent in these areas. The latter group, being mainly migrant workers, are often housed in hostels. Their permanent residence is in the rural areas and they only come to the urban areas to work. As a result, these characters feel the influence of rural traditions. Both types of characters will be considered in this article because they are residents of this type of urban setting.

Modern literature in Tshivenda began in the mid-1950s with the publication of *Elelwani* (1954) and *A Si Ene* (1956). The first authors of modern literature among Vhavenda wrote on different themes which reflected the people with whom they stayed, almost always in rural areas. Only Madima, in his *A Si Ene* and Masekela, in his *Nungo Dzi Mulomoni*, mixed the rural setting and the urban setting at the time. This is the case because in these two narratives events take place both in urban and rural areas. A few more recent narratives that portray urban characters in Tshivenda are *Thonga A I Pfi Ndo Tou Doba* (1980) by I. P. Demana, *Philiphise A Si Tshilonda* (1983) by E. T. Maumela, *Zwi Do Fhela Ngani* (1983) by N. G. Magwabeni, *Gundo* (1988) by N. G. Magwabeni, *Mitsheto Ya Wa* (1984) by A. W. Magau, and some short stories in volumes such as *Zwiitavhathu* (1965) by T. N. Maumela, and *A Zwi Faneli* (1971) by T. N. Makuya. In this article, only *A Si Ene*, *Thonga A I Pfi Ndo Tou Doba*, and *Philiphise A Si Tshilonda* will be analysed.

Some authors, like Maumela, in his *Zwi Mulouha Zwi A Fhela*, tried to bring out their themes by using both the rural and the urban settings, but were not successful in this regard because they failed to show urban characters in action. Malilele, one of the main characters in this narrative, is depicted as a migrant worker. He spends most of his time in urban areas and only comes to Venda when he is on leave or during the holidays. While reading this narrative, one would like to see him in action, communicating with other characters in Johannesburg. However, the

author indicates only that he has left for Johannesburg or is back from Johannesburg. Another character in this narrative whose contact with urban life has helped to develop the theme is Malilele's second wife, Mukumela. Before Mukumela goes to Johannesburg with Malilele, she is portrayed as a Muvenda woman who respects Tshivenda custom. She used to respect Malilele's first wife who was also responsible for her marriage to Malilele. She stayed for more than two years in Johannesburg. On coming back from urban areas, she did not want to share her husband with the first wife. This change in attitude demonstrates the influence of urban life on her. Readers assume that she had been influenced by other characters in urban areas, but the author does not depict her association with other characters in urban areas at all. Readers can only make this deduction from her actions back in the rural areas. Thus, although the author refers to the urban setting in passing, he has not truly depicted characters in their urban setting.

CHARACTER DEPICTION IN THE SELECTED NARRATIVES

Both Madima and Demana, in their narratives, *A Si Ene* and *Thonga A I Pfi Ndo Tou Doba*, mixed the urban and rural settings to develop a plot, action and themes. However, in *Philiphise A Si Tshilonda*, most actions take place in a rural setting, but with urban characters involved. There is very little reference to the urban setting in this narrative.

A Si Ene, in contrast, is the first novel of its kind to include both the rural and urban settings to develop theme in Tshivenda literature. In order to show how the author achieves this, a brief discussion of the storyline of the narrative will follow.

The storyline in *A Si Ene* is based on Adziambel, Maluta, and Muhanelwa. The story commences in the rural areas when Maluta is about to marry Muhanelwa. Muhanelwa, who is reluctant to marry, employs some delaying tactics. As a result, Adziambel elopes with Maluta to Hammanskraal where Maluta stays as a migrant worker. After a short stay in Hammanskraal, Adziambel is taken by Fanyana to stay in Benoni. Maluta asks his wife Muhanelwa to pay him a visit in Germiston. However, Maluta is re-united with Adziambel before Muhanelwa arrives in Germiston. When Muhanelwa arrives, Maluta hires thugs to kill her. Instead of killing her, the thugs give her money to go back to Venda. Maluta goes insane and Adziambel sends him back home. Maluta dies of shock at a bus stop after seeing his wife, Muhanelwa.

Adziambel and Maluta are rural characters in nature but happen to be in an urban area because Maluta is a migrant worker. Madima presents urban characters as untrustworthy. This is achieved through Fanyana's actions, who is Maluta's friend. Maluta and Fanyana work for the same

company in Germiston. After finding out that Maluta has a beautiful woman, Fanyana comes up with a plan to win her. Adziambel, Maluta's girlfriend, stays at Hammanskraal while Maluta works in Germiston. Maluta visits his girlfriend on weekends and during holidays. One day during the week, Fanyana goes to Hammanskraal and tells Adziambel that he has been sent by Maluta to fetch her so that he (Maluta) can buy her some new clothes. Adziambel goes off to Benoni with Fanyana and is not heard of by Maluta for a long time.

The urban atmosphere changes Maluta's view of life. He is not afraid of killing a person for convenience. This is not according to Tshivenda custom and tradition in which Maluta was born and brought up. Vhavenda people have a high respect for human life. In urban areas, Maluta acts contrary to his custom and tradition. On re-uniting with Adziambel, he decides to kill his legitimate wife, Muhanelwa, whom he had asked to visit him, because she disturbs their love affair. Fortunately, the thugs he hired give her money to take the train home. According to the African traditional values, Maluta should have stayed with both Adziambel and Muhanelwa, or else he should have sent Muhanelwa back home.

Like Maluta, a reader can assume that Adziambel changes her view of life because of the influence of the urban setting. She does not respect Tshivenda traditional values when she is in urban areas. She hires a person to kill Fanyana. In sending Maluta home by train while he is very ill, she does not act like a Muvenda rural woman. She should have accompanied him home if she really loved him. Mathiyha (1972, 195) says of Adziambel's character

This aspect of her character shows that she has really changed from the conduct that she had in Vendale and has really become an urban girl who is as cruel as a snake that does nothing but kill although it will not eat the animal.

As in *A Si Ene, Thonga A I Pfi Ndo Tou Doba* uses both the rural and the urban settings to develop its theme. In this narrative, Magelegele is married to Laedzani and they stay in the rural areas of Venda together with their son, Thambatshira. Magelegele works in Johannesburg as a migrant worker. Like other migrant workers, he stays in a hostel. He becomes infatuated with Grace, a Tswana woman who is a widow and who owns a house in Meadowlands Township. She asks Magelegele to move in with her. Magelegele does so, forgets his family in Venda and helps bring up Grace's children. He accuses his wife in Venda of witchcraft. When Magelegele is retired, Grace and her children send him back to Venda. In Venda, he asks his son, Tshambatshira, who is a school principal, to forgive him and accept him back. Unfortunately, Magelegele dies in hospital before he can go and stay with his own child.

Grace is a permanent resident of Meadowlands Township because she owns a house. She is portrayed as a crook, an exploiter and an unfaithful woman. She seduces Magelegele who works in the same factory as herself because she wants him to help her bring up her children. Her conversation with Phineas, her lover, illustrates this point very clearly.

Munna hoyu ndo vha tshi shuma nae u swika nwedzi wo fhelaho ndi tshi litsha mushumo. Nge nda vhone vhusiwana hovhu ho ndungamaho ndo do ita uri ndi dzule nae a nyatusele vhana na u vha dzhenisa tshikolo u nga ni tshi khou zwi vhone uri zwo vha zwi tshi do nkondela (Demana, 1980, 20).

I was working with this man until last month when I left work. After realising my poverty, I decided to stay with him so that he would help me bring up these children as you can also see that it would be difficult for me to bring them up.

Grace cares for Magelegele tenderly, which his legitimate wife had never done. She cooks him nice food and buys him beer. Rural Vhavenda are used to eating maize-porridge with vegetables or some kind of meat. When they come across delicious food, they are impressed. This was certainly true in Magelegele's case. In return for this, Magelegele buys her everything she wants and pays for her children's school fees. He despises his own child when Thambatshira pays him a visit in Johannesburg. He does not acknowledge him as his own son. However, when Magelegele is pensioned, Grace evicts him and buys him a train ticket to Venda. This reveals the exploitation she has practised on him throughout. This type of life as Vorster *et al.* put it, reveals the confrontation of the rural tradition-oriented indigenous inhabitants with Western technology and the concomitant process of urbanisation (p. 189).

Grace is in love with another man while staying with Magelegele as husband and wife. She does not even see Magelegele as a problem in her love affair with Phineas. When Phineas pays them a visit, she tells Magelegele that Phineas is her brother. Initially, Phineas is told that Magelegele is a Muvenda man who is a lodger in the house. This suggests that Grace looks down upon Magelegele in particular, and rural people in general, because she does not admit that she and Magelegele are staying together as husband and wife.

Grace and Phineas rob Magelegele of his money. Phineas, pretending to be Grace's brother, demands bride-price from Magelegele. Magelegele pays part of the money and promises to pay the balance at a later stage. Magelegele opens a bank account in Grace's name. When Grace evicts him after he has retired, she gives him no money to take home, except for the train fare. Kgopelo, like his mother, Grace, changes his attitude towards

Magelegele when he is a grown up man. He no longer shows respect for Magelegele, the person who tried to please him while he was still at school. He orders his mother to evict Magelegele. He even organises his friends to murder Magelegele, but fortunately the plot falls through. At home, Kgopelo slaps Magelegele for arguing with Grace, Kgopelo's mother.

Magelegele on the other hand, is not a permanent resident of Johannesburg. He would like to be a permanent resident of Johannesburg, but the Act passed by the government of the day stipulated that African rural people should be in urban areas for work purposes only. Their families should remain in the rural areas. When their contracts expire, they were bound to go back to the rural areas to renew them. Moreover, they were not allowed to move about in the White suburbs. If they were found moving in prohibited areas, they were arrested and escorted back to the rural areas. Magelegele is used to staying in a hostel where other migrant workers stay. He is not used to urban life. When he gets to Grace's house, he is surprised to see a Black woman owning such a beautiful, four-roomed house, with beautiful sofas, chairs and pictures on the wall. As a rural man, he belongs to a peasant class, whose homes are without sophisticated household goods. This suggests to us that prior to meeting Grace, Magelegele had little experience of urban life outside the hostels.

While Magelegele is in an urban area, he does not behave as a Muvenda man. A Muvenda man, as head of the family, is not supposed to be dictated to by the wife. According to Tshivenda traditional custom, a man does not elope with a woman to her residence, but the woman should stay at the man's homestead. Had these events occurred in the rural areas of Venda, Magelegele would have taken Grace with all her children to his homestead as his second wife. However, in the urban areas, he acts contrary to this, perhaps forced by economic and social conditions. His perception of urban life has changed his view on the position of a man. Furthermore, in order to be accepted by Grace, he changes his language of communication. He speaks Tswana, Grace's mother tongue. According to traditional Tshivenda values, if a woman of another language marries a man, the woman must learn the language of the man. In reality, if rural people, especially Vhavenda and Vatsonga, happen to be in an urban area, they feel inferior speaking their own languages. On the other hand, urban people suffer from superiority complex in this regard. They will never learn a language such as Tshivenda which they consider inferior.

Magelegele is portrayed as a fool. He pays bride-price to Phineas without first verifying whether Phineas is Grace's brother. Even if Phineas had been her real brother, Magelegele could not pay bride-price on meeting him for the first time. Had he followed the Tshivenda custom, Grace's and Magelegele's families should have made all the necessary arrangements in

this regard. There should have been a messenger to conduct all the formalities.

Unlike the two novels discussed above, the setting in *Philiphise A Si Tshilonda* is in a rural area, with urban characters involved in the development of theme. Urban characters in consideration are Zodwa and Themba.

The line of action in *Philiphise A Si Tshilonda* commences with Mukandangalwo proposing love to Tibani. Tibani accepts the proposal and falls pregnant before she gets married to Mukandangalwo. All formal arrangements to marry Tibani are made by Mukandangalwo's parents after the birth of the child. Tibani becomes ill and Mukandangalwo takes her to Rishile Hospital. She is admitted and stays at the hospital for a number of days. Mukandangalwo falls in love with Zodwa, a nurse at the hospital, who befriends Tibani, a patient. Zodwa's home is in Vereeniging. Mukandangalwo leaves Tibani for Zodwa. He pays a bride-price for Zodwa and marries her. Themba, who claims to be Zodwa's brother, pays Mukandangalwo's family a visit. He stays at Mukandangalwo's place for a number of days. Before he goes back to Vereeniging, he arranges with Zodwa to come back to rob Mukandangalwo. On the day of the robbery, his plan is foiled by the police, who kill him before he takes Mukandangalwo's property.

Zodwa is not a faithful woman because she pretends to be in love with Mukandangalwo, whereas all she wants is his money. Zodwa and Themba organise to rob Mukandangalwo of the wealth which he inherited from his late father. At first, Mukandangalwo is made to pay bride-price to Themba. Mukandangalwo, accompanied by his friend, Mukhwandala, goes to Vereeniging to pay R1 200 in bride-price for Zodwa who is on leave at the time. He does not use mediators to arrange his marriage to Zodwa as expected by the Tshivenda culture. Zodwa is released by Themba to go with Mukandangalwo to Venda. However, this is a joint strategy devised by the two to rob Mukandangalwo of his property. Mukandangalwo owns a big 12-roomed house, a retail store and a milling plant. Zodwa's stay with Mukandangalwo is to oversee his movements. When Themba pays them a visit, Zodwa shows that she does not love Mukandangalwo when she says:

Lushaka holwu ndi lwa madanana fhedzi 'darling'. Ndi nnyi ane a nga malwa nga madithu a no la vathu? Na uri 'love' ndi mini ha vhuvi a zwi divha. Tshao ndi u viana a tshi lana. Tshelede yone a nayo. Zwino a ri u i vholunga rine vhotalingwane ra da ra dzhia ngauri ri na mushumo nayo. Ri a funela khole zwenezwo. Hafhu ro pulana (Maumela, 1983, 36-37).

This nation is characterised by fools, darling. Who can marry monsters who eat people? They do not even know what love is. Theirs is ritual murder and eating each other. However, they have plenty of money. When they save it, we clever

people come and take it because we have use for it. We pretend to love them as a result. Indeed, we have planned.

From this passage, one assumes that Zodwa and Themba are lovers. Rural characters in the passage are not shown as people, but animals. No normal person can eat another person. It is only animals which can eat other animals. Zodwa and Themba are at Mukandangalwo's place to rob him. After a short stay at Mukandangalwo's house, Themba goes back to Vereeniging. He organises a truck to come and fetch Mukandangalwo's property. On the day of the robbery, Maradzhe, Mukandangalwo's half brother, foils it by informing the police. However, Mukandangalwo is beaten by Themba and his friend before Themba is killed by the police. Zodwa kicks Mukandangalwo and says:

Vhavenda ni tou vha madonngi ni a diha. Ni humbula uri muthu a no nga sa nne a nga malwa nga madithu a no la vathu? Wanga munna we ra saina rothe arali u sa mu divhi ndi onoyu ane iwe wa ri ndi sivhara tshau. Phuphula iyi! A u koni u dielekanyela. Rine ri khou toda masheleni hayo e wa dadza sefo na thundu ra bua ra fhela (Maumela, 1983, 44).

Vhavenda people are donkeys, you know. Do you think a person like me can marry monsters who eat people? My own husband whom I sworn with, if you do not know him, is this very one you say is your brother-in-law. You stupid! You cannot think for yourself. As for us, we want your money of which there is plenty in the safe and furniture, and go away.

Zodwa is a cheat. She is not a nurse by profession. She took her late twin sister's nursing certificate and used it to get employment at the hospital.

EVALUATION

The authors of these three narratives see urban characters, both women and men, as unfaithful. Urban female characters such as Grace in *Thonga A I Pfi Ndo Tou Doba* and Zodwa in *Philiphise A Si Tshilonda*, are not faithful to their 'husbands'. They marry rural men to get money from them. Fanyana in *A Si Ene* is unfaithful to his friend Maluta because he steals Maluta's girlfriend and is never seen again. Whereas Demana and Maumela portray only permanent urban characters as unfaithful, in Madima's view, it does not matter whether the character is a permanent resident of urban areas or a migrant worker. Maluta, who is a migrant worker, is not faithful to his legitimate wife, Muhanelwa.

Urban characters are considered to be exploiters by Demana and Maumela. They go to the extent of using a person to achieve their own goals. This is attested by the actions of Grace and Zodwa who rob

Magelele and Mukandangalwo respectively of their monies on the pretence that they love them. All authors portray urban characters as cheats, who can easily extort money from a person by telling lies. Both Grace and Zodwa made Magelele and Mukandangalwo pay bride-price to Phineas and Themba respectively, on the pretence that they were their brothers. While Demana and Maumela portray rural characters in urban areas as fools who cannot think for themselves, Madima does not see any difference between permanent urban residence and migrant workers in urban areas.

Urban characters are presented as despising ethnic groups such as Vhavenda and Vatsonga. Magelele learns to speak Setswana so as to be accepted by Grace and her children. Grace never learns to speak Tshivenda while staying with Magelele as his wife. Zodwa, on the other hand, considers Vhavenda as people who are unable to think for themselves, and associates them with animals.

All three authors associate people, both male and female, with murder. Themba and Zodwa want to kill Mukandangalwo in *Philiphise A Si Tshilonda*, Kgopelo wants to kill Magelele in *Thonga A I Pfi Ndo Tou Doba*, Maluta wants to kill Muhanelwa and Adziambi hires a person to kill Fanyana in *A Si Ene*. Murder and thuggery are perceived as part of urban life.

In *A Si Ene*, urban characters of all ethnic groups, Vhavenda included, are perceived negatively. However, in *Thonga A I Pfi Ndo Tou Doba* and *Philiphise A Si Tshilonda*, only ethnic groups which are not Vhavenda are perceived negatively. Demana perceives Basotho urban characters negatively, especially female characters when it comes to the treatment of rural men, while Maumela perceives the Nguni urban characters negatively, that is, both male and female.

A more important point is that the authors depict urban Blacks according to a naïve stereotype, which suggests that the authors have little personal contact with these urban people. The assumption of the narratives appears to be that life lived according to traditional ideals is good and any variation from it leads to a breakdown of morals. Because of the influence of their rural setting, the authors do not show any sign of identifying themselves with urban people. The authors further show no awareness of serious attempts to adapt to new economic and social conditions that towns demand.

Urban characters have been depicted negatively to protect and enhance African traditional values, suggesting the authors' love for traditional culture. Characters in cities are presented as having lost touch with tradition. Authors ignore the realities about the economic and social conditions that towns demand. Nevertheless, the authors have a moral lesson to their readers. Urban people are told to treat rural people with respect. On the other hand, rural people are taught to change their attitude

towards urban life. They should be liberated from the hold of rural traditional life and refrain from being dominated by urban people. The bad economic conditions had a hand in the depiction of both the towns-folk and country-folk in urban areas. Characters acted cruelly or foolishly in attempting to adapt to new economic and residential conditions that towns demand. Life in town is expensive when compared to rural life. When urban characters try to adapt their living conditions accordingly, they are accused of violating moral values.

Finally, the authors did not make use of urban Whites in the development of plots and themes in their narratives. The absence of these characters reveal the time in which the narratives were written when urban Whites did not stay in the same residential areas as urban Blacks. One would expect to see urban Blacks intermingling with urban Whites in the work place, shopping centres and other environments in the progression of plot of the narratives. Although Demana and Madima wrote extensively on characters in urban settings, they never touched this population group. Malilele and Grace in *Thonga A I Pfi Ndo Tou Doba* work with Whites, as do Maluta and Fanyana in *A Si Ene*. Maumela wrote very little on an urban setting and never touched the White population group in the development of his theme. It could be assumed that these authors did not have enough experience of urban life and settings.

CONCLUSION

By protecting and enhancing African traditional values, authors simply satisfied popular stereotypes by presenting foolish country-folk and wicked towns-folk, diminishing the interest and literary value of the narrative. Since Tshivenda literature is still young, one can hope that these stories are just a beginning from which more sophisticated art will develop.

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