Chapter 10

Unholy Unions: Analysing the Constitutionality of Levirate Marriages in Zulu Custom

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Introduction

Nelisiwe Zulu's books *Isiko Nelungelo* (2011a) and *Umshado* (2011b) are written in a post-1994 South African context and demonstrate the conflict between patriarchal societies and the modern world. While patriarchal families still believe in cultural traditions that are oppressive to women, the modern world seems to embrace the feminist ideology and advocate for gender equality (Ntshangase 2018a). The Constitution, guaranteeing and safeguarding women's rights, supports South African women who believe in the modern world (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development 1996).

The two abovementioned books engaged with in this chapter illustrate that the dawn of democracy in South Africa did not make life easier for some women who marry into patriarchal families (Zulu 2011a, 2011b). Those women find themselves subjected to marginalisation and degradation by oppressive cultural customs regarding marriage (Ntshangase 2018b). Since literature is critical in shaping and changing how society thinks about gender issues, those two books were deemed suitable for a discussion of how the cultural tradition of levirate marriage suppresses the constitutional rights of women in post-1994 democratic South Africa. They show the power of the isiZulu language in entrenching gender stereotypes to propagate gender imbalances between men and women in patriarchal Zulu families and society at large.

Levirate marriage is not a strictly Afrocentric cultural tradition but a global phenomenon (Agarwal 1994; Nyanzi, Emodu-Walakira and Serwaniko 2009; Doosuur and Arome 2013; Ogolla 2014; Baloyi 2015; Westreich 2019). Although this cultural tradition, which was already practised by the ancient Israelites, is no longer as dominant as it used to be, it is still being practised by societies around the world—for example, the Punjab and Haryana of India, some communities in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Igbo of Nigeria, the Nandi, Luo and Kamba of Kenya, Zambia, Uganda and

Sudan, the Supyire of Mali, the Akan of Ghana, the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Sotho, Venda, Tsonga and Nguni in South Africa (Baloyi 2015).

Levirate marriage occurs when a widow is forced by her in-laws to marry her deceased husband's brother (Ogolla 2014). The term levirate marriage is derived from the Latin term *levir*, meaning a husband's brother (Ogolla 2014). Justification for levirate marriage is often based on religion and culture (Baloyi 2015). In an African setting, especially in South Africa, patriarchal families have always used cultural customs to compel women to enter into loveless levirate marriages (Baloyi 2015). These families ignore the fact that according to the Constitution, all people are equal before the law, regardless of race, gender or creed, and women have the right to refuse any form of oppression or subjugation (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development 1996).

Nevertheless, even in democratic South Africa, some women are still being forced into levirate marriages by their patriarchal families. This chapter aims to provide answers to the following questions:

1. How are widows demeaned and trapped in marriages that could be classified as unholy unions?

2. Why and how do these unholy unions obstruct the feminist agenda of emancipating women from all forms of domination by men?

Levirate marriages as a direct attack on the feminist agenda of equality

Nelisiwe Zulu's books *Isiko Nelungelo* and *Umshado* both interrogate gender issues, especially the oppression of women by the families of their deceased husbands through levirate marriage. If analysed through a feminist lens, these books could fuel a robust debate embracing all ideologies of feminism and interrogating how gender imbalances are entrenched in the use of isiZulu.

The feminist criticism approach followed in the analysis of these two books is interdisciplinary as it allows for a multi-thematic analysis involving diverse disciplines, such as anthropology, education, history, language, law, philosophy, psychology and religion. These disciplines play a role in critically analysing the themes of the two books and in substantiating the argument with credible examples depicting the severity of gender inequalities in patriarchal Zulu families. The thematic analysis approach adopted in this chapter speaks directly to the language usage in isiZulu literature viewed through the lens of literary feminist criticism.

The books are analysed by unpacking how the social scripts and institutions, such as cultural institutions and levirate marriage, are used to police gender identities, power and privilege (Butler 1988, 1997, 1999). Since Nelisiwe Zulu's books are both prescribed as Grade 12 set works in IsiZulu First Additional Language, they must be analysed as educational tools for ushering in social change and justice. Young Zulu women and men should read about the violation of women's constitutional rights, engage in debates about these issues, and reposition themselves in society as the custodians of change. The model of educational intervention should embrace the feminist ideals advocated for by Butler (1988) in her assertion that feminism should be about empowering women and should encapsulate the emancipation of all of society from the theatrical acts that exalt men over women.

Nelisiwe Zulu's books expose a string of classical performances or theatrical acts, such as levirate marriage, embroidered in the form of cultural traditions. Butler (1999), who warns that if this string of classical acts goes unchallenged, societies will most likely naturalise or normalise them, believes that the normalisation of these theatrical acts poses a great danger to the feminist agenda of changing the perceptions of society. Once these acts are normalised, it becomes difficult to root them out from society's psyche. Gender inequality could create psychological and cognitive dissonance if it is not deconstructed and subverted (Butler 1999).

Nelisiwe Zulu's books are analysed thematically by juxtaposing literary feminist criticism with narrative criticism. For an authentic interpretation of the text, the argument must be substantiated with a direct narration from the stories (Gunn and Fewell 1993). Although it is impossible to unpack the entire plot and characterisation in an academic chapter, this chapter aims to make the reader aware of what is dealt with in the books. The narrative criticism approach makes critical engagement with the books' themes possible. The books discuss cultural traditions, such as levirate marriage, *ilobolo* (bride price), ancestry, religion and patriarchal families' disproval of deep feelings such as love. The analysis of these themes is contextualised in the post-1994 democratic South Africa, which boasts a Constitution that guarantees and safeguards the rights of all citizens.

It is important to note that the themes of the books are not only analysed as fictional works of art with fictional characters but also from the viewpoint that language choices in literature play a critical role in shaping the thoughts of society. The reason for this is that language and literature 'are representative of the struggle for power between different social groups in society' (Anttila, Leskinen, Posti-Ahokas and Janhonen-Abruquah 2015: 62). Therefore, what Nelisiwe Zulu narrates in her books and the characters she developed are true reflections of the feelings, thoughts, philosophies and cosmologies of Zulu communities. The pain, struggles, triumphs, failures and suffering of women portrayed in these books are projections of the lived experiences of women in the broader society.

Zulu women are victims of cultural beliefs and traditions

In the play *Isiko Nelungelo*, the author shows that the cultural tradition of levirate marriage is oppressive to women as it robs them of their right to move on with their lives after the death of a husband.

> *MaMbatha:* *Uyabona njengoba wakhishwa kini kwabikwa emadlozini nje, akuselula ukuthi ubuye ubuyele kini. Uyothi uyaqhamuka bathi abamfuni umuntu obuye emendweni. Wena awusenayo indawo kini*. [You see, as your parents gave you to us and we introduced you to the ancestors, it is impossible to go back home. They will chase you away if you do so and will say that they do not welcome back people who have deserted their marriages. You no longer have a place at your original home.] (Zulu 2011a: 16)

The above quotation shows how the Zulu culture is deeply rooted in religion—in this case, ancestry religion. The ancestors are believed to be a powerful force controlling the fortunes of the living, and by defying them, one risks their wrath or punishment (Ntshangase 2018b). Therefore, we find MaZungu reminding Thenjiwe that the ancestors would not approve of her decision to return home after her husband's death. MaZungu is aware of the fear and respect most African people have for the ancestors and manipulates religious-cultural beliefs and cosmology to trap Thenjiwe into a marriage with her dead husband's brother. In isiZulu, a woman who leaves her marriage (whether the husband is alive or dead) is called *umabuyekwendeni* (the one who deserted her marriage). This derogatory term is used to demean women and force them into loveless marriages. If they refuse, they risk being cast out or frowned upon by their patriarchal families and society (Zulu 2011a).

In the play, Thenjiwe represents the voiceless women who become victims of societal-cultural beliefs and traditions. Nyengelele (2004: 56) explains the significance of culture as follows: 'Culture is a two-edged sword. In some instances, it is a badge or even the creed of community identity. However, in others, it is used to distinguish between different people in the community, which sometimes results in oppression and injustice.'

Examples are given of how the Zulu people use culture as the creed of community identity and a way to oppress women. Nelisiwe Zulu is known for demonstrating the plight of women in her literary works. In the novel *Umshado*, she narrates the story of a young woman, Tholakele, who strongly resisted her in-laws who wanted her to marry Bhatomu, her late husband's brother.

> *Lalela-ke Bheki* [Bhekani]. *Ngilapha nje ngibalekile. Ekushoneni kukababa wakithi, umfowabo wabe esethi uzongingena. Ngangingamfuni nhlobo. Ngathi nyawo zami ngibelethe*. [Listen here, Bheki [Bhekani]. I live here because I ran away from home. After the death of my husband, his brother wanted to take me as his wife. I did not love him at all. Then I decided to run away.] (Zulu 2011b: 8)

Two terms are used in isiZulu to refer to levirate marriage: *ukungena* and *ukungenwa*. *Ukungena* is the 'masculine' active-voice term used to describe the actions of a brother or half-brother of the deceased who marries his late brother's widow, while *ukungenwa* is the 'feminine' passive-voice term used to describe the widow's acceptance of a levirate marriage. My linguistic analysis and understanding of the two terms is that *ukungena* gives men the upper hand to do as they please with the grieving widow. It gives men the power to own the widow, her children and everything that belonged to the deceased husband. The term *ukungenwa* depicts women as passive players in this interplay of power between women and men. It removes women's power to refuse their families' demands when they are forced into a levirate marriage. Women who defy their families are often regarded as rebels.

In *Umshado*, Tholakele refuses to agree to a levirate marriage and runs away. Although running away worked for Tholakele, other women, such as Thenjiwe in *Isiko Nelungelo*, were less fortunate. When Thenjiwe tried to run away from her in-laws, her own parents forced her to return to her late husband's family as their culture did not permit a married woman to return to her own family, regardless of whether her husband was alive or dead.

The cultural oppression of women is as complex as culture itself as it is influenced by religion, history, the economy, politics, geography and anthropology (Cosgrove and Jackson 2013). Historically, a married Zulu woman was never allowed to leave her husband's family and return home. Although this is still generally the case in rural areas, such rules do not necessarily apply in urban areas where the economic status of women has changed. Women in urban areas, where many job opportunities exist, are more likely to be able to break away from their husbands' families and sustain themselves (Cosgrove and Jackson 2013). We saw this in the case of the character Tholakele in *Umshado*, who fled to an urban area and found employment. Thenjiwe, in *Isiko Nelungelo*, remained in the rural area and became a victim of an unjust cultural tradition when she was forced to marry the brother of her deceased husband.

In the two books, Nelisiwe Zulu tells the stories of two women living in rural areas, with one managing to relocate to the city. This shows that although all South African women have rights

enshrined in the Constitution, some women in rural areas are still victims of unjust cultural practices, such as levirate marriages. It would therefore be wrong to assume that since South Africa now has a constitutional democracy, all women are enjoying their rights. Such thinking 'tends to mask inequalities within and to reproduce sectional power and interests as the elite within the group control the membership resources and voice' (Albertyn 2009: 173).

In both the books under discussion, men seem to be benefiting from the unjust cultural traditions infringing on the constitutional rights of women, since in isiZulu, men are called *izinhloko zamakhaya* (the heads of families) and women are seen as subordinates who should accept whatever is imposed on them (Thabede 2017). When men are called *izinhloko zamakhaya*, they automatically think that it is their inalienable right to control the lives of women. Levirate marriage is a classic example of gender inequalities and men's control over women. Zulu's books show that despite the rights given to women by the Constitution, some women are still oppressed through the practice of cultural traditions.

Nelisiwe Zulu's books anchor the argument that culture cannot be ignored in a discourse about gender inequality, as culture plays a critical role in defining male and female identities (Koskinen 2008). In most societies, the degree of oppression of women by men is often measured by culture (Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui 2013). The binary division between men and women in the books delays the feminist agenda because 'in most societies, the allocated work designated to both women and men in the household and the wider community is validated and explained by culture' (Koskinen 2008: 159). Since men are the ones who generally benefit from this inequality, women's voices are often unheard in a patriarchal family, further hindering their holistic development within the family and society at large (Albertyn 2009). Zulu's books, especially the play *Isiko Nelungelo*, demonstrate how culture becomes inseparable from the identity of society since 'man creates culture but culture, in turn, makes man' (De Bruin 2002: 40). In the play, women are the instigators of the unjust cultural tradition of levirate marriage when they force Thenjiwe into a loveless marriage with her late husband's brother. Nevertheless, in a patriarchal family, women are voiceless because culture is often used as an excuse to oppress them (Thabede 2017).

In any society, as in their culture, people's perceptions, philosophies and cosmologies evolve. 'Culture is dynamic, not static, but patriarchal men are convinced that culture does not alter when times change' (Ntshangase 2018b: 88). In *Isiko Nelungelo*, Thenjiwe shows how times have changed and how that which was acceptable in the past might no longer be acceptable in a democratic South Africa.

> *Thenjiwe: Bathi likhona isiko elinjalo elalisebenza kuqala nokho-ke selaphelelwa yisikhathi.*
> [They say a culture of levirate marriage was dominant in the past, but it is dying now.] (Zulu 2011a: 3)

In the books under discussion, we find men pursuing their late brothers' wives mainly because they want to 'cling to the old ways of what it means to be a man, to protect their masculinity' (Hadebe 2010: 5). In most societies, men who want to justify their prejudice and dominance over women might even go beyond the parameters of culture and find justification in religion (Morrell 2001). In both books, ancestry religion is cited on several occasions to explain why the Zulu women, Tholakele and Thenjiwe, the main characters in the books, should agree to a levirate marriage. Women are deliberately made inferior to men by the notions of culture, religion and marriage. This is a problem as it hampers the struggle for the emancipation of women in all spheres of life, including the home and workplace (Connell 2001; Nyengelele 2004).

Commodification and communalisation of the institution of marriage

Accounts of the cultural tradition of levirate marriage are also found in the Old Testament; it was practised by the ancient Jews to preserve the genealogy of the family of a brother who died without an heir (Seidler 2018). The cultural tradition was observed solely for that reason. Although the motives for pursuing the cultural tradition of levirate marriage have changed, such marriages were a common phenomenon in Asia and Africa long before the Bible became available on those continents.

> Traditionally, levirate marriage provided a vehicle through which the husband's family could financially support the widow and her children. Today the practice is sometimes seen as a way for the husband's family to access any wealth the deceased may have acquired during his life and to provide sexual access to his wife (Bond 2011: 9–10).

Therefore, men use levirate marriage as a viable weapon to control women. In a patriarchal family, women are regarded as weak and incapable of managing their own affairs, let alone managing the wealth and finances of the family, which is why they are perceived to need a man to look after them (Baloyi 2015).

Ilobolo, which is loosely translated as bride price, is another cultural practice commodifying

marriages and forcing women into levirate marriages. If the widow decides to end the marital bond with her deceased husband's family, her father will have to pay back the *ilobolo* (Ntozi 1997). In the play *Isiko Nelungelo*, Zulu highlights the pain to which Zulu women are subjected because of the commodification of marriages.

> *Mondise:* *Ngisho ukuthi phela lokho kuyosho ukuhlehlisa lonke uhlelo olwenziwa. Eqinisweni leli siko lavezwa yilokho. Ukubuya kukamakoti emendweni kusho ukuphindisela emuva amalobolo nakho konke okuthintene nawo.* [Coming back home will mean that we have to reverse all that was done. The cultural tradition of levirate marriage was invented to counter that. If a widowed bride leaves her marriage, it will mean that we must pay back the ilobolo [bride price] and everything else that was paid by the in-laws.]
>
> *Nondumiso:* *Okungcono singaya ngisho kubameli. Sinalo ilungelo lokungabuyiseli lutho emuva baba.* [We should at least consult with the attorney. We have a right not to pay back anything, Father.] (Zulu 2011a: 46)

Modise is Thenjiwe's father. In a normal family setting, Modise would sympathise with his daughter. However, because marriages are now commodified and *ilobolo* is extremely expensive, Modise is more concerned about the possibility of financial ruin than the well-being of his daughter. Nondumiso, Thenjiwe's sister, tries to support her sister by suggesting they take the legal route to avoid paying back the *ilobolo*. However, Nondumiso's suggestion is ignored by Mondise and his wife MaMkhize. The author might have deliberately included this to show how reasonable suggestions by women are often ignored by society.

In a traditional family setting, wealth accumulation in a household is often attributed to the husband, even if the wife also generates income (Ezejiofor 2011). Language choices play a major role in entrenching these gender imbalances because in isiZulu, as mentioned earlier, a man is called *inhloko yekhaya* (the head of the family). Language use, therefore, can be directly linked to the attitudes of most men in patriarchal families towards widows, who are regarded by men as weak and in need of protection.

The determination of Thenjiwe's in-laws, who use the cultural tradition to force her into a levirate marriage, is intriguing. Since Thenjiwe was unemployed and her late husband was the sole breadwinner, one could assume that her in-laws were not acting in her best interest and wanted

a share of her inheritance. In such a case, it could be assumed that all the ideological orientations of feminism (radical, liberal, socialist and Black) would unanimously defend Thenjiwe's right to her late husband's assets, regardless of whether she had contributed to the accumulation of wealth or not. Thenjiwe's marriage becomes commodified because the family resents the idea that the wealth generated by their son might be transferred to another man who is not a blood relative.

Levirate marriages continue to be enforced in traditional patriarchal families, as women are perceived as communal commodities. In the novel *Umshado*, Zulu uses a female character, Bhekani's mother, to show how deeply the ethnophilosophical worldview of marriage is entrenched in the psyches of both men and women.

> *Ungakhohlwa ukuthi umfazi owabadala akusiye owakho. Wena uyamletha kuphela. Uma bengamfuni ngeke ahlale nokuhlala lapha ekhaya*. [Do not forget that the wife you take is not necessarily yours; she belongs to the ancestors. Your role is to introduce her to them. If they do not approve of the union, she will not stay in this family.] (Zulu 2011b: 15)

There is a difference between the Afrocentric and Eurocentric views of marriage. When a woman marries a man in a normal family setting, she should concentrate on her nuclear family. In a traditional African family, however, because of cultural beliefs and traditions, marriage involves both the wedded couple's and the ancestors' families (Ntshangase 2018b). This seems to be the general practice among Commonwealth Africans as the cultural beliefs, philosophies, and cosmologies of many Africans consider 'women to be under the guardianship of their fathers before marriage and of their husbands after marriage' (Bond 2011: 9). Most of these communities communalise marriages because of the Afrocentric worldview that 'marriage is the sacred rite of passage that involves the whole community' (Ngidi 2012: 45). There is a belief that the ancestors do not cease to be part of the community and that even though they are not physically present, their spirits continue to control the fortunes of the living (Ntshangase 2018b; Zulu 2011b).

In most African communities, including the Zulu community, once a bond of marriage has been formed between two families through the payment and acceptance of *ilobolo* and blessed by the ancestors, it becomes impossible to break such a bond. Therefore, when the husband dies, 'a widow may live under the guardianship of her husband's customary law heir, such as her husband's brother or a male cousin' (Bond 2011: 10). Most women are forced into levirate marriages against their will, which is why, in this chapter, such marriages are called unholy unions.

Unholy unions that trap Zulu women in loveless marriages

Women find themselves trapped in loveless levirate marriages because of the payment of *ilobolo*, by which an unbreakable bond is sealed between two families. Ngidi (2012: 49) concurs with this:

> In African communities, as well as in Zulu communities, death does not constitute an end to a marriage. The paying of *ilobolo* and the slaughtering of the goat to accept the wife into the family is an eternal binding bond between the surviving spouse and the in-laws' family. When a husband dies, his brother has to take over all his wives and bear the husband's responsibilities, taking care of his late brother's wives and children.

In both *Isiko Nelungelo* and *Umshado*, the brothers of the deceased husbands are trying their utmost to trap their brothers' widows in loveless marriages. In *Umshado*, Bhatomu fails to force Tholakele into marriage, whereas in the play *Isiko Nelungelo*, Dumisani enlists the help of both families and succeeds in forcing Thenjiwe into an unholy union.

In *Isiko Nelungelo*, the value of love in a marriage is demeaned. Thenjiwe tries to emphasise the importance of love when two people enter marriage, but her woman's voice of reason is usually ignored.

Thenjiwe: *Nazi kanjani ukuthi uzongithanda?* [How do you know that he will love me?]

MaMbatha: *Akukhulunywa indaba kamathandana nokungathandani lapha. Ngikhuluma ngesiko elaziwa kini nalapha ekhaya.* [I do not care whether he loves you or not. All I care about is the culture, which is known at your home and in this house.]

Thenjiwe: *Anginalo nje uthando lomunye umuntu mina.* [I do not have the feelings of love for another man, though.] (Zulu 2011a: 16–17)

These examples show that the entrapment of women in loveless marriages challenges the significance of culture in modern society and nullifies the institution of marriage. The above quotation reveals a conflict between love and culture as it suggests that love does not matter in a levirate marriage

and that preserving the cultural tradition is more important than feelings of love. This is a cause for concern, since in a normal society, marriage should be built on a solid foundation of love, as confirmed by the isiZulu expression *uthando lungumanqoba* (love conquers all). The author uses the character of Thenjiwe to demonstrate that ideas about cultural traditions and institutions such as marriage could be oppressive and detrimental to the feminist agenda of emancipating women from gender inequalities and bias.

In *Isiko Nelungelo,* Thenjiwe and her sister Nondumiso are portrayed as the custodians of change in a world unwilling to listen to women's voices. They are tireless in their attempts to change the status quo by arguing that love is essential in marriage, but their efforts are in vain.

> *Nondumiso:* *Uma ungamfuni lowo mfana kungakusiza ngani ukukungena kwakhe? ... Mina nakulo leli siko ngibona sengathi uthando kuhle lube yisisekelo*. [If you do not love this man, how will the cultural tradition of levirate marriage help you? I think love should be the foundation of the levirate marriage.]
>
> *Thenjiwe:* *Uyedwa umuntu engangimthanda emhlabeni, uSikhumbuzo.* [There is only one man I ever loved; it is Sikhumbuzo.] (Zulu 2011a: 37–45)

Thenjiwe and Nondumiso are seen as angry feminists trying their best to end a tradition that has been handed down through generations. This kind of thinking illustrates the classical or theatrical acts about which Butler (1988, 1997, 1999) is concerned since once they have been engraved on society, they will be difficult to erase. Therefore, no one in Thenjiwe's family and family-in-law is prepared to listen to Thenjiwe and Nondumiso, who are the only two feminist characters in the play who believe that women should not be condemned to loveless levirate marriages for the sake of preserving a cultural tradition. Cultural traditions should never be used to victimise people (Zungu and Siwela 2017). Zulu communities should, therefore, note that enforcing the cultural tradition of levirate marriage as a way to hold women hostage is in opposition to the ideals of social change and justice.

Thenjiwe was condemned to enter into a loveless levirate marriage, and the law could not protect her. This should be unacceptable in a democratic South Africa where the defenceless should have access to legal recourse. In the play, a young man named Sipho, who Thenjiwe thought could wipe away her tears after her husband's death, is failed by the judicial system when he is unfairly imprisoned.

Sipho: *Kwathiwa ngiyophuma uma seniganene.* [They said I will get out [of prison] once you and he [Dumisani] are married.]

Thenjiwe: *Ngihlushwa ukungabi namali, bengizofuna ummeli liqalwe phansi leli cala.* [It is a pity I do not have money; I would have hired an attorney who would see to it that this case is re-opened/goes back to court.]

Sipho: *Sisodwa isixazululo saleli cala, yikho ukuba ugane uDumisani. Ukuba ngangazi ngabe angisizanga mngani.* [There is only one solution to this case, that you marry Dumisani. If I had known, I would not have helped you when Dumisani grabbed you and wanted to speak to you by force.] (Zulu 2011a: 64–65)

When people are failed by institutions such as courts, which are supposed to be the custodians of justice, law and order, they are often left with no choice but to take the law into their own hands (Ntshangase 2018a). Sipho found himself on the wrong side of the law after trying to protect Thenjiwe from Dumisani, who wanted to speak to her against her will and was manhandling her. Sipho intervened by stabbing Dumisani and was arrested. The court denied Sipho bail, and he was told that he would only be released once Thenjiwe had agreed to marry Dumisani, her deceased husband's brother. Sipho did not get a fair trial and was sent to prison, where he died. The result was that Thenjiwe felt obliged to poison Dumisani to free herself from the bondage of a loveless levirate marriage.

Thenjiwe: *Angilithele itiye ngigalele lo muthi. Uma eke waqhabula kathathu kuyobe sekwanele.* [Let me pour the tea and add this poison. Three sips will be enough to kill him.] (Zulu 2011a: 72)

Fortunately for Dumisani, Thenjiwe's plan was thwarted by Thabi, his younger sister, who warned him not to drink the tea. This incident was used as leverage by Thenjiwe's in-laws to compel her to agree to a loveless unholy union.

MaMbatha: Ukugana kwakho uDumisani kuyogqiba zonke izenzo osewake wazenza. Akekho osayophinde azikhulume. [Agreeing to marry Dumisani will erase all the terrible things you have done. No one will ever talk about them again.] (Zulu 2011a: 75–76)

Thenjiwe had no option but to agree or risk going to jail. In the end, all the attempts made by her and her sister Nondumiso to liberate women and their families from the domination of women by men were in vain. It is bizarre to think that women are still forced into loveless levirate marriages in a democratic South Africa and that the state appears to be unable to protect its citizens. Zondi (2020: 8) succinctly summarises the context in which we live by stating that:

> It may sound clichéd to state that we live in times of profound change, given the malaise of our socio-political context. Ours is a context in which the template of change is deeply embedded in the meaning of a budding democracy. We are regularly directed to questions of rights, expectations, service delivery, the meaning and ethics of leadership, what it is to be a nation and, at the heart of it, the meaning of embodiment in the context of gender and sexuality.

Thenjiwe, the main character in *Isiko Nelungelo*, eventually betrays the feminist agenda by not risking defending her case in a court of law. However, this is not surprising considering what happened to Sipho, who was denied justice by the institution that should have defended him. Thenjiwe had another option, which was to run away like Tholakele in *Umshado*, but she never explored that possibility. Instead of fighting for the ideals of feminism, Thenjiwe chose to surrender, thus giving in to the domination of women by men. This may have been a deliberate attempt by the author to show that the struggle for the emancipation of women continues. Both her books, *Isiko Nelungelo* and *Umshado*, have inspired robust, vigorous debates around gender issues in lecture halls and classrooms.

Conclusion

The isiZulu expression *Umendo kawuthunyelwa gundane* (No woman would send a rat to spy on the in-laws before she commits to the marriage) highlights the plight of women who feel entrapped by marriage and wish they had known what to expect. Levirate marriage is a classic example of how women's rights are violated by their families and society at large.

Levirate marriages are referred to in this chapter as unholy unions as they show patriarchal families' refusal to respect the constitutional rights of women. These constitutional rights include women's right to protection from all forms of abuse, including being forced to accept unjust cultural traditions (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development 1996).

In her books *Isiko Nelungelo* and *Umshado*, Nelisiwe Zulu challenges male domination over women through levirate marriage. The main characters in the two books, Tholakele and Thenjiwe, are labelled rebels by their patriarchal families. However, their words and actions are manifestations of a struggle to emancipate women from the bondage of male domination. Two women from remote rural areas are the female protagonists in the two stories and are united in sisterhood in their struggle to implement the ideals of a feminist agenda. Tholakele wins the battle by leaving the rural area and her patriarchal in-laws to start a new life in the city. She risks becoming a social outcast or *umabuyekwendeni*, the derogatory isiZulu term used to refer to a woman who has deserted her marriage. Thenjiwe tries to free herself from the clutches of patriarchy by trying to poison the man who plans to force her into a loveless levirate marriage. In the end, she loses the fight and is condemned to this unholy union—a shocking ending for feminists.

The shocking ending of *Isiko Nelungelo* confirms what Butler (1988, 1997, 1999) wrote, which is that normalising gender inequalities makes it hard for them to be rooted out. The fact that Thenjiwe was not only fighting this war against men but also against the women who were pushing her into a levirate marriage confirms Butler's assertion that feminism is not meant to liberate only women but also society at large (Butler 1988, 1997, 1999).

The bitter ending of *Isiko Nelungelo* does not mean that the struggle to emancipate women and society at large is lost, as the book is used as an educational tool in most public schools and universities in South Africa. It teaches young people to become agents of change in their communities by confronting oppressive cultural traditions that deny women their constitutional rights. The other book, *Umshado*, serves the same purpose. For Tholakele, the protagonist, running away from her in-laws to settle in the city may have been a solution, but it was not an ideal solution as it still deprived her of the right to live peacefully wherever she chose to live. It should never be necessary to escape from your home to avoid being forced to uphold patriarchal customs and ensure that you will be protected against male chauvinists. Therefore, both Nelisiwe Zulu's books challenge young boys and girls to stand together against male chauvinism and cultural fanaticism, which are phenomena that enslave women.

This chapter explained the interplay of various disciplines such as anthropology, education, history, language, law, philosophy, psychology and religion to justify gender inequalities. Attempts to rid society of gender bias and the unfair treatment of women require collaboration by different parties, and the language used in literature is critical to the success of this endeavour. Literature has the power to promote social change and justice because it 'forms part of teaching and education in general … [and] the way gender is portrayed in these materials influences how pupils perceive gender' (Anttila et al. 2015: 62–63).

The writer of this chapter is of the opinion that educational books, such as *Isiko Nelungelo* and *Umshado*, openly challenge the status quo and can contribute to fostering social change and justice. The more young people read such books and engage with the language used, the more they will deliberate on how societies in present-day Africa, for example in Kenya, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda and South Africa, obstruct the gains of the feminist agenda of equality by continuing to practise the oppressive cultural tradition of levirate marriages.

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