
The girl-child is not a 'hen that wants to be a cock': A short survey of the portrayal of the girl-child in Alumenda's selected children's books

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Abstract

This paper illustrates that Stephen Alumenda represents the girl-child in a positive way in four of his children's books. The girl-child is portrayed as active, assertive, wise and independent. Alumenda satirises the patriarchal belief system that discriminates against and demeans the girl-child in society. Alumenda's girl-child emerges dignified, proving that girls can do what boys do equally well if given the same opportunities. Through carefully crafted plots involving Marita, Tambudzai and Thandiwe, the author demonstrates that children's literature is an indispensable medium which can be used to empower the girl-child.

Introduction

The girl-child has been the object of scorn and abuse in the Zimbabwean African society since time immemorial. This state of affairs is evidenced by the gender imbalances that still exist in many facets of the society today which show that basic rights like the access to education have been skewed in favour of the boy-child. The situation has created stereotypes against the girl-child, which have existed despite concerted efforts by the government and non-governmental organisations to provide conducive and enabling environments that promote gender equality.

This paper demonstrates that children's literature is one of the most effective and effortless ways of inculcating in child readers' minds that both boys and girls are equal and have the same aspirations and can achieve the same things in their lives. To illustrate this, I have chosen to focus on the ways in which the late prolific writer of children's books, Stephen Alumenda, empowers the girl-child in four of his works. The chosen books are *Maria goes to School* (Baobab Books), *Marita's great idea* (Baobab Books), *Thandiwe's spirit and the river* (Baobab Books) and *Tambudzai aona nyoka huru* (*Tambudzai sees a big snake*) (Mambo Press).

Marita goes to school

In *Maria goes to school*, the young girl Marita and other girls in their village face the fate of not being allowed to go to school just because they are girls. Although Marita's mother wants her to attend school just like her brother, her father refuses, arguing that: "Boys take on a lot of responsibility. They need to go to school. They need to know how to look after their families. Girls can't make decisions. They don't have the knowledge to do so" (p. 2). The other reason Marita's father gives is that it is a waste of time and money to educate girls because they are going to get married and live a happy life. But Marita does not allow herself to be a victim of such old-fashioned and male chauvinistic thinking. She has a strong conviction that she should go to school and do just like her brother. With the help of Miss Hombo, a female teacher from the local school, Marita secretly learns to read and write. And one day when her parents are desperate to have a letter read for them in the absence of her brother, Marita comes to their rescue and reads it for them, much to

their surprise. The letter contains very sad news from the brother of Marita's father. Marita's father now declares that she should go to school and this opens the door for education for all the other girls in the village. Marita has liberated the girl-child!

The way other girls mock Marita when she says she wants to go to school shows how negatively children are socialised to believe that girls cannot do what boys do. The other girls call Marita 'hen-cock', a derogatory term villagers use to describe Miss Hombo, the only female teacher at the village school. The female teacher is despised by the community for wearing long trousers and "many men spat after her as if she were an evil spirit", saying: "She is like a hen that wants to be a cock" (p.5).

The bone of contention is that the female teacher does not follow African culture and tradition. She is an independent woman who is not married. Through this female teacher Alumenda shows the reader the contempt unmarried Zimbabwean women get from the society. According to Zimbabwean culture and tradition, a decent woman should be married and have children. The villagers are puzzled by Miss Hombo's life and they ask a rhetorical question: "Who has ever seen a grown up woman living alone without a husband and working" (p.4)? It is not surprising that the female teacher, who is the subject of contempt by society, comes to the rescue of Marita through teaching the young girl to read and write. The female teacher's kind gesture liberates the young girl and the other girls in the village when they are allowed to go to school. But it is through Marita's conviction that one day she must be able to go to school and her initiative when she meets the female teacher who secretly teaches her to read and write, that she realises her dream.

In this story Alumenda satirises the patriarchal society that treats the girl-child and women as inferior to boys and men. It is the author's intention that as he denounces this bad system in the story, his readers equally denounce it and develop a sense of gender equality. Similarly, Kangira (2005) attacks another African belief that an avenging spirit of somebody murdered by one's family member must be pacified by giving a young girl as a wife to one of the men from the bereaved family. In some cultures and traditions, young children are actually sacrificed during cleansing rituals. In the past, among the Shona people, "after the death of a king's wife ..., a virgin was killed and buried close to the royal grave" (Aschwanden, 1989:245).

Marita's great idea

Even in the sequel, *Marita's great idea*, Marita emerges a heroine again, this time at her school. Her ever inquisitive mind makes her come up with an idea of organising a fundraising fete that raises enough money to buy books for the whole school. She gets support from Miss Hombo, the same teacher who secretly taught her how to read and write. "Never has a rural school been able to raise so much money through its own efforts and the support of the whole community," comments one newspaper on the occasion. The way in which Marita convinces people older than herself to organise the fete is so intriguing and characteristic of children. Sometimes grown-up people act on the advice of young ones, but do not want to always openly acknowledge this advice.

It is through the successful fete that Marita earns a scholarship. The headmaster and Miss Hombo have the following conversation after the fete (p.24):

"I don't know how you managed to have such a wonderful idea?" the headmaster said to Miss Hombo.

"Ask Marita," replied Miss Hombo.

"She deserves a scholarship!" said the headmaster. "This has been one of the best days in my life."

Alumenda uses the scholarship as a symbol of empowering Marita. The reward is meant to be an encouragement for the girls and boys who read this book to do good things for their communities. In a similar manner, Kangira (2003) uses a pangolin to change the life of a girl called Tariro in his children's book, *The bundle of firewood*.

In *Marita goes to school* and *Marita's great idea*, we see a simple rural girl being uplifted to greater heights, giving hope to the girl-child that nothing is impossible and that she can do even better than the boy-child.

Tambudzai Anoono Nyoka Huru (Tambudzai sees a big snake)

Folktales are of great importance in raising children in Zimbabwe. The tales usually involve people and animals that talk like human beings. Snakes, baboons, hares and tortoises, for instance, are some of the animals that are used in folktales. In the folktale *Tambudzai Aona Nyoka Huru (Tambudzai sees a big snake)*, we see a girl called Tambudzai playing a big role in ending witchcraft that had been a headache in Chimanimani's village. Through curiosity, anxiety and bravery, Tambudzai discovers that an old woman in the outskirts of the village has a secret way of calling her big snake from a hole inside her house.

One event leads to another until village elders call Tambudzai to bear witness in the trial of the witch. Tambudzai provides overwhelming evidence which leads to the destruction of both the witch and her snake. Tambudzai becomes the heroine of the village. In this story, Alumenda presents Tambudzai as a saviour of the whole village as she solves the mystery of the many deaths in the village.

Thandiwe's Spirit and the River

In *Thandiwe's Spirit and the River*, Thandiwe's virtues are seen through her friend, a boy called Akedu. Thandiwe has drowned in a river, but her spirit is alive and active. Akedu convinces himself that Thandiwe's spirit is in any of the good creatures of the river and not in a crocodile, a hyena or a jackal. Perhaps the spirit is in one of the ducks, swallows or a tree. Akedu says, "Thandi, I know you are here with me," (p.4). One night Akedu has a dream which bothers him. His teacher assures him by remarking:

"Your dream about the birds and the boy with the catapult means that you were protecting Thandiwe from her enemies, and from bad spirits. She is now quite happy with you to protect her" (p.130).

The fantasy Akedu has about Thandiwe's spirit finally takes him on a journey that earns him heroism when he leads to the arrest of two notorious thieves and murderers at a local store. Alumenda attempts to convince the reader that Thandiwe's spirit is

still with Akedu:

"It was Thandiwe's spirit that led him past the store. He hadn't really known why he had chosen to walk the long way home. Thandiwe made him a hero. Tomorrow at the school assembly he would be made to stand up in front of everybody and his story would be told to everyone" (p.19).

The reader here gets the impression that although it is Akedu who is the physical hero, it is Thandiwe who is the spiritual hero. As Akedu feels Thandiwe's spirit everywhere he goes and in everything he does, the reader is made to think that Thandiwe must have been a girl of good character. This story harmonises gender relations through the strong friendship between Thandiwe and Akedu. The cordial relationship shows that boys and girls need each other in everything they do. It is amazing how the author skilfully weaves the story, turning Thandiwe's tragic death into something positive through Akedu. It is as if Thandiwe herself is actually living.

Discussion

In general, children have been abused in several ways in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. According to UNICEF, "...children required to undertake labour involving long hours interfering with school-herding animals, begging, hawking, caring for siblings or sick parents, tending or picking crops, prostituting their bodies, pushing carts in the market or working as domestic servants in other people's houses - are almost certainly exploited" (End Decade Goals for Children, 1990-2000 : 70). Writers can assist in alleviating the problem by being ambassadors of children through creative writing involving children as heroes and heroines.

Children's stories play a vital role in the socialisation of young readers. Young readers develop their minds when they attempt to interpret the world around them through the characters and experiences they encounter in the stories they read. In other words, the lives lived in the stories children read shape their understanding of not only themselves, but also the phenomena around them. It is often true that "[a]lthough children often enter the life of books as if entering another world, there are also times where their personal lives and book lives connect" (Adele, 2007:33).

By extolling the virtues of the heroines in the four stories studied for this paper, Alumenda is persuading the young readers to exhibit the same. The author is also illustrating that girls have the same abilities as boys. Society should therefore treat them equally. As an adult writing for children, it can be noticed that Alumenda takes it on his shoulders to socialise the children through the power of the written word. In general, as Knowles and Malmkjaer (1996:43) argue, adults ... see it as their task to socialise children, that is, to make them behave in ways that are generally acceptable to adults – in ways that will fit the children to take their proper place in society, as adults perceive it. Obviously, adults have many means towards this end available to them. They might, for example, consciously exercise their superior physical strength, or employ a regime of reward and punishment. However, they also inevitably influence their children more subtly, often subconsciously, and, many would argue, most effectively, through language.

Like most children's books, Alumenda's children's stories put children's innocence

and purity at the centre stage in the child-adult relationships we encounter in the stories. There is no doubt that the books play a significant socialising function as stated earlier. On adult-child relationship and the socialising function in books written for children, Knowles and Malmkjaer (1996:53) note:

There is, to this present day, ambivalence in the adult-child relationship, which partly reflects a belief, encouraged by Christianity, in the value of innocence and children as the carriers of this virtue. For many writers, the innocence of children is combined with wisdom. Children are yet unspoiled by the ways of the world and are therefore able to understand and perceive more clearly than adults the basic truths of nature and existence. The wise child, from whose innocent, but natural and/or virtuous, actions and words the adult protagonist derives much instruction, is a common character, especially in Romantic and Victorian literature ... the notion that children are wise still remains in literature written for children today. No doubt this feature encourages children to identify with the children they meet in books, and this may precisely support the books' socialising function.

Chinua Achebe, the doyen of African literature who has written for both children and adults, strongly believes that children's books "...must pass on wisdom, be educative, in some way" (Hunt 1996:669). For instance, wisdom exudes from Marita and Tambudzai in Alumenda's stories in such a manner that the child reader is compelled to emulate the two characters.

Sexism is another issue that Alumenda tackles effectively in the four stories under study. On the same subject, Norton (1983) observes:

The controversial issue of sexism in children's literature involves not only the exclusion of females from children's books but the stereotyped roles in which females are frequently depicted. Females are often shown as homemakers or as employees in 'female' occupations; they possess characteristics that suggest they are passive, docile, fearful, and dependent.

Alumenda's girl characters are the opposite of what Norton refers to above. The characters are active, independent and assertive.

Conclusion

This short appraisal of Alumenda's four children's books has shown that children's books play a crucial role in the process of eradicating stereotypes about the girl-child. The overall aim in these children's books is loud and clear - to create environments that foster the realisation of the girl-child's dreams. The stories are intended to create a positive mindset of both the child and adult reader about the girl-child.

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