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Unveiling the Complexities of Gender Identity in Siswati Short Stories: A Nuanced Analysis

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Abstract

Among the many deeply rooted customs and beliefs of the Siswati people is the importance of gender identification. The representation of gender identity in Siswati short stories is garnering increasing attention. This study aims to examine the complexities of gender identity and its societal impact as portrayed in Siswati literature. From a feminist perspective, we will explore various themes and motifs in these narratives, emphasizing how they reflect shifting perceptions of gender identity within Siswati society. It is crucial to recognise that gender identity in Siswati short stories transcends the conventional binary of male and female. Numerous narratives challenge and subvert traditional gender norms, illustrating the fluidity of gender identity in Siswati culture. Moreover, gender identification in these stories is closely intertwined with various socioeconomic factors, including class dynamics and power relations. Additionally, the portrayal of gender identity in Siswati's short stories mirrors the evolving attitudes toward women. Historically, women had limited decision-making authority and were largely relegated to domestic responsibilities. However, some stories feature strong female characters who defy these confines and assert control over their own lives. A critical analysis of the representation of gender identity is supported by significant literary devices that highlight the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity. Collectively, these insights can foster a deeper understanding of positive gender identity. It is essential for both men and women to recognise the importance of gender equality and equity while respecting their distinct gender rights.

Keywords

Representations of gender roles, Identities, Siswati short stories, Conventionalism, Cultural identity, Modernity, Characterisation, Conversation, Occurrences

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Siswati customs and traditions, women have significant responsibilities regarding the family's reproductive duties. This includes not only childbearing but also nurturing and educating the next generation to ensure the continuity of cultural and familial values. On the other hand, men are traditionally seen as the protectors of the family, tasked with providing for their material needs and ensuring a stable living environment.

Despite the passage of time and changing societal norms, research conducted over two decades ago by Farag and Halla (2013:183) highlighted a prevailing belief within the community: "A woman cannot work for herself, so she gets

married.” This notion reflects a deep-rooted cultural perspective that views marriage as a primary avenue for a woman's financial and social security. Sadly, this belief has not significantly evolved since the study was conducted. In fact, according to Swati tradition, women are still perceived as central to the personal and emotional growth of men. Their roles are often interwoven with men's success and well-being, underpinning the idea that women's contributions to the household and society, while vital, are primarily oriented toward supporting and enhancing the lives of men.

Furthermore, it also demonstrates the emergence of a critique of the representation of gender identity in four selected short stories, a comparison of traditionalism and modernity in this context, the labelling of possible reader responses (male and female) concerning age-related psychology and aesthetic reception, and a source of alternate and ongoing information about the representation of gender and identity in the selected stories. According to a study by Bhana, Shakila and Msibi (2021:109), girls' job choices and involvement in the labour market are still based on their gender, even if there are more black girls than boys enrolled in the educational system and more of them finish grade 12. Compared to their male colleagues, they achieve less while being more exposed to schooling. It's possible that growing up in a kid, adolescent, or young adult's environment exposes them to harmful gender norms.

The way that gender is portrayed in literature bothers feminists. According to Milestone and Mayer (2020:42), there is a genuine shift in viewpoint when the experience and values of women take center stage in the act of reading since "for a long-time reading has assumed a male perspective." For instance, men are viewed as literary writers, whereas women are considered natural mothers, housewives, and cleaners.

For instance, in folktales, the victim is typically a woman, and the hero is typically a man. The Siswati short stories frequently present women as objects rather than subjects. In other short stories, society expects women to be housewives who belong in the kitchen. This supports the theory that "Girls are generally passive, staying at home or performing household chores." The stereotype of women in caregiving roles is constant (Mills, 2002:10). In addition, men are typically seen as powerful and should labor outside to support themselves.

In addition, many South African women are expected to fulfil the roles of mothers, spouses, and housewives. These roles are also depicted as fixed and natural. According to Merrill (2009:24), adolescents develop their sex roles and create a world in which they look for solutions to the issues they face as they mature through socialisation within the frameworks of their families and the larger society.

Parents unintentionally reinforce stereotypes that they think are correct when speaking to their kids. Adults and the peer group reprimand a child whenever they hear them speaking in a language other than what is expected of them. This strengthens Mohamed's (1987:6) claim that societal norms about how men and women speak and behave are illusions that will destroy present and future generations.

On the other hand, teenagers grow up surrounded by adults, copying their lifestyles while attempting to find their own identity and fulfilling their expectations. Social influence has a role in contributing to the challenges associated with growing a gender identity. "In the past, a man's choice of a career was regarded as more important than a woman's since it defied both his family and social status," according to September and Chasamal (2005:41). Furthermore, because men are seen as the cornerstone of the family, this viewpoint may be skewed by the idea that a traditional woman should be required to obey her husband's instructions and listen to him.

Merrill (2009:7) joins the quarrel and stresses that "gender is the socially constructed dissimilarities between males and females." Milestone and Mayer (2020:17) continue to say, "Identity is who a particular person is." Also, it is important to discover that gender is a party developed by society, and identity is a process and change of identity based on time.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The study's main aim was to inspect and elucidate the depiction of gender identity in selected Siswati short stories.

This also indicates the following:

- To discuss and assess how gender identity is portrayed in the chosen Siswati short stories.
- Contrasting modernism and traditionalism by examining how gender identity is portrayed.
- To elucidate the possible reactions of the male and female applied readers who are interested in development psychology, aesthetics, and reception.
- To present a different viewpoint and discuss the issues of how gender identity is portrayed in the chosen short stories.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method is followed, emphasizing young adult literature and gender studies. The text and literary survey analysis is completed with the database consulted. Certain aspects concerning gender identity, traditionalism versus modernity in the Swati culture, age-related psychology, narratology, and reception methods are combined concurrently in the analysis of the selected short stories. A comparative method is utilised to decide the variations concerning the depiction of gender identity in the selected short stories. Sperber and Flick (2009:22) also define the qualitative approach as "research in which information is given through words, photographs, drawings, paintings, and other media rather than just numbers."

However, research methods that yield descriptive data, such as people's written or spoken opinions and observed behaviors, are referred to as qualitative research. The data includes the opinions or behaviours of research participants, as

learned through observations, interviews, and other means Hermick, Hutter, and Belly (2020:12). In addition, Yin (2011: 89) upholds that “qualitative research is typically employed when an investigator seeks to comprehend human behaviour”.

According to Flick (2009:81), qualitative research aims to comprehend social phenomena from the participants' perspective. This might occur if the researcher engages in the activities that the subjects of the study engage in regularly. This would allow the researcher to draw conclusions from the data and create an explanation. Van der Merve (2004:181) provides evidence in favour of this viewpoint by stating that “a qualitative research approach takes place in a typical setting, which could be the participant's home or place of employment”. As a result, the quantitative research approach requires that the information gathered be numerically quantified.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The reception theory supports this paper. The reception hypothesis looks at the reader's function in literature. When writing a literary work, one hopes that readers will examine it closely. Without the reader, a literary work cannot achieve its purpose, gain fame, or become essential to human existence. Changerder (2024:76) postulates that “the reader makes implicit connections, fills the gaps, draws inferences and tests out hunches; and to do means drawing on a tacit knowledge of the world in general and of literary conversions in particular.” Reception theory holds that the reader evaluates the literary work, which is represented by a series of well-organised blackmarks on the page. reception theory.

According to Holub (2013:78), there are open areas in Iser's theory that the reader needs to be aware of. The author is the one who made those gaps. Iser argues that a literary work is not a monument with a predetermined set of features that the reader must grasp right away. The reader's interaction with the text, according to Swanepoel (1990:124), is a dynamic process of self-corrections. According to his formulation, it means that the self-correcting system will or ought to be adjusted continuously.

Iser believed that the critic's job was to explain how the text affected the reader, not the text itself. According to Ribo (2019:49), it is still unclear whether Iser views the texts as the ultimate arbitrator of the reader's actualisation or whether he permits the reader to fill in the gaps in the text at a whim.

Picoult (2016:79) views reading as “a catalyst for a more critical understanding of our own identities and as a point that helps us become more self-aware. According to him, when reading, a person should be adaptable, open-minded, and willing to have their opinions challenged, rejected, or allowed to change”. Reading creates a space where the unformulated can be formed.

Swanepoel (1990:36) outlines that “the one the author supposes to be reading his work. He is supposed to be present all the time and be able to follow all indicators of the text.” Ribo (2019:112) postulates that “this reader is the reader created by the text itself, amounting to a network of responsive-inviting structure, which predisposes us to read in certain ways.”

Real reader: Iser defines "real reader" as referring to various reader kinds, including romantic, realistic, and intellectual readers. Nchoe (1998:36) states, "One could also add experienced readers, young readers, lay readers, and professional readers." Explicit reader: this is a reader the author directs himself to, and sometimes this is done directly (Swanepoel, 1990:36). Iser states that the explicit reader “receive a certain mental image in the process of reading; images will inevitably be colored by the reader existing stock of experience” (Picoult, 2016:112).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture

Culture is acquired, not inherited. Literature can be considered a mirror for some communities, encouraging people to learn about the cultural values, morals, and beliefs of other nations rather than to be critical of them. Culture is a mirror through which an individual looks at his or her own life and makes any required adjustments. Culture also plays a role in poetry, marriage, language, and music. Culture, according to Mohamad (2013:33), is life. It's how people have lived in the past, how they are living now, and how they will continue to live. Bhana (1999:46) postulates that “culture is the total of the learned behaviors of a group of people which are generally considered to be the tradition of the people and are transmitted from generation to generation.

Identity

Attwell (1999:85) defines identity as “the quality or condition of being a specified person or thing.”

Chitando and Tgarasei (2001:517) define identity as “who or what a particular person or thing is”.

Attwell (1999:55) says identity “is equality or condition of being a specific person or thing”.

According to Mills (2002:80), “Identity is understood in three types: public, personal, and individual identity”.

- Everyone has a name and a position toward other people that defines their public or social identity. An individual possesses a public identity from birth. An adult's title will likely alter as they assume more responsibility; for instance, they may become a mother or father, and so forth.
- The idea of continuity in all circumstances is always referred to as personal identity. Despite potential changes, an individual never truly loses their identity.

- A person's subjective distinctiveness and uniqueness are referred to as their identity. It includes the person's perception of himself concerning other people and the social structure. It is created by learning to identify oneself as a distinct person with relationships, interests, values, and beliefs.

Characterisation

characters, who represent the people in the story. The portrayal of human interactions in fiction makes them significant components. In addition to creating characters, the author also chooses and shapes them to dramatise human life in all its forms. He sets them apart by endowing each character with distinct attributes. Guillain (2015:90) maintains that:

“Characterization is related to a character. Characters are closer to the reader through their actions and thoughts, and through that which is said about them in a story, one should distinguish the types of characters”.

Ribo (2019:45) postulates that:

“Characters in a short story are defined in three ways: (i) by what they revealed about themselves in their outward and inner life, (ii) by what they said and thought about them as characters, and (iii) by what the author draws about the character”.

Characterisation is the creation of a living person through means of action, speech, thoughts, physical appearance, and other opinions of an imaginary character. This may be done directly by a clear description or narration and indirectly through his intention, feelings, and thoughts so that the readers infer the character of an imaginary person” (Va der Merve, 2004:45). Swanepoel (1990:70) continues to say that “establishing the distinctive characters of the person in a narrative showing and telling. In showing, the author presents the characters talking and acting, leaving it entirely up to the readers to conclude the motives and disposition behind what they say and do.

The author may show not only the external speech and actions but also the character's inner thoughts, feelings, and representatives to events in telling the author intervenes authoritatively to describe, and often evaluate, the motives and dispositional qualities of the character. Picoult (2016:281) upholds that “characterisation is how the writer describes the person in a story.” A writer uses descriptions of the character’s appearance, actions, thoughts, and dialogue to give information about the character.

Cultural identity

Mills (2002:56) says, “Cultural identity is a net of adaptations ranging from ethnicity, through religion, social structure, philosophy, national consciousness, and privilege patterns of language acquired in various formal ways.”

Nchoe (1998:50) postulates that “cultural identity and nationalism with certain identity patterns being selected as measures for the formation of an independent existence or distinct political nationhood are linked to the elements welcomed mean an independent existence, for example, language, history, religion fields of activity, artifacts, or symbols, and each has definite importance for the acquisition of a sense of a particular cultural and national identity.”

Segers boldly says cultural identity can be assigned to three factors (Bal, 1985:51), namely:

- “Formal characteristics concerning that nation or group at a given time in history.”
- “The programming of the mind within a particular community based on which the cultural identity of the ingroup is being constructed and
- How people from outside conduct a process of selection, interpretation, and” “evaluation regarding the specificity of the group, which means the outside image of the cultural identity of the foreign nation or group.”

Moreover, cultural identity can be exactly like a mirror to which any person repays visits to himself/herself in order to observe that their values, morals, and beliefs are aligned as they were maintained in the olden days as a way to know oneself.

Gender refers to the socially constructed difference between males and females (Meriill, 2009:40).

From the above definitions, it can be concluded that gender is the aptitude to distinguish between males and females and the superiority to be a specific person.

Gender roles

Roles refers to the position occupied in a society coupled with a set of behavior and attitudes which are regarded as appropriated to someone playing that role (Mohamad, 2013:34). Roles refer to four broad categories of work done by men and women in the home, in community and economic sector, production, reproduction, community management, and community politics.

Concepts related to role (Milestone and Mayer, 2020:88):

- “Expectations: expectations are assumptions concerning what a particular role involves. These expectations are based upon hopes, fears, beliefs, and objective knowledge of what others expect of an individual and vice versa.
- Fulfillment: This refers to how the individual performs a role and how he/she feels about such a performance.
- Prescriptions: prescriptions, expectations, and fulfillments are all culture-bound.
- Strain and conflicts: difficulties may occur when the demands of a role or several roles produce strains of some kind such as stress due to overwork and fatigue”.

In terms of reproduction, the mother bears and gives birth to the child. This is what she does. Once the child is born, both parents, the man included in this case, share equal responsibility for raising the child. It is their parental duty to do this. It helps to remember that from the perspective of the parents, boys and girls are equal. It aims to remind people that, in terms of the law, men and women are equal (gender equality). What gender equality means may be a question.

Gender

“It refers to the socially constructed differences between males and females. What this means is that through cultural formations that differ markedly and are ever-changing, as reflected in everyday life and discourses, people learn appropriate gender behavior from the moment of birth” (September and Chasmal, 2005:40). In brief, gender signifies the social connotations that are ascribed to being female and being a male.

Gender equity

It is the term used by legal pundits to explain the equal rights of citizens. “Gender equity entails meeting women’s needs for them to participate fully in civil society and fulfill the familial roles adequately without being discriminated against because of their gender”. (Marrill, 2009:270).

Early childhood developmental roles and gender equality

Early children's growth must cultivate the values and attitudes of future citizens who will not engage in sexism or racism. The foundation for learning to read and comprehend the world around them is laid in early childhood schooling. Children should be taught not to discriminate against one another because the Constitution forbids the state from treating anyone unfairly based on any source, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, or belief.

Roles during school years: Gender Equality and Gender Equity

Even in their early school years, boys and girls have already absorbed typical gendered behaviors that can eventually result in discrimination. Combating these harmful behavioural models is possible, and educators must deal with them. Educators may have a key role to play in disseminating all information, even that which reinforces gender inequality.

The "manifestation and forms of gender leaning vary and from culture to culture," according to Bal (1985:77). they contend that schools are appropriate venues for challenging socially acceptable behaviors that dehumanise and violate women. For example, a teacher is required to carry out the responsibilities assigned to him and resolve disagreements and stress in the course of his work. He needs to demonstrate that none of these accomplishments come at the expense of gender equality in the process of accomplishing them all.

DISCUSSION

Interpretative of the four selected short stories

Short story: *Umfati Weliphepha (Momen of a paper)*

Names of characters in the short story

Name	Connotation of the name	The drive of the name
Majalimane	The man of the Germans	He was born in Germany.
Simiso	The one who is established.	She is the only child at home.
Malamulela	The one who is resolving issues.	His mother was not conceiving babies for a long period. When he was born the family was happy. He rescued his mother.

Age

Majalimane is an old person who commands all the characters in the story, and no one challenges him. Being a pastor, he is well-respected. He is lodging in remote, deep, rural locations where traditions are upheld. He is instilling in the young people of his congregation the value of showing respect to the seniors in society. He confronts Simiso in the narrative when they begin acting strangely in public. The irony is that he is oblivious to the woman's feelings and only considers the male.

Marriage

Maketala finds Simiso childless marriage to be quite taxing. He justifies going out with a different woman by claiming that his marital issues are getting better. Maketala places a higher emphasis on his concubine than on his wife and customs from his culture. For instance, he breaks his vow to his wife to accompany her to his aunt's burial by choosing to visit his concubine instead of going to the funeral when he needs to go. Being a traditional woman, Simiso is aware that she is a member of her husband's family. Despite what her employers say, she demonstrates the reality when she chooses to go to her husband's aunt's funeral.

Religion

Simiso expresses her open belief in the past. According to her, when someone passes away, they are not forgotten because it is culturally thought that they are asleep and will act as a bridge between the living and the dead.

Simiso was raised in a rural region where customs are followed. She is encouraged to adopt and adhere to cultural norms while visiting the area. At her core, she is a conventional woman from her husband's family. She works hard to try to convert from a traditional to a modern lifestyle, but her self-concept remains unwavering. She is content to remain a traditional married woman who does not work. The narrative makes this evident.

Synthesis

An example of a traditional character is Simiso. She finds herself in a cutting-edge period but does not fully embrace modernity. She does, it may be claimed, appreciate Siswati culture. She is aware that her husband's family is the one who owns the married Swati woman. She is affected by the location.

Name of the Short story: *Labani Lelifa? (who is the owner of this wealth)*

Name of characters in the short story

Name	Connotation of the name	The drive of the name
Lungile	The kind one.	She is a kind person and respects everyone in the story.
Bheka	The focused one.	He is helping people in the society.
Lungi	The one who is kind.	She is a good lady who listens to her parents.

Age

Lungile is a classic figure; she is an elderly and wise woman. She is a fierce critic of everything that the current generation does that goes against conventional wisdom. Lungile is highly critical of young people's official education, claiming that it does not prepare them for life's challenges. She exposes Bheka's eyes to the erroneous methods that contemporary youth practice and teaches her about what is culturally appropriate. When her grandmother tells her a story that evening, Lungile feels as though she is being educated. The grandmother tells the tale in the evening, at precisely the same time the Swati people gathered around the fire to exchange life stories.

Marriage

Given that no parent is mentioned in the short narrative, it is evident that Phila and Veli's marriage is customarily incorrect. Lungile turns matrimony into a contest. She ends up with two boyfriends, the deal being that she will spend the rest of her life with the first one to propose. Lungile maintains her career, works, is married, and has an education. It is not expected of a married Swati lady to work. Although Lungile and Bheki get married without the consent of their parents, it is well recognised in African tradition that marriage is a union of two families rather than two individuals.

Religion

Lungile is a state-of-the-art woman, but she is deeply influenced by culture. In her mind, she is a traditionalist. She is employed and still supports the beliefs of a culture that a woman should be silent when a man speaks. She knows she must be silent and not exchange words with men. When she challenges the principal, she still does not throw away the respect she must show to men. Modern formalities do not change Phila's belief in traditional culture. Also, she knows that she must respect men and not exchange words with them.

Gender Roles

Phila put all her trust in what the principal said. She should have visited the department long before she began working to confirm that she was properly employed. She relies on a man to handle her responsibilities, such as looking into why she hasn't received payment in several months. She still thinks, in a way, that a man must do things. She also did not receive the help she was looking for when she got to the education department.

Synthesis

The short story's protagonist, Lungile, works as a diplomat for Swati women. She ends the quiet moment. She is a cutting-edge woman with strong ties to the past. She is aware that custom dictates that she be silent and avoid talking to men. She also breaks the hush by questioning the principal about wage issues. She heads straight to the inspector's office if her confrontation with the principal fails. The author also challenges the notion that educated people shouldn't be the ignorant light.

Name of the short story: *Kugula Kwemlobokati (The Sickness of the Married Women)*

Names

Name	Connotation of the name	The drive of the name
Sikhumbuzo	The one who remembers.	He is the breadwinner in his family.
Sidleke	Nest.	He is a trouble in the society.
Tsandzekile	The one who is loved.	She is a loving and peaceful person in her family.
Gcinaphi	The last one.	She is the last born in her family.
Veli	The one who showed up.	He is assertive in his family
Msila	The tail	He is always the last one to finish in his family.

Age

In the short narrative, Sikhumbuzo is a reference character. In addition, he is a conventional figure who supports conventional practices and traditions. Following his son Sidleke's passing, he intends for his youngest son, Thabo, to marry Veli. He overlooks the fact that people search for mates in the present era.

Modernity contrasts with the custom of parents searching for partners for their offspring. He continues to hold the opinion that women are incapable of taking care of the home on their own since they are like children and lack autonomy. In the narrative, he decides to get Sidleke married to Gcinaphi without first talking to her. Not because they do not love her, but rather because of contemporary society and the Western way of life, his son declines to wed Sidleke.

Marriage

Sikhumbuzo chooses not to assist Sidleke after realising that he has a significant issue. He employs conventional methods to assist. He proposes marriage to Gcinaphi to his son Sidleke, who is single. By doing this, he will be assuming his brother's responsibilities. Because Western culture has significant negative effects on African societies, his son refused to embrace what he was advocating.

Religion

This short novella suggests that many of the world's problems today can be attributed to contemporary society. It is claimed that individuals despise their traditional cultures these days. Gcinaphi receives a call from the local town offices informing her that the individual who had been renting the house has passed away and must leave.

A week after her husband's funeral, she visits the municipality's offices, which is against custom because widows are thought to be threats to society and shouldn't be seen on the streets. She was shown in the story to kneel to beg Sidleke, the ancestors, for forgiveness. This demonstrates to the audience that she does have faith in her forebears.

Gender roles

Gcinaphi embodies the ideal housewife. She raises her kids, cooks for her spouse, and does the laundry. Because she lacks education, she is unable to get employment. She marries young while still enrolled in school and stops attending classes afterward. Msila, her husband's buddy, took her husband's position. stereotypes. She does not make her own decisions. Her beauty outweighs her intelligence.

Synthesis

The author indicates that people wind up on the streets if they do not listen to their elders. The narrative is told from the viewpoint of a man. Gcinaphi bears the responsibility for all that has happened.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research comprehensively explores various aspects of cultural identification, including name, age, marital status, religion, language, communication, and gender roles, with a specific focus on the intersection of gender identity as depicted in the chosen short stories.

The analysis indicates that intermediaries, such as educators, can effectively employ these narratives to enrich young adults' understanding of gender identity in the context of contemporary issues related to traditionalism, modernisation, and the Swati people. According to feminist theory, these Siswati short stories serve as influential means to challenge deeply rooted gender norms and expectations within society. By representing gender identity as fluid and dynamic, these narratives foster a more inclusive understanding of gender within the Siswati cultural framework.

CONCLUSION

Traditional societies' cultural beliefs and practices contrast significantly with those of contemporary society. In many modern contexts, having a second wife is largely frowned upon and not legally or socially accepted. However, in traditional cultures, polygamy may be permissible under certain circumstances, such as when the first wife is unable to conceive and bear children. This practice often reflects a different set of values regarding family and lineage, prioritizing the continuation of the family line.

In today's world, advancements in medicine provide a variety of solutions for health-related issues, allowing individuals the option to address fertility problems or other medical conditions without resorting to traditional marital practices. On the other hand, in many traditional societies, if a husband passes away, it is a common custom for the widow to marry the brother of the deceased. This practice serves to provide social and economic support for the widow and keep family resources and properties within the same lineage.

Given these contrasting perspectives on gender roles and family structures, it is crucial for both men and women to participate in workshops designed to challenge and deconstruct rigid beliefs surrounding gender identity. Such workshops can provide valuable insights and foster understanding among participants, promoting healthier relationships and more equitable social dynamics. To ensure their success and relevance, it is essential that these workshops are funded and supported by the same individuals who stand to benefit from them, thereby encouraging active involvement and investment in the process of social change.

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