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## Introduction

There are very few Shona women novelists, the most prolific being Sharai Mukonoweshuro. Readers would be keen to find out what these few writers focus on. This chapter closely examines how some Shona female authors deal with issues confronting women and how the female characters emerge. The five novels that are discussed in this chapter all deal with specific social issues that women find challenging. Kahari is correct in calling women's novel writing, 'a rebellion of the intellect', as women started writing 'about the abuses they suffered and saw around them' (Kahari, 1997:343). These abuses are well articulated in *Zviuya Zviri Mberi* (1974), *Akafuratidzwa Mwoyo* (1983), *Makudo Ndomamwe* (2004) and *Ndakagara Ndazviona* (1995). Events unfold differently in *Richave Dzerevende* (1998).

The Shona novel by women can basically be understood from a Marxist/Engelian point of view which enables us to understand the characters' need to satisfy material life, 'for life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things' (Marx and Engels, 1976:47). In various ways, the authors manage to convey this concept in their works. As Marx and Engels point out, 'the first historical act [of man/woman] is...the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself' (ibid: 47).

In exploring this basic issue of the provision of material life, the female Shona novelists engage in sexual politics, exploring 'the social inequality between women and men', with men and women attempting to, and sometimes succeeding in profiteering from women, young and/or old (MacKinnon, 1991:ix). The most disturbing aspect of this profiteering and exploitation of women is that it is not only carried out by men against women, but also frequently by women against each other. Sometimes women are actually much more vicious adversaries of fellow women. We find an explanation for this attitude in the same need to satisfy material life because invariably, this exploitation is done in order to alleviate poverty at a personal level. However, in all cases in the novels that are analyzed here, women's sexuality is central to men's status. To this end, men and their female accomplices wield

institutional power over weaker females who are usually the victims. We now analyse how male-female or gender issues are enacted in the novels. We shall also attempt to work out the authors' vision in each novel.

We must hasten to declare early in the discussion, that the societies created by the novelists are not always representative of the traditional African societies in real life. Zulu Sofola (in Nnaemeka, Obioma, 1998:54) asserts that,

The worldview of the African is rooted in a philosophy of holistic harmony and communalism rather than in the individualistic isolationism characteristic of European thought. The principle of relatedness is the *sine qua non* of African social reality. Relatedness characterizes the African experience of the living person. If one is cut off from his community, one is considered dead...the individual belongs primarily to a context, and within it he/she moves and has his/her being. It is this philosophy that informs African social order and the dual-sex system of socio-political organization which Kamene Okonjo articulated as follows:

The African woman has not been inactive, irrelevant and silent. Rather, African tradition has seen the wisdom of a healthy social organization where all its citizens are seen to be vital channels for a healthy and harmonious society. Hence the establishment of a dual-sex power structure, which is lacking in European and Arab cultures.

It is important to bear this in mind because often the characters in the novels do not always display such African values. We shall discuss the values in those novels as they arise, but always remembering that they do not necessarily portray real life traditional African values.

Before we get to the novels, it is important to define 'gender'. Easthorpe (1986:2-3) has defined it in three ways: 'as the body; as our social roles of male and female; as the way we internalize [sic] and live out these roles'. For Bressler (1999:270),

Gender studies broaden traditional feminist criticism to include an investigation not only of femaleness but also maleness. What does it mean, it asks, to be a woman or a man? Gender studies continue to

investigate how women and men view such terms as *ethics*, definitions of truth, personal identity, and society.

The two definitions provide a comprehensive way of understanding gender in the works under study. In fact, in her discussion of Marxism and Feminism, MacKinnon (1991:3) makes an observation, which is pertinent and applicable to our novels:

Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away...As work is to Marxism, sexuality to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing, universal as activity yet historically specific, jointly comprised of matter and mind.

We shall find that women's sexuality is often 'taken away' from them, and it becomes the cause of their misfortune. Only one novel, Joyce Simango's *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, seems to succeed in defying the grip that patriarchy has on female sexuality. Let us now turn our attention to that pioneering work.

### ***Zviuya Zviri Mberi***

Joyce Simango's *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, which can be translated to mean, 'The best is yet to come', or to be literal, 'The good things are ahead', as Kahari (1997:143) suggests, explores 'some of the complicated social issues women writers deal with. This is the story of VaMunhamo, her two children, Tambudzai and Chemwandoita, and VaNhamoinesu, her husband. Chemwandoita, the boy, experiences no significant controversy in the story. The story centers on Tambudzai, the nine-year old daughter whose father wants to marry off to Mundogara, a polygamous man said to be old enough to be Tambudzai's grandfather. He already has five wives, just like Tambudzai's father. It is the fifth wife's *lobola* (bridewealth) that needs to be secured through Tambudzai's marriage to Mundogara. The latter had already given VaNhamoinesu, the money to marry that fifth wife. VaNhamoinesu now just has to deliver and honor his side of the bargain in order to seal the deal.

Thus, Tambudzai, at this tender age, already has no control over her sexuality. For the men in this novel, to acquire many wives is a symbol of status that brings fame and a fulfilment of their concept of manhood, power and wealth. A study of this novel, therefore, becomes an investigation into what femaleness



and maleness mean, as Bressler asks (ibid: 270): 'What does it mean...to be a woman or a man?'

The short answer to the question is that to be a woman in VaNhamoinesu's compound is to be a commodity and a nonentity, and to be a man is to be the owner of that commodity. For example, VaNhamoinesu does not care about the well being of his wives. The narrator informs us, *Vakanga vasina hanya nokurwara kwavakadzi vavo* (He did not care about the well being of his wives) (11). Yet, he values women's sexuality as evident in his efforts to pursue VaMunhamo when she runs away with Tambudzai. His instruction to Pirai whom he sends to look for this truant wife is to bring back his children. He does not care about the wife.

Culturally and traditionally, among most of the older people that populate these novels, a wife is not a companion to her husband. A woman gets married in order to bear children, work in the fields and look after the husband's family, a fact well articulated in another novel by Pelda Hove, *Richave Dzerevende* (1998). In fact, the objectification of the woman is demonstrated through the fact that it was the families that played matchmaker. As Lydia Janhi (1970:33) explains, long ago, parents chose husbands for their daughters based on the men's character rather than love between the two. In Ndabaningi Sithole's *Busi*, serialised in *African Parade and Photo Action* (October, 1959 to January, 1961), a young girl named Busi runs away from home because her father wants to marry her off to an old man so that he may be given some cattle.

In *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, it is the girl's mother who decides to defy the above-described custom of *kuputsa mwanāsikana*, literally, 'to break the girl child'. The idea of doing so when the girls are young is to ensure complicity. For example, it is clear in the novel that Tambudzai still has a child's innocence and does not understand the gravity of the predicament that she is in.

The practice of pledging young girls to men was common, not only in Zimbabwe, but also in other African countries and other parts of the world. It is still prevalent in some parts of the world. Time will eradicate this practice as humanity develops. Perhaps that is why Simango decides to criticize such a tradition in novel form.

Sofola (in Nnaemeka ibid:63), however, seems to embrace polygamy, arguing that the husband becomes a shared commodity rather than a central focus as in monogamy. She goes on to say that the more he is shared, the less central he becomes in the wife's life; the more central the mother/child dynamic becomes. She sees monogamy as an alienating factor in the same way that

western culture alienates the African woman to the point where she neither understands nor appreciates her own, whose tenets include polygamy as an ideal marital set-up.

In Simango's novel, however, VaMunhamo has not acquired an alien culture in the form of western education, but she does run away from home in order to rescue her daughter from a forced marriage into a polygamous home. We can say that she and her daughter are running away from the power of patriarchy. The male force becomes the social force that systematically shapes the social imperatives for the female (MacKinnon, 1991:ix). VaMunhamo defeats such male driven social imperatives. For example, when Mundogara, Tambudzai's potential husband, brings the gift of a hare, she refuses to acknowledge it as a genuine gift. Tambudzai's mother also hates the idea and thinks that it is foolish and arrogant for a man to attempt to bribe her with a little rabbit. Instead, she is determined to rescue her young daughter from the impending forced marriage. In doing so, VaMunhamo is redefining her own parameters and taking control of her own daughter's life, instead of blindly accepting patriarchal control as she sees and defines it, thus defying tradition.

Once she breaks the ties with her husband, VaMunhamo and Tambudzai are like a free ball. Ramatoulaye (in Mariama Ba, 1989:40) argues that a woman is like a ball. Once thrown, no one can predict where it will bounce and no one has control over where it rolls, and even less over who gets it. It is often grabbed by an unexpected hand.

Tambudzai eventually falls into the hands of missionaries who educate her and, like a ball, she rolls into the nursing profession, finally being catapulted into Davy's arms who marries her. By the end of the novel, she is enjoying a very happy life at home and abroad where she, her husband and child, emigrate. Her happiness is a tribute to her mother's determination and later, her own, and that qualifies this novel as a good attempt in the feminist genre. Both women go through a severe test and both pass that test.

For the grown Tambudzai, the endurance test comes when she escapes one old man only to land into the clutches of another, Chairikira, a married man who pays her father's demanded compensation of £25, for the loss of revenue he would have received from Mundogara had she not run away with her mother. Chairikira now wants to marry Tambudzai even though she does not love him. For us to understand the way men in this society think, we have to refer to Hegel (in Simone de Beauvoir, 1989:435) who maintains that women's relations as mother and wife are basically general and not individual.

When her boyfriend, Davy, pays Chairikira's debt, she still has to endure another test, namely, Davy's prolonged absence and the pain brought on by rumours of his alleged marriage to another woman abroad where he has gone for further studies. Here, we can agree with Sofola (in Nnaemeka, 1998:63) when she argues that, because of this 'wifehood' syndrome, the educated African woman spends most of her time panicking over the possibility of rejection by her husband, thus making herself less relevant and less effective. Tambudzai indulges in this syndrome of 'wifehood', even though she is still single. Indeed, many detractors, including Davy's family, persuade her to marry someone else. But she remains resolute and practically becomes a *waiting wife*, as described in Njabulo Ndebele's novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2004:2). She is the new Penelope, an ultimate symbol of a wife, 'so loyal and so true', even though she is a mere girlfriend. Ironically, Davy is fraternising with many women, as he tells her later upon his return. Since the man is the one who wields authority, the woman invariably suffers when that waiting has not been done to perfection. The only redeeming factor for Davy is that he apologizes to Tambudzai and marries her.

VaMunhamo mourns such poverty that she feels is a curse. It is important to note that although poverty entraps both males and females; it is the females who bear the brunt as portrayed in this novel. It is VaMunhamo's husband, for instance, who has an advantage and the immediate means to try and alleviate his poverty as compared to his wife. The husband marries off Tambudzai, which VaMunhamo cannot do.



This issue of being pledged to an older man for a husband could even have resulted in Tambudzai being pulled out of school, for in this society's cultural context, the belief is that marriage takes precedence over the acquisition of a western education whose benefits are little known anyway. This aspect is well articulated and dramatized by Tambudzai's nephew, Kurauone, a drunk who lobbies on behalf of Chairikira because he buys him beer. In return, Kurauone urges Tambudzai to forget about school in order to get married to a wealthy man. After all, a woman's duty is to be married and to bear children. This male domination over the female who potentially can empower herself is problematic. Odora has explained its cause as that of 'capital', as quoted earlier. Certainly, as far as Kurauone is concerned, Tambudzai has no right to do what she wants. She should be told what to do by the men in the family, including being told to stop going to school. Whether deliberately or through ignorance, there is a fear of the females' education because it is believed that it will give the girl some undesirable independence. This is why it is correct to view the basis of gender disparity in this and other novels, from the Marxist exposition of the need to satisfy man's basic material needs.

Simango's answer to this cycle of poverty is empowerment for both males and females through western education. So, both VaMunhamo's children get educated at mission schools, Tambudzai becoming a nurse who marries Davy, a teacher, and her brother proceeds to university. Before getting married, Tambudzai gets a job and is able to help her family. She assists Chemwandoita, who is still at university and even manages to pay the required *lobola* to his girlfriend's family. Simango has been successful in balancing male and female joint efforts towards economic emancipation, what Hudson-Weems (in Nnaemeka, 1998:148) calls 'empowerment of women and individualism...human dignity and rights'. For Simango, both sexes have been liberated from stifling tradition and poverty. The oppressive, sexist tradition that is the setting of her novel is replaced by mutual respect between the sexes. Gender issues have therefore been positively portrayed in this novel. *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, as a title, therefore could mean a heralding of the best times or best, ideal age in the future when exploitation of one sex by another would no longer exist.

Although western education liberates Tambudzai and her family from the clutches of poverty, its alienating nature needs to be noted. While there is no doubt that Tambudzai feels good about her economic and professional achievement, there are negative consequences that are felt as a result of this independence from the embracing, communal, nurturing culture from which

they escape. Sofola (in Nnaemeka, *ibid*:54) correctly argues that if one is cut off from this nurturing culture, one is considered dead. Thus, no matter how much she misses her father, Tambudzai has been cut off from him and the culture that he believes in, and so she is practically 'dead' to him and to her paternal home and family.

The other four novels discussed below give completely different solutions to similar conflicts.

### ***Akafuratidzwa Mwoyo***

Sharai Mukonoweshuro's *Akafuratidzwa Mwoyo* is a more shocking tale of jealousy. A mother ends up fatally poisoning her own son in order to fix an 'undesirable' daughter-in-law. Gender issues here are more complex because it is the older woman who persecutes the younger woman. Men, in the novel, are gentle, loving and generally very kind and warm, akin to African men in real life who are not always cruel and domineering in a negative sort of way. The evil nature of the mother-in-law, again, can be understood from the Marxist dictum referred to above concerning the need to satisfy material life. When Svinurai, VaMakandionei's son, marries Machivei, he concentrates on his new nucleus family of wife and children. Consequently, VaMakandionei feels neglected materially and emotionally and alleges that because of Machivei, Svinurai no longer cares for her. She therefore attempts to kill his entire family by burning down their house with Machivei and children inside. When they survive that arson, she resorts to fatally poisoning her own son. She accuses Machivei of feeding her son a love potion that has turned his heart away from her. Hence, the novel's title, meaning, 'His heart was turned away [from me, the mother]'.

Using Freudian psychoanalysis, one could interpret the extreme jealousy exhibited by VaMakandionei as being a result of unresolved sexual attachment to her son. She failed to successfully pass through the castration complex or to successfully negotiate the Electra complex in a lop-sided way (Bressler, 1999:152). So in adulthood, she remains more or less physically, emotionally and psychologically attached and attracted to her son. She, therefore, regards her daughter-in-law as a rival. Significantly, her husband is no longer alive. An example of VaMakandionei's bitterness is when she complains to her friend, VaMashizha, that whenever her son visits, he prefers to spend time with his 'proud' wife. VaMakandionei works herself up into a frenzied fury, and the fact that she drinks alcohol continuously does not help



matters. By the time she poisons her son, her mind is full of beer fumes, practically, because she drinks without necessarily eating sensibly.

This novel is firmly rooted in traditionalism, unlike *Zviuya Zviri Mberi*, which has feminist tendencies. Traditionalism manifests itself most in Machivei, a comely, obedient, ideal young wife. She succumbs to extreme submissiveness, both internally and externally. For instance, she suppresses the desire to go and live with her husband in Zvishavane where he teaches. At the same time, both husband and wife suffer from the colonial, capitalist ideology which segregates against African male workers by not allowing them enough living space to accommodate their families at the work place. Endurance, thus, becomes the only thing to live for in Machivei's life. When she consults her aunt on these issues, the aunt advises her not to tell off or answer back when her mother-in-law insults her. It is only after her husband's death that she leaves for Chivi, without two of her children. They do not belong to her, but to the husband's people, as tradition in this novel dictates.

This is a serious aspect of the oppressive conditions dictated by traditionalism as manifested in the novel. It also manifests itself in the definition of marriage - not for companionship with one's partner, but for service to the husband's family. This is why VaMakandionei and her *sahwira* resent Machivei's *tete-a-tete* with her husband. It is a case of the values of the dominant patriarchal class being internalized by every class (Mohanty, et al, 1991:167). The downtrodden class such as Machivei's, feels more and more inferior and helpless, while the domineering class, here represented by VaMakandionei, feels more assertive in a cruel sort of way. VaMakandionei goes on to influence Soromoni, Svinurai's and Machivei's first son, against his mother, convincing him that it is the mother who killed his father. Soromoni automatically becomes a member of the dominant class, believing his grandmother without even investigating the truth of what he is told. Hence, the mother is further victimized to the point where Soromoni vows to kill her in order to avenge his father's death. Not until a friend's father reveals the truth to him, does he turn against his grandmother who responds by committing suicide.

Machivei, however, does not actively seek to assert her rights in this family. Even when VaMakandionei influences Tagarika, her kind brother, to fire her from his shop; even when her own son, Soromoni, insults and chases her away from his home when she visits, she remains a woman of great dignity and humility. It is Svinurai who declares his deep love for her and who also

expresses his dismay at the arson committed at his house, promising vengeance if and when he catches the culprit. Thus, in the novel, it has been easy to victimize such a meek and humble character. Machivei's sister-in-law, Maidei, is a better character who displays independent thought by contradicting her mother in most of her negative running commentary against Machivei. Yet, even Maidei cannot articulate a definite opposing attitude towards the forces that are suffocating Machivei. Machivei's aunt can only console her and advise her to persevere.

This sort of advice demeans Machivei and it seems to be a misrepresentation of the African traditional, rural woman as viewed by Sofola (in Nnaemeka, *ibid*:63) when she says,

Quite often when one hears the Western-educated African woman speak in a demeaning manner about her illiterate, rural "traditional" counterpart, one cannot help but pity the former for her false sense of importance and delusion of grandeur. It never occurs to her that while she parrots the phrase, "What a man can do, a woman can do better," her illiterate counterpart asserts: "What a woman can do, a man cannot do..."

Ama Ata Aidoo (in Nnaemeka, *ibid*:39-49) also discusses the tenacity of the traditional African woman to show that from time immemorial, she has worked hard and fearlessly in order to fend for her family. In this novel the writer seems to promote the concept that women should not be seen to be opinionated about anything at all. The end of the novel vindicates Machivei who regains respect and motherhood for Soromoni, but only because the latter liberates her by confronting his own grandmother and exposing her evil. The writer, thus, creates a world where gender issues are complicated by jealousy rooted in extreme materialism and plain evil. In her other novel, *Ndakagara Ndazviona*, attention shifts to a young girl's handling of love affairs. We shall discuss this novel together with others that deal with the same subject.

### **Three novels, three types of love affairs**

In *Ndakagara Ndazviona*, the plot and theme of love are prominent, with love, education and work outside the home for a young girl explored concurrently. The other two novels where love and education form an integral part of the plot and theme are Pelda Hove's *Richave Dzerevende* and Rudo Makayi's *Makudo*

*Ndomamwe*. These novels portray young high school girls who become extremely irresponsible in the way they handle their love affairs. In the end, only the girl in *Makudo Ndomamwe* succeeds in getting empowered through education. As discussed earlier, the girls in the other two novels do not succeed in achieving the means to satisfy material life. One gets the impression that they neither understand how education is supposed to transform their lives towards that goal, nor are they rooted in the nurturing of traditional life. So, they remain caught in-between, so to speak. It seems as if school for them is still an extraneous element, relatively isolated from other forms of social life (Odora, 1993:93). This is an interesting point when one considers that Simango, who writes in the 1970s, was better able to articulate decisively the role that education plays in emancipating families from the clutches of poverty. These three more recent works do not address the issue of education in the same manner. It would be interesting to see how these authors approach the complex subjects of love, education and career for the girl child in relation to fulfilling material life. We are mindful of the fact that these girls are now divorced from the warmth of the communal traditional home as discussed by Sofola (in Nnamaeka, *ibid*:54).

Unlike in the two novels discussed above, we cannot say that the girls in the novels under discussion are forced into their relationships the way Tambudzai is being forced to marry two old men at different times in her life. In *Ndakagara Ndazviona*, for example, the story opens with news from Gurai that her cousin, Revai is pregnant. It turns out that the pregnancy is not by her boyfriend, Jemisi Nzara, but by her aunt's husband, and she claims that 'he forced her'. If this is true, perhaps she could have told someone on the day of the event. Somehow, the text does not follow this claim of the rape convincingly. To keep quiet and seemingly not to even worry about this forced affair leaves the reader sceptical as to whether, indeed, she was a true victim of rape. Instead of her mother protesting and threatening the rapist, she looks forward to her daughter's marriage to VaMhosva, the alleged perpetrator, because he is a wealthy man. Once again, the issue of material needs surfaces.

On her own part, Revai does not seem to understand her fate. We see her not perturbed by the fact that she is going to be a second wife to her own paternal aunt. When Jemisi, her boyfriend, puzzles over her supposed illness of a stomach-ache, Revai's answer is a naive utterance, '*Waiuya kuzodii*'? (What were you coming to do?) (13-15). She neither appreciates nor understands that Jemisi is deeply in love with her and that she has an obligation to explain



matters to him. Throughout this novel, Revai displays no serious emotion towards her boyfriend who is so much in love that he visits her at VaMhosva's home where she is married. His love for her turns fatalistic, however, when he finally murders VaMhosva in order to reclaim his woman.

If, indeed, Revai was raped by VaMhosva, then that could explain her seeming indifference to the sensuous love between her and Jemisi. We can explain her flat attitude in Collins' words:

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that provide energy for change. The ability of social practices such as pornography, prostitution, and rape to distort the private domain of...women's love relationships...typifies this process (Collin, 2000:171).

Thus, Revai feels so oppressed by both VaMhosva and her mother who encourages her to marry this wealthy man for her own anticipated material gain, that she is unable to reciprocate Jemisi's love, or to respond meaningfully to his enquiries on why her behavior seems to have changed. This is similar to what victims of racism feel when they are sometimes paralyzed into machine-like passiveness. By having VaMhosva murdered, it appears as if the author has supported marriage based on genuine love since Revai ends up resuming her love affair with a man of her own choice.

Although Revai goes back to Jemisi, she still does not show the kind of remorse expected of a woman who engaged in an illicit affair behind her boyfriend's back. Strangely, Jemisi continues to love Revai as if she has always been his own. He, however, hates Revai's son by VaMhosva to such an extent that the reader is afraid for the boy's and even its mother's life. It is this relationship with the boy that gets Jemisi to reveal that he killed VaMhosva in order to demonstrate the depth of his love and commitment to Revai. It takes Revai's friend and neighbor to convince her that Jemisi has genuine love for her.

Revai's affair with VaMhosva terminates her education when she becomes pregnant. She makes no effort to return to school. Although her uncle takes her to Harare so that she can seek employment, she fails to do so and, instead, clandestinely resuscitates her love affair with Jemisi. She is comfortable with the role of a full time housewife and mother.

*Makudo Ndomamwe* subscribes to the idea of western education as a liberating tool, as shown in the case of Revai, the main character in this novel. Revai fails to write her 'O' level examinations because she falls pregnant by a womaniser and a reckless teacher, Gutsa, who deceives her by promising marriage. The girl is naïve and is easily taken advantage of. However, it is her brother, Nyadzisai, who affords her a second chance in life by financing her resumed studies while living with her grandmother, VaMashizha. After passing her 'O' level examinations, she trains as a nurse in Harare.

It is while in Harare that she falls in love with a former schoolmate, Nyengerai. Although he initially means well, just before going overseas for further studies, his relatives discourage him from continuing the affair with Revai whom they perceive to be loose. Meanwhile, by the time he leaves for further studies, Revai is pregnant again out of wedlock.

This woman's only redeeming feature is that she is employed and is financially secure. She seems to be devoted to her career and to motherhood even though these are not emphasized in the story. She is a strong woman who has faced rejection twice, yet without giving up on her career aspirations.

Revai, thus, fits into the category of many black women who want loving sexual relationships with black men, but instead, end up alone. Perhaps for her, wisdom, experience, and some passion become important weapons against male abuse (Collins, 2000:160). Thus, she is able to face Nyengerai later, and reject him in public. She has the courage to face her mistakes, analyze them and is able to conclude that men are all the same - deceitful people as the title, *Makudo Ndomamwe* suggests. She, therefore, pours her energies into motherhood and career, and hopes that her daughter, Chido, would not be as unlucky as she has been with men. In the meantime, she seems to be at peace with herself once she discovers that what she had in herself was a world that men wanted to enter without living in it. They wanted to take it away without owning it, or to lay it waste so that others would have no desire to even take a peep (Ndebele, 2004:57). Once she realizes these things, perhaps, she is able to live with herself without bitterness, and then hope for a better day in future.

Nevertheless, Revai can work out 'where the rain began to beat her', to use Achebe's expression (Chinua Achebe, 1981:44). With two children out of wedlock, both men and women in real life and in the novel brand her, a *mvana*, a dirty word that describes women in her predicament. At least the author ends the novel on a positive note for the women - it is *they* who *abandon* the arrogant man and in Topics Store, First Street Harare!

In the last novel, *Richave Dzerevende*, we are confronted by a reckless, sexually and morally irresponsible girl, Pendeka, and an equally reckless and morally irresponsible man, Chigariro. Chigariro's irresponsibility is well described at the beginning of the novel and is also depicted and accentuated by jealous, neighboring women who mock his wife. These women are jealous of her because she is a hard worker at home in the communal lands where she farms. She cannot live with her husband in Zvishavane where he works as a manager because she works hard, doing her own thing, to use that modern colloquialism, in order to satisfy requirements for material life. She has her own money and even sends some to her husband who, however, misuses it. The narrator's explanation for her remaining in the rural areas, however, is not so positive or complimentary because she is seen to be a culturally well-socialized woman who understands that wifehood/womanhood means tilling the land, home building, child-bearing and looking after the husband's relatives.

This is a typical misrepresented image of a rural woman that Sofola (1998) talks about as quoted earlier. Here she appears to have been brainwashed and socialized into total humility. Such people as portrayed here define womanhood or femininity in terms of work, home building and procreation. In addition, this wife learns to accept her husband's infidelity as a given fait accompli. Hence, Chigariro is very happy that his wife does not interfere with his activities. He is popular with prostitutes and goes about snaring young women at will.

One such young girl who falls into the clutches of Chigariro's spider's web is Pendeka, his own son Wiridzai's girlfriend. They both use false identities. From the time they meet, we see that these two are going to live up to their identities of falsehood and sexual mischief, since Stephen is really Chigariro, Wiridzai's father, and Catherine is Pendeka, Wiridzai's girlfriend whom he deeply loves. Thus, Pendeka is intimate to both father and son. Matters get complex when she falls pregnant by Stephen, but tells Wiridzai that it is his pregnancy. She goes to his home to get formally introduced to his family as their new daughter-in-law, only to be confronted by Stephen, at the same home!

One way of explaining Pendeka's unfaithful behavior towards Wiridzai is to look at it through Marx's and Engels' theory of materialism. Stephen, being a working boyfriend, satisfies Pendeka's material needs, while Wiridzai who is a mere school boy cannot.

The women as portrayed in this novel are, therefore, of three types: the subservient woman, Chigariro's wife; the jealous gossips, her neighbours;



and the truant, sexually promiscuous Pendeka and her friend Zviregwe. The men are in two categories only: the morally decadent, represented by Chigariro and a Gweru Teachers College lecturer who hopes to seduce Pendeka; and the morally upright represented by Wiridzai who is faithful to Pendeka. Unfortunately, he is the one who ends up deceived and hurt. Once again, the women have not come out in good light in this novel. Wiridzai is in the category of Jemisi in *Ndakagara Ndazviona*; men who get compromised by the girls' extreme infidelity and greed. These girls contrast sharply with Tambudzai of *Zviyaya Zviri Mberi*, a woman who can correctly be described as a paragon of virtue. The end of the novel is amazing, contrived, one might say, because instead of Hove resolving the complex issue of father and son possessing one girlfriend, she resorts to the supernatural and spiritual world of *mashavi* or *svikiro* (spirit medium) to resolve this strange issue. It is a *svikiro* who reveals the identity of the man responsible for Pendeka's pregnancy, ending the novel with that devastating news.

### Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to explore gender issues as depicted in the five selected novels by Shona female writers. These Shona novels have consciously portrayed complex gender issues where both men and women do not always acquit themselves positively. The men and women who populate these novels are, to a great extent, driven by the need to satisfy basic material needs. The struggle to satisfy these basic needs sometimes leads people into circumstances where they exploit each other and invariably, girls and women find themselves at the receiving end, with their sexuality being exploited.

The authors have also dealt with the complex issues of love, marriage, education and women's career opportunities in an African society, in an equally complex manner. Hopefully, the reader will find new insights revealed here and will be encouraged to search for more hidden meanings in these wonderful works, which fit snugly into the African literary canon of Zimbabwe.

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