

# FREEING VUYAZI: ORALITY AND WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITY IN PAULINA CHIZIANE'S FICTION

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## **Abstract**

Oral stories often maintain societal structures through the teaching of cultural norms. By bringing oral stories into her written text, Chiziane positions the elders as the resources of the village, the pillars, and the center of a fragmented world where things have started to change. As sites of memory, elder women establish a balance when the community needs to face modernity. However, as Chiziane deconstructs oral tales, she also subverts the colonial language. Here, I examine how the author utilizes a feminist and Africanist aesthetics, through oral tales, myths and proverbs often told by elder women, to reinvent the Portuguese language and literature while subverting myths and legends which reinforce gender hierarchies.

**Keywords:** feminist, Africanist aesthetics, gender hierarchies, subverting, language

# LIBERANDO A VUYAZI: ORALIDAD Y SUBJETIVIDAD FEMENINA EN LA FICCIÓN DE PAULINA CHIZIANE

## **Resumen**

Las historias orales mantienen a menudo las estructuras sociales, a través de la enseñanza de normas culturales. Al incorporar historias orales en su obra escrita, Chiziane sitúa a los mayores como recursos de la aldea, como pilares y centro de un mundo fragmentado en el que las cosas han empezado a cambiar. Como sedes de la memoria, las mujeres mayores aportan un

equilibrio cuando la comunidad necesita afrontar la modernidad. Sin embargo, al tiempo que Chiziane deconstruye los cuentos orales, subvierte igualmente la lengua colonial. En este trabajo examino cómo la autora recurre a una estética feminista y africanista, a través de cuentos, mitos y proverbios orales, frecuentemente transmitidos por mujeres mayores, para reinventar la lengua portuguesa, al tiempo que subvierte los mitos y leyendas que refuerzan las jerarquías de género.

**Palabras clave:** feminismo, estética africanista, jerarquías de género, subversión

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Mozambican writer Paulina Chiziane employs African aesthetics and a feminist impulse to unveil the multilayered source of constraints which affect women's lives. Chiziane appropriates the Portuguese language to recreate cultural traditions, thus forging a national allegory in which women reveal their voices and get empowered. Through many stories within the story, old women, aunts, mothers, and grandmothers bring to the center of the narrative myths, tales, and legends. Their oral stories fill the gaps of silence, giving meaning to untranslatable cultural aspects. By presenting the interplay of orality and literacy, the narrative scrutinizes the role of oral tradition which has as its main purpose to educate and to pass on culture but also fulfills the role of inculcating patterns of subservience and obedience.

Paulina Chiziane published *Niketche: Uma Historia de Poligamia (A Story of Polygamy)* in 2002. Besides *Niketche*, Chiziane also published five other novels: *Balada de Amor ao Vento (Love Songs in the Wind)* in 1990, *Ventos do Apocalypse (Winds of Apocalypse)* in 1993, *O Setimo Juramento (The Seventh Oath)* in 2000, and *O Alegre canto da Perdiz (The Joyous Song of Partridge)* in 2008.

In *Niketche*, Rami, a southern Mozambican woman is married to Tony, a powerful man. The protagonist has a European education, speaks the colonial language well: however, she feels disempowered. Neglected by a husband who decides to be polygamous after 20 years of marriage and five children, Rami investigates her husband's love affairs and discovers that he has four other wives and many children. After that, Tony's wives become friends and decide to search for their freedom.

A great deal of critical responses on *Niketche* focuses on polygamy, the initiation rites, and cultural traditions. Russel Hamilton, for instance, argues that Rami, instead of considering polygamy a matriarchal traditional practice from the north of Mozambique, understands polygamy "as a patriarchal practice that reinforces male dominance." (Hamilton 2007: 320) Rodrigues and Sheldon (2010) emphasize the womanist vein in *Niketche*, as Rami and her co-wives form a collective based on cooperation to liberate themselves

from the abusive husband. Ana Margarida Dias Martins highlights cultural differences, suggesting that Chiziane criticizes the “consequences of western catholic practices.” (Martins 2006: 81) Therefore, the exotic polygamous relationship contrasts with “the model of western monogamous marriage.” (Martins 2006: 70) In this work, I do not concentrate on polygamous relationships in Chiziane’s novel, but I examine how the author utilizes a feminist and Africanist aesthetics, through oral tales, myths and proverbs often told by elder women, to reinvent the colonial language and literature.

Female characters in *Niketche* re-imagine a nation that surpasses Portuguese colonization that imposed the myth of monoglossia, also ratified by Frelimo (Mozambican Liberation Front). While each of Rami’s co-wives comes from a different part of the country, speaks a different language, and has diverse cultural backgrounds, they come together to envision a nation that includes ethnic diversity. In this alternative nation, women learn from each other, thus forging a national space that accepts multiplicity. Linguistic diversity becomes part and parcel of the nation which those who cannot speak the colonial language get included and respected. In this context, Rami’s co-wives find opportunities to overcome socioeconomic adversity.

In *Niketche*, Rami helps Saly, Mauá, Luísa e Julieta to get freedom from the abusive polygamous husband. However, when those women need more time to run their business, they see polygamy as an advantage for them, searching for a sixth wife for Tony. They choose a young girl from the north who speaks Portuguese with a regional accent that does not have any prestige in urban Maputo:

–Tony, explica a Saly, conhecemos as tuas aspirações de abraçar o país inteiro em casamento, por isso fomos buscar esta nortenha do lado oeste. Ela fala português com acento nhanja, mas vamos corrigi-la no devido tempo. (322)

[Tony – explains Saly– We know your aspirations to embrace the entire country through marriage, so we sought out this northwestern woman. She speaks Portuguese with a nhanja accent, but we will fix it in due time.]

By speaking Portuguese with a nhanja accent, the girl from the northwest might not be a proper wife for a man of Tony’s stature—a powerful man—however, Rami, in an ironic tone, promises to fix the girl’s accent and make her a proper co-wife. Through a narrative that disrupts the power of colonial language in Mozambican society, Chiziane promotes inclusion of linguistic diversity.

After the country's independence, many Mozambicans could not speak Portuguese because most of them did not attend colonial schools. Only a tiny fraction of the population could speak, read, or write the European language. In 1979, a few years after the liberation of the country, only 15% of the population was literate in Portuguese, some, included in this 15%, attended school for less than two years. With that in mind, deciding national political matters or producing national literature in European languages might be useful to a few Mozambicans. The national or the official language of the country serves the interests of the national elite who acquires more power to control the wealth and dominate the population. Those who cannot speak the national language are virtually excluded from political debates and decisions that directly affect their lives.

The socialist party Frelimo decided to maintain Portuguese as the national official language. Like many other nationalist leaders across Africa, Frelimo opted not to choose one of the local languages to be the national language since the decision could instigate ethnic disputes. Some groups could argue that one ethnic group would be privileged to the detriment of others. Frelimo also considered that keeping Portuguese as an official language could connect Mozambique to other parts of the world, such as Brazil and other Lusophone colonies in Africa. Portuguese became the official language, but Frelimo did not take into consideration that not many Mozambicans could speak the colonial language. Kathleen Sheldon points out that in the census of 1970, "93 percent of Mozambican women and 86 percent of Mozambican men were could not read or write in Portuguese and only 6 percent of women and 12 percent of men had completed a primary education." (Sheldon 2002:105)

Women did not get the same opportunities as men for education and access to jobs. A few women had opportunities to get educated; most of them became outsiders and foreigners in their own nation. Women get pushed aside in political and administrative matters, being unable to make decisions to change their condition. As women were unable to speak Portuguese, they were not allowed to participate fully in the construction of the nation. Sheldon argues that "language, in both spoken and written versions, gave men, in general, an advantage denied to women, and allowed men to feel attached to the idea of Mozambique as a nation." (Sheldon 2002: 30)

Though Chiziane understands that writing in Portuguese might mean a denial of culture, and the erasure of indigenous languages, she also sees that as a tool that gives her the opportunity to tell stories to a broader audience. In an interview with Patrick Chabal, Chiziane states that she would not like to write in Portuguese, but she does not have other means to have an audience.

Choosing one of the indigenous languages does not seem possible, however, she expresses her frustration in attempting to translate some words and expression, which seem untranslatable, from her mother tongue to Portuguese. (Chabal 1996: 300 my translation) She says to Chabal: “orality is the strongest part of my writing because my most beautiful and profound ideas always come in the language that a story was told to me.” (Chabal 1996: 300 my translation) For women writers from Africa, the appropriation of colonial language is even more problematic than for male writers as this language represents not only colonial vehicle but also a patriarchal instrument. An instrument that implies a double colonization needs to be subverted in order to carry on women’s experiences.

According to Bill Ashcroft and Gareth Griffiths, this postcolonial literature is written out of a tension between “abrogation” and “appropriation.” He defines “abrogation as a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or “correct” usage and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning.” (Ashcroft and Griffiths 2002:38) Appropriation is the use of the colonizer’s language as a medium for the colonized to reflect and to tell the colonized of their own cultural experience. This ambivalence regarding the use of imperialist languages permeates the works of postcolonial writers.

With abrogation and appropriation, Chiziane finds ways to remedy the ruptures caused by European language, providing the inclusion of non-Portuguese speaking women from diverse parts of the country and of elder women who had been excluded from the making of the nation. In this sense, Chiziane plays “the role of the ironic commentator on the dominant Portuguese culture.” (Martins 2006: 81) As Chiziane writes in Portuguese, the inclusion of these other voices gives the reader a feeling that they are reading a work in translation. Chiziane fulfills the goal of translating as many female voices as possible through a text that has characteristics of orality. Most importantly, the text highlights voices from different ethnic groups in different parts of the country, so that in her narrative the privileged south learns from the north and by effacing rivalries the novel re-imagines the nation.

Culture gains a privileged dimension in a text that explores an Africanist aesthetics. Chiziane’s text brings tales and myths, originally meant to educate and pass on culture. By considering that these stories are also embedded with patterns of subservience of women and patriarchal rules, Chiziane’s narrative provides the deconstruction of tales. As Hillary Owen argues, these tales always expose “essentialist maternal traditions.” (Owen 2008: 164) If elder

women such as grandmothers, mothers, and aunts, interrupt the written text by filling the gaps of silence left by those who cannot speak or write the colonial language, Chiziane's text subverts these very stories as it challenges patriarchal authority within folktales and myths.

In one of the passages, Rami and her co-wives set up a conference among the elders to let them know that Tony is abusing the institution of polygamy. According to Rami and her co-wives, the husband cannot be considered a polygamist because he does not give proper assistance to his wives and children. For Rami, Tony distorts the institution of polygamy, thus committing adultery or concubinage. He utilizes tradition to justify his misconduct toward vulnerable women.

With an intention of protecting the husband from women's revenge, Tony's aunts take advantage of the situation to tell Tony's wives the story of a princess named Vuyazi. She explains that Vuyazi never obeyed her husband and her father. She never behaved like a woman, therefore, when her parents or husband hit her, she hit back. She talked back to them, letting men around her know how she felt. When she served food to her husband, the princess never gave him the best parts of the meat, but instead ate whatever she wanted. One day, her husband became upset because Vuyazi would not stop breastfeeding her daughter when the girl turned one year old. Vuyazi thought that, in order to get strong, girls should have the same rights as boys to be breastfed. Vuyazi's father became upset with his daughter's stubbornness and asked a dragon to send her to the moon. Vuyazi was stamped in the full moon to show that she was banned from the earth for being a rebel. The storyteller also explains that women menstruate every month to remember the consequences of Vuyazi's rebellion.

Oral stories resist modernity, providing women with culture and knowledge from oral traditions. Nevertheless, *Niketche* reinvents cultural traditions, creating a space for women to decide which aspects of a tradition they want to maintain, and which ones should be challenged. As Tony's aunt, a woman in the village who certainly cannot speak Portuguese, tells the wives the story in order to prevent a rebellion against their husband, the story of Vuyazi assumes symbolic meaning. At the end of the novel, Rami frees Vuyazi from her lunar prison. As Rami extends Vuyazi her freedom, she reverses the oral story, saying that women who challenge patriarchal society and disobey their husbands and fathers should not be imprisoned. As Rami walks toward her own freedom, she shows other women how to do the same.

When Rami's mother tells stories to make her daughter accept male privilege which is ingrained in their culture, her tales are filled with

exaggeration, irony and sarcasm. She tells about her older sister, Rami's aunt, who defies male authority and dies. She explains that the chicken stomach in every house must be saved for the men of the house. Hence, Rami's aunt died because she was not careful to save the chicken stomach for the husband. She reserved the chicken best parts in a bowl; a cat came and ate it. When the husband arrived home, he discovered that his chicken stomach was missing. He got furious. The woman, afraid of the husband, runs away to be killed by a leopard. To revenge the woman, Rami and her co-wives subvert the story. They decide to go to a grocery store and buy kilos of chicken stomachs for Tony. Tony feels disrespected because he craves for a single stomach from a special chicken which would represent privilege and respect, not a tableful of chicken stomachs.

These stories told by Tony's aunt and Rami's mother are multilayered texts that serve many functions. Through rebellion against these norms, women are able to rethink feminine roles in this patriarchal society. The text also gives voice to village women who cannot speak the European language. When Tony's aunt tells the story, the narrator is silent, giving a place to the elder women. The narrator exchanges her place with several other women who fill the text with multiple voices. Through oral tradition, Chiziane's narrative alerts the reader to the importance of memory in the reconstruction of the community's history, as voices of those who cannot speak Portuguese are included as a counterpoint to historical narratives. In this sense, memory plays a pivotal role in maintaining history as elder women's tales play a crucial role, functioning as constructions of self-representation and identity.

In Oral Literature in Africa, Ruth Finnegan suggests that stories are also told to maintain hierarchies and secure the power of rulers and to present "harmonic model to the society, by teaching the kind of relationships which maintain the structure of society." (Finnegan 1970: 321) Orality's role in African literature is threefold: cultural, political and aesthetics. *Niketche* assumes a paradoxical role to pass on cultural traditions while subverting and disregarding them. According to Eileen Julien, essentialist postcolonial readings of the role of oral tradition in the African novel usually connect it whether as an ethnographic text or as an example of authenticity and originality. However, Julien suggests that "both readings hold the novel hostage to the expectations of a hegemonic readership." (Julien 2003:132) In this sense, Chiziane's text frustrates the expectations of the audience, particularly the audiences that expects ethnography and authenticity.

By bringing oral stories into her written text, Chiziane positions the elders as the resources of the village, the pillars, and the center of a fragmented



world where things have started to change. As sites of memory, elder women establish a balance the community needs to face modernity. To counterbalance the promise of a future where capitalism and modernity dominate the scene, the idea of preserving the past becomes a way of understanding and negotiating the future without romanticizing the past. Chiziane's narrative informs the reader that depriving a nation of these stories means provoking amnesia. To avoid amnesia, the author reinstates memory and oral tradition as pillars for maintaining the knowledge that Mozambican modernity had gradually set aside.

Chiziane provides readers with tools to re-imagine neo-colonial women beyond the stereotypes disseminated by colonialist and nationalist discourses. The question of reception is still an issue in countries where a high percentage of the population is not proficient in European languages, therefore, these women writers attempt to make a political impact in their societies through their literature. Their audience is, however, for the most part, outside of Africa, and so they may find it difficult to have any direct influence on the lives of poor women in their countries. This situation becomes a source of frustration for those who have to write in European languages. Even when the indigenous population does not have the opportunity to get access to African literature, some works become known through other artistic representations, as is the case of theatrical group Mutumbela Gogo which adapted *Niketche* to the stage. Nonetheless, those who could not read, write, or simply do not have access to books, may get acquainted with the work of Paulina Chiziane.

Across Africa, visual artistic expressions, such as cinema and theatre, have been some of the ways in which literary works achieve larger audiences. An example is the Senegalese film director Ousmane Sembene, considered the father of African cinema, who started his career as a writer. He wrote *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), however, he became a filmmaker, with the intention to tell his stories to an audience that could not read French. The Zimbabwean writer and filmmaker Tsitsi Dangaremba also started her career as a writer. With her first novel, *Nervous Conditions*, published in 1988, Dangaremba also turned to filmmaking, a vehicle that has helped her to spread a message to a broader audience in Zimbabwe.

In African women's literature, language is a space of tension and controversy, and, although these writers find European languages a site of patriarchal and colonial power, they also appropriate these languages to profit from the exposure that they offer. If the colonizer's language may not reach the population in their countries, it promotes an impact on readers worldwide.

African writers like Chiziane thus give to the global community means to deconstruct stereotypes about these authors' countries and about Africa in general.

By challenging patriarchal rules as well as promoting women's empowerment, Chiziane considers *Nicketche* a feminist novel. Despite some African writers' refusal to acknowledge themselves as feminists, Chiziane told Patrick Chabal, in an interview, that *Nicketche* is "a feminist novel that carries a message of protest." (Chabal 1996: 298 my translation) Irene Assiba D'Almeida, in her book *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*, argues African women authors "struggle to articulate and theorize their own conception, at the same time they put pressure on men to make them active agents in achieving the goal of social transformation." (D'Almeida 1994: 21) A harsh criticism of masculinity and male power in Africa characterizes a lot of works authored by African women.

Some African women writers think Western feminist theory might not be appropriate to examine problems of women in the continent. Some writers acknowledge that they have some affinities with international feminism as well as Afro- American feminism, but they delineate a specific African movement which can take into account the needs and goals that arise from the particular realities of women's lives in African societies and the necessity of a reconstruction of Africa. Phaniel Egejuru and Ketu Katrak in their book *Womanbeing and African Literature* state that "Women's issues constitute important aspects of working towards a most just and humane future for African society." (Egejuru and Katrak 1997: 9) Nevertheless, this is a discussion that goes beyond gender and proposes a deconstruction of ideologies, class and gender hierarchies.

The Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking creates a term, "the misovire", a French neologism that means the male hater. For D'Almeida, Liking's invention is "all the more important as the creation of the word also creates the function, and the possibility of another reality." (D'Almeida 1983:20) The term coined by Liking has generated quite a few interesting debates for writers who struggle to come to terms with the intersection of categories, such as, class, race, nationality, religion, sex, and others. It is worth noting, as D'Almeida suggests, that the invention of misvoire does not mean "a gratuitous act; it's done for a redressive purpose, for besides filling a linguistic void, the word aims to destabilize the status quo, and it shows the extent to which social reality and literary expression are inextricably intertwined." (D'Almeida 1994: 21)

D'Almeida reiterates the necessity to have a new term to destabilize the term feminism, which is deeply linked to Western women experiences. She engages the discussion that many African women refuse the term African feminism as it reminds them a Western ideology, an outsider invention that is imposed on Africa. She also emphasizes the importance of the participation of African men in social transformation, one of the aspects that make African feminism dissimilar from its Western counterpart. For her, African feminists are aware that males should be part and parcel of a wider struggle to overcome gender hierarchies and social injustices.

For Obioma Nnaemeka argues that "to speak of feminism in Africa is to speak of feminisms in the plural within Africa and other continents in recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives." (Nnaemeka 1998: 31) However, Nnaemeka envisions herself as part of a common struggle that has its foundation in pan-African ideals. In so doing, she aligns herself with other literary critics, such as Irene Assiba D'Almeida, who have affirmed that in using the term feminisms, her intent is not one of "totalization, but of a Pan-African perspective." (D'Almeida 1994: 23)

*Niketche's* protagonist analyzes women's lives in a postcolonial urban environment. The freedom of Vuyazi from the moon represents the self that threatens the prevailing social order. Thus, freeing Vuyazi becomes a powerful symbol in the narrative, as female characters struggle to free themselves from societal constraints, norms, and rules that regulate their bodies. Without performing the role of an ethnographic novel, Chiziane utilizes orality to subvert not only Portuguese language but also to disrespect myths and tales which often reinforce gender roles and patriarchal norms.

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