


The use of the concept of *imbokotho* in the study of selected isiXhosa poetry

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IsiXhosa poetry about women and by women is one of the growing areas that attracts the attention of literary scholars today. Scholars have posed a challenge to study these works as they offer new insights and nuances in scholarship. Although scholars have turned their attention to these aesthetic works about women and by women in isiXhosa poetry, they rely heavily on Western frameworks to examine these works. Scholars use literary criticism theories such as feminism, African feminism, South African feminism and intersectionality to examine and interpret these works. These theories tend to look at women in literary texts in relation to men, forcing critics to examine women in literary texts in the light of their male counterparts. This limits scholars to only that and does not explore what women can do on their own. It is against such a backdrop that this article aims to evaluate the concept of *imbokotho* for use in the study of literary texts about and by women. In investigating the use of the concept of *imbokotho*, I have used conceptualisation and propositional theorising as a form of investigating the concept of *imbokotho*. To evaluate the concept of *imbokotho* in studying literary texts, I used two poems and an anthology about women and two anthologies by women. The focus was on how women are portrayed as individuals and in groups, the definition of their beauty, and their roles. As this concept was examined in isiXhosa poetry, it calls for future examination in other genres and literature from other languages.

Contribution: This study adds a voice in scholarship about women in literature and in approaches used to study literary texts about and by women. It adds a nuance by evaluating the concept of *imbokotho* as an approach to study literary texts about and by women. This approach encourages critics to view women as they are and not in comparison to men. Although the article used poetry to test the approach, it can be used in all literary genres to examine texts.

Keywords: *imbokotho*; criticism; feminism; isiXhosa poetry; women.

Introduction

IsiXhosa poetry about women and by women is one of the growing areas that attracts the attention of scholars today. According to Jadezweni (2013:1), 'there is pressing need to write about poetry about women in isiXhosa'. With the rise of isiXhosa female poets such as Mthunzikazi Mbungwana, Athambile Masola and Anelisa Thengimfene, there is also a need to study isiXhosa poetry written by women. Scholars such as Makhenyane (2022), Gqola (2023) and Diko (2023) have responded to this call by examining the works of these female poets writing in isiXhosa. Although scholars have turned their attention to these aesthetic works about women and by women in isiXhosa poetry, they rely heavily on frameworks founded on Western thought to examine these works. Scholars use literary criticism theories such as feminism, intersectionality, African feminism and South African feminism to examine and interpret these works. Although these theories are relevant in examining lived experiences of women, in that they observe issues of gender inequality, oppression of women by men and the role played by women in patriarchal system, they tend to look at women in literary texts in relation to men, compelling critics to examine women in the light of their male counterparts. This limits scholars to only that and does not explore what women can do on their own. It is against such a backdrop that this article aims to test the concept of *imbokotho* for use in the study of literary texts about and by women.

In response to the above-stated problem and aim, this article answers the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of the concept of *imbokotho*?
- How can the concept of *imbokotho* be used to examine literary texts about and by women?

The following section outlines the methodology used to answer research questions.

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Methodology

This article is qualitative in nature, as it sought to investigate the concept of *imbokotho* for use in the study of literary texts about and by women. Diko (2023:591) notes that qualitative research approach 'advances the use of argumentation, conceptualisation, contextualisation and description of the phenomenon of interest'. The phenomenon of interest in this study is the concept of *imbokotho* for use as literary criticism, and it was investigated from a constructivist research paradigm. In investigating the use of the concept of *imbokotho*, I adopted conceptualisation and propositional theorising as a form of investigating the concept of *imbokotho* for use as literary criticism. To evaluate the concept of *imbokotho* as a literary criticism, I used two poems and one anthology written about women. The two poems were written during the colonial era by S.E.K. Mqhayi and J.J.R. Jolobe, and the anthology was published in 2023 by Edwin T. Smith. In addition, I used two anthologies written by women. Both these anthologies were published in 2021 by Athambile Masola and Mthunzikazi Mbungwana. The selected texts were purposefully sampled, as I sampled poems written about women and by women.

The following section of this article surveys literature about feminism and literary criticism. This glance at feminism as literary criticism not only shares a history of feminist literary criticism, but it also sets the foundation for the evaluation of the concept of *imbokotho* for use in the study of literary texts about and by women.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Fort Hare, Inter-Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee (IFHREC) and ethics consent was received on 06 December 2023. The ethics approval number is MAK001-23.

Feminism and literary criticism

Although many scholars date feminism back to the 18th and 19th centuries, Dinshaw (2012) finds traces of feminism during the Middle Ages, where medieval thought made comments on the tradition of the time that repressed, mistreated and misrepresented women. These traces of feminist thought in medieval Europe are corroborated by Bennet (2005), who alludes to the fact that:

When feminists first began to organize in late-nineteenth-century Europe, they quickly turned to the Middle Ages for information about the issues that concerned them: women's work, women's education, women's status under the law, and women's participation in political life. (p. 139)

Bennet (2005) adds that feminists today will discover that the status of women began to change for the better during the era of the medieval millennium. Observation of women and women's writing by feminist medievalists showed women in the light of men, noting issues of oppression of women by men, mistreatment of women by men and misrepresentation of women in men's writing, as well as

their changed status in relation to men. Therefore, there is need of a literary criticism that will observe women in aesthetic works about and by women from a perspective that views them as independent beings.

According to Guo (2018), feminist literary criticism has feminism as its foundation, and it is anchored on the three waves of feminism that began in 1890. Plain and Sellers (2012) credit the birth of feminist literary criticism to the pioneering work of critics like Germaine Greer, Kate Millet and Eva Figs. These scholars searched 'for a women's tradition and the impact of autobiographical discourses, to the challenges posed by black, lesbian and male feminists and critics' (Plain & Sellers 2012:102). Their focus in literary texts was issues of gender, race, class and sexuality, observing issues of inequality, oppression and roles played by women in literary texts as they reflected society. According to Goldman (2012), Virginia Woolf, who lived from 1882 to 1941, is the founder of modern feminist literary criticism. Black (2018) substantiates this view by noting that Woolf's assertions of women's experiences were the basis of transformational change. Living in Victorian society, Woolf observed the marginalisation and discrimination of women, as she could not go to school because of her gender (Bilgin 2013).

In examining feminist thought in two of Woolf's books, Bilgin (2013) notes that in *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf displays the social role of women, the patriarchal system during the Victorian Age and differences between men and women, as well as issues of mental health. The principal character, Mrs Dalloway, symbolises the power of women. Bilgin (2013) notes that although she is strong, she is alone. The researcher, using feminist literary criticism, notes this as though it is a defect; she should be with a man. Furthermore, this power and strength is made manifest by paralleling it with a male character named Septimus, who kills himself, revealing the weakness of men. Although this work displays the relevance of feminism in studying literary texts written by women, it also shows its shortfall in describing the strength of women by comparing them to men and by showing the failures of men.

The development of feminist literary criticism shows a continuation of examining women in literary texts in the light of men. Knellwolf (2001), who studies the development of feminist criticism in the 20th century, notes the oppression of women by men and how women were made to feel inferior by men based on their gender. She comments on the work of an American feminist, Elaine Showalter, who:

[C]oined the term 'gynocriticism' which she defines as the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of female literary tradition. (p. 200)

Showalter (1979) argues that the purpose of gynocriticism is to develop a framework and new models that are based on female experiences to critique women's literature. The thoughts of Showalter liberate women's work from being

observed from a male perspective, giving them their own voice. There is a need for such an outlook in studying literary texts by women from different contexts. Evaluating the use of the concept of *imbokotho* in the study of literary texts about and by women seeks to view women independently in any literary text, irrespective of the producer of the text. The concept of *imbokotho* emanates from a South African perspective of the term *imbokotho*, which is described in the next section.

The development of feminism in the 21st century saw the birth of regional forms of feminism, including African feminism. Atanga's (2013) description of feminism in Africa shows similarities with gynocriticism; it is only the environment and circumstances that differ. According to Atanga (2013), African feminism is a way of rewriting the identities of African women as active participants in socio-economic-political development in African states, instead of passive victims in a patriarchal system. Makhenyane (2022) argues that African feminism assesses African women's responses to social, political, cultural, intellectual and professional challenges and problems imposed by patriarchy.

Out of African feminism emerged another form of regional feminism, South African feminism and black South African feminism, espoused by scholars such as Boswell (2020) and Gqola (2023). Boswell (2020) argues that a:

[B]lack South African feminist criticism as a method of engaging with black, women-authored texts, takes as its point of departure the intrinsic value of a black woman – her life shaped by oppressive forces such as slavery, apartheid, colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy – sitting down to write from her uniquely gendered, classed and racialised position. (p. 207)

In her study of Masola's religious imagery in *Ilifa*, Gqola (2023) used black South African feminism, as defined by Boswell. Gqola (2023) admonishes that the work of Masola must be read in a manner that will allow her to take her place in the midst of women who wrote isiXhosa poetry. The emphasis of South African feminism is on works by women, and for black South African feminism, on black women. Nevertheless, they are silent on literary works about women. Evaluating the use of the concept of *imbokotho* in studying literary texts seeks to examine its use on both literary texts about and by women and women in general, irrespective of race.

The concept of *imbokotho*

At an elementary level, the word *imbokotho* in isiXhosa (*iimbokodo*, in isiZulu) is a noun that refers to a stone. Ramantswana (2019) further states that the term *imbokotho* is used to refer to a grindstone, a durable stone used by women for pounding and pestling when processing material, such as grains, tobacco and medicine (Mini 2003). The two scholars give an image of an object that transforms other objects, an object that brings about change. It is often associated with women among Nguni people, as they are the ones who use the grindstone. When asked a question on *imbokodo* in an interview with The Conversation Africa (2022), Guzula answered from isiZulu perspective, noting that the word

'*imbokodo*' means a 'rock'. It is from this idea that the slogan *wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo, uzokufa* [you strike a woman, you strike a rock, you will die] emanated.

On 09 August 1956, women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, South Africa, with chants of *wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo, uzokufa* to resist the white regime. The purpose of the march was to protest Pass Laws during the tenure of Strydom, laws that restricted the movement of and oppressed black people in South Africa. According to Ramantswana (2019), the isiZulu saying *wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo, uzokufa* was made famous during apartheid, and it was used to epitomise courageous women who fought against Pass Laws. Therefore, 'The slogan came to represent women's courage and strength in resisting and protesting the increasing oppression of Apartheid laws' (Clark et al. 2019:69). Scharneck (2020) refers to this slogan as a battle cry for South African women, as in that day they fought fiercely with apartheid government. He states that this slogan is a symbol of the courage and strength of South African women, who now have a struggle for gender inequality in South Africa and the rest of the world. Clark et al. (2019) note, 'That rock says, "we are solid" in what we see and name as injustice and we are solid in our stand for justice'. These views of the concept of *imbokotho* are problematic, in that for many they reduce women to passive objects whose strength is for stomaching abuse they get from men and who are courageous to withstand the abuse, leading to more cases of gender-based violence (GBV). A rock, unlike a grinding stone, is a giant boulder that sticks out of the ground, making reference to its passive nature.

Clark et al. (2019) report on a march they attended in August 2018. Women led this march against GBV. They narrate an incident that took place in that march by stating:

The familiar call '*Wathinta abafazi*' went out, and as we responded '*wathint' imbokodo!*', a group of young Black womxn [women] alongside us responded by shouting [*in English*], 'We are not rocks!' This response became louder and louder, and became a chant, 'We are not rocks! We are not rocks!' clearly drowning out whatever else was being said in our section of the protest. (p. 68)

Clark et al. (2019) continues that the overwhelming new direction by young black women in South Africa, refusing to be called *iimbokodo*, emanates from the thought that:

To say 'I am a rock' also seems to imply that I can take many blows or I can be thrown about many times until someone or something outside of my own choice and agency decides to stop the blows – whether those blows are physical or emotional or institutional blows – the various blows of patriarchy. (p. 68)

The resistance to the slogan is emancipatory, in that it resists seeing women as passive objects to be subjected to any treatment by men or any group of people. Their reasoning behind their rejection of a term that has been known to describe women in South Africa for more than six decades is justifiable and in no wise demeaning the work done by 1956

women; in fact, it confirms and celebrates their work. Their view is of *imbokotho* as a grinding stone rather than of *imbokodo* as a rock.

The Greater Dictionary of isiXhosa defines *imbokotho* in a manner that will help us to view women differently whenever we use the *imbokotho* metaphor to refer to them. Mini (2003) defines *imbokotho* as follows:

[I]senzo, intetho okanye umntu othi enze inguqulelo entlalweni njengokutyumza izinto ezingalunganga ezinjengokrutha-kruthano, ukungavisisani, ukuhlalalana ngentlamba, uthiyano, njl. [An act, a speech or a person who brings about a change in society by grinding evil things like discord, disorder, dissension, mutual hatred, etc.]. (p. 314)

When a woman is called *imbokotho*, a grinding stone, they are perceived as game-changers, as active members of the society who fight against any injustice, enemies of disorder, discord, dissension and hatred. As the grindstone brings about change in corn, tobacco and maize, transforming objects from one state to the other, women who are called *imbokotho* bring about change in society; they are transformative in nature. As the grindstone effects change through an act of grinding, *imbokotho* are women who grind acts and speech that are harmful to others. This idea of *imbokotho* is further elaborated in the *Imbokodo: Women who Shape Us* series of children's books by Masola and Guzula, published by Jacana Media in 2021. The series has three books – *10 Extraordinary Leaders, Activists and Pioneers*; *10 Inspiring Singers, Writers and Artists*; *10 Curious Inventors, Healers and Educators* – which look at the lives of influential women in South Africa who continue to shape women in the country. In these books, Masola and Guzula (2021) tell the history of collaborative works of women which led to standing together in confronting the white regime. In this series, they paint women as inventors, independent thinkers, critical thinkers, creatives, activists, leaders, problem solvers and nation-builders. Their view of women outside of men in these aspects further emphasises the concept of *imbokotho* for use in the study of literary texts about and by women.

Therefore, the concept of *imbokotho* offers literary critics ways of interpreting literary texts about and by women. The concept of *imbokotho* paints women as active agents in society rather than passive people who are defined by their men and looks. This perspective calls on critics to examine women for what they can do on their own, rather than what is expected of them by society or as compared to men. In addition, the concept of *imbokotho* perceives women as agents of change who transform people, situations, environments and anything they come across. This calls for critics to observe how people and things were before women arrive in a text and how people and things are after their arrival; what kind of positive change do they bring in the picture? This will lead critics to note when women are portrayed negatively as gold-diggers, promiscuous, negligent, lacking intelligence and so on. In literary texts written by women, this concept calls for critics to observe trends before the writing of women and contemporary trends in their writing to examine the

impact and transformative nature of their writing. *Imbokotho* is used to grind objects, transforming them from one state to the other. This aspect of *imbokotho* seeks critics to interpret acts and speech of women against the ills of the society such as GBV, corruption, unemployment, human settlement and the need for freedom and leadership. Critics must ask questions such as: are women portrayed as grinders of social ills with the purpose of transforming society, or they are portrayed as contributors to such ills? Examining answers to such questions will help critics to see whether women are portrayed as *iimbokotho* or in the same manner they have been portrayed in literature, as secondary citizens. In the next section, I use this concept of *imbokotho* to study literary texts about and by women.

The concept of *imbokotho* in the study of literary texts: isiXhosa poetry

This section tests the concept of *imbokotho* for use in the study of isiXhosa poetry about and by women. I have divided this section into two subsections, namely poetry about women and poetry by women.

Poetry about women

This section analyses two poems about women, one by Mqhayi and the other by Jolobe, as well as an anthology by Edwin Smith. The analysis swings on the hinges of the concept of *imbokotho*.

'UMfikazi uCharlotte Manyhi-Maxeke' by S.E.K. Mqhayi

In this poem, Mqhayi is eulogising the late Charlotte Manyhi-Maxeke, at her funeral. In lines 1 and 9, Mqhayi repeats a similar clause, '*Shukumani bafazi*' [Stand up, women]. This charge displays the poet's belief in the capabilities of women to stand and be counted in the fight for liberation. He is emphasising the point that now that Maxeke is laid to rest, women must take the baton from her. In these lines, Mqhayi uses pacing to lead his audience to want to know what Maxeke has done during her life that is worth emulating. In the following lines, the poet depicts Maxeke as an agent of change:

3. *Ufinyis' amagruxu.*
4. *Ushenxil' okadesakh' imizi,*
5. *Egutyul' iirhanga namanxila;*
6. *Egodus' amahilihil' agoduke;*
7. *Kubuy' amadungudwan' emazweni.*
3. The one who removes refuse.
4. Gone is the builder of homes,
5. Removing the idle and the drunkards;
6. Sending wanderers home;
7. And vagabonds come home.

Mqhayi uses raw imagery to paint a picture of a woman who goes out of her way to effect change in society by identifying

and mapping out innovative strategies to solving societal problems. She was selfless in her leadership. In line 4, he portrays Maxeke as a nation-builder, a significant characteristic of *imbokotho*, who is transformative in nature. This idea is further emphasised in line 18, where Mqhayi compares Maxeke to a cow that produces substantial amounts of milk to feed the nation, '*Maz' emabele made yaseAfrika*' [Friesland of Africa]. This metaphor paints a vivid picture of one who has impacted the entire continent of Africa with her influence. Feminists might shun this metaphor, questioning the comparison with an animal that is used for the benefit of its owner. Nevertheless, using the concept of *imbokotho*, which espouses imagery born out of African lifestyles, this metaphor portrays Maxeke as an active agent in addressing poverty in Africa, feeding Africa with food and ideas to get out of poverty.

Furthermore, in line 8, Mqhayi uses a metaphor to compare her to a foundation stone in saying, '*Itye lesiseko seTiyopiya*' [The foundation stone of Ethiopia]. In acknowledging her strength by comparing her to a stone, Mqhayi points out her innovativeness as a founder, a starter and an initiator, as Maxeke is 'one of the co-founders of African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Africa' (Masola & Guzula 2021:24). In line 22, Mqhayi appeals to the nation to build a monument for Maxeke, so that her works are never to be forgotten. According to Mqhayi, the beauty of Maxeke lay not in her looks but in her monumental works.

Inyibiba by J.J.R. Jolobe

In this poem, Jolobe uses a botanic metaphor to refer to his love, whom he compares to '*inyibiba*' [a lily]. Jolobe (2018), the son of J.J.R. Jolobe, confirms that his father was referring to his wife when he praised the lily in this poem by revealing, '*... wayesisithandwa kwiqabane lakhe, uNksk. Jeanne Buthelwa Jolobe, kwaye naye wayeyinyibiba kuye*' [... he was a darling to his partner, Mrs Jeanne Buthelwa Jolobe, and she was a lily to him]. In stanza 7, the poet says:

*Ndevo' izisebezo
Emazants' obume bam,
Zindityel' ukuthi yeyam,
Phofu ingeyiy' ubuhle
Bonk' obunjengayo.*

I heard whispers
Down in my loins
Telling me he is mine
Oh, what manner of beauty
None compares to it.

Jolobe selects the best plant in terms of symbolic meaning to refer to a woman in his life. A lily is known for its beauty amid a dump, and its green stem is a symbol of natural beauty, while its whitish-yellow head is a symbol of purity and intellect, and the silver spots on the leaves symbolise life and productivity. Through the lenses of the concept of *imbokotho*, Jolobe's text is marred by stanza 7, where he says

it was after he heard whispers in his loins that he realised she is his. The poet is saying he needed a confirmation from his manhood that she is the right woman, despite all the evidence of resilience in rising against the odds, of natural beauty, purity, intellect, life and productivity.

The concept of *imbokotho* defines beauty by permanent attributes and not temporary attributes like looks and sexuality. In this poem, Jolobe reduces women to sexual beings rather than intellectual beings, as everything in her did not move him except her sexuality. This is the kind of discourse that leads women to be sexually abused and used in their unions. It is when Jolobe's '*Inyibiba*' is critiqued through the lens of *imbokotho* that it is found to demean women.

UMalusi (The Shepherd): an anthology by Edwin Smith

UMalusi (The Shepherd) is a bilingual (isiXhosa and English) poetry collection that portrays mothers as *imbokotho*, agents of change and transformers. Smith translated all the poems to English. During the launch of the book in Pretoria, Smith (2023a) opened by noting that 'the collection fundamentally is a sentimental gesture to my mother', whom he saw as a shepherd. This metaphor places women in a leading and active role in society. According to Smith (2023b:2), a shepherd mother guides her 'children to pastures where they will be nourished and grow to become the human beings they are meant to become whilst protecting them from harm'. He further argues that:

This view of parenting differs radically from an approach that seeks to design our children to be what we as parents want them to be, which often results in the anguish and trauma parents suffer when this does not materialize. (Ibid)

Smith (2023a:xvi) uses these ideas of a shepherd to paint a picture of his late mother in this collection, and 'all the mothers in our lives'. In addition, when his mother passed in his car on the way from Cape Town to Pretoria, he reveals that 'without any forewarning, I was the shepherd my mother needed to get back home to her people, hence the title of the collection' (Smith 2023a:xiv). In this line and in the poem titled '*Umthandazo*' ['Prayer'] Smith (2023a:4-5) alludes to the fact that his mother taught him well, preparing him for this day.

Smith (2023a:16-17) pens a short poem titled '*Izimbo zakho*' ['Your Idiosyncrasies'], and the English version reads as follows:

The new MaNdllovu bought
a street urchin food
because you taught us that
no child will go hungry while you watch
no one will sleep on the street while you have a house
no girl will go naked while you have clothes
Your idiosyncrasies endure

Smith uses personal deixis ('you' and 'your') to point to his mother, who taught them to care for and love people, despite

their social status. In these lines, we learn of a mother who is active in instilling transforming values to her children by her actions. This idea is further emphasised in a poem on pages 12 and 13, titled '*Ndisakuthanda nawe*' ['I still love you'], where the poet closes the poem by emphasising that he still loves her mother, because she showed him love. His mother taught values by her actions.

The theme of transformational love is pervasive in Smith's anthology. Poems such as '*Isithembiso sakho/Your promise*'; '*Ndisakuthanda nawe/I still love you*'; '*Ndibhabh' emafini/Floating in the clouds*'; '*Nangamso/So be it tomorrow as well*'; and '*Ukusinda kothando/The burden of love*' discuss this theme of love as taught by his mother. These poems reveal a woman who is a critical thinker, in that she knows what is best for her children. We further note a mother's influence in uprooting toxic masculinity in a man, who learns how to love like his mother by learning from her.

In this section, the concept of *imbokotho* is used to examine poetry about women. This concept of *imbokotho* helped to critique literary texts about women by examining how women are portrayed as independent beings and not in comparison to men. The section that follows investigates poetry by women.

Poetry by women

This section analyses two anthologies, *Unam Wena* by Mbungwana and *Iifa* by Masola. These two books, written by women, were published by Uhlanga Press in 2021. The analysis hinges on the concept of *imbokotho*.

Unam Wena by Mthunzikazi Mbungwana

Unam Wena is Mbungwana's second collection of poems, following *Umnikelo* in 2015. It contains 37 poems that are divided into four sections. According to Motinyane (2022:92), 'The themes in this collection are life in general, hope, dreams, love and sexuality'. On the theme of love and sexuality, Mbungwana paints a vivid picture of the daily lives of people whose love and sexuality do not discriminate by gender (Mbungwana 2021). Although met with resistance in some circles, based on its handling of these two themes, Mbungwana's collection is a contemporary masterpiece, as it tackles contemporary issues in a manner that is not available elsewhere. This confirms the approach of South African feminists Boswell (2020) and Gqola (2023), who emphasise approaching works by women as containing insights and perspectives not available elsewhere. This is the true nature of *imbokotho*, which is inventive and transformative in nature.

Mbungwana's poetry offers new insights and perspectives in isiXhosa poetry in terms of themes and style. In three poems, '*Ikhaya*' (p. 39), '*Ameva*' (p. 60) and '*Uvula zibhuqe*' (pp. 67–70), Mbungwana discusses the theme of home in a contemporary setting. We all know home as a place of refuge, where we run to when the world deals harshly with us. Nevertheless, in the second stanza of the poem '*Uvula zibhuqe*', Mbungwana reveals, '*ndixharhe apha/okomzuzwana*' [i am lodging here/

for a short while]. Mbungwana is painting a picture of a home that has shifted from a refuge to a place of temporary abode with unpleasant smells and scars. In the other two poems, she views home as a place of keeping secrets, of abusing children and pain. In observing the theme of home through the lenses of the concept of *imbokotho*, one gets to acknowledge the poet's bravery in rewriting the narrative of home as she has experienced it, different to widely held belief. For most women, home has been a place of misery that one longs to run from.

Pain in the home is also revealed in Mbungwana's poetry on the theme of abuse. The theme of abuse is prevalent in poetry, and it manifests itself through physical and sexual violence against women by men who are in relationships with them. In Mbungwana's poetry, this theme is more complex and specific. In poems such as '*Ndicholwe ndifile*' (p. 16), '*Unongayindoda*' (p. 17) and '*Isilonda*' (p. 59), Mbungwana speaks of unprecedented abuse towards queer people, who are abused verbally, physically, sexually and emotionally simply because of their sexual orientation. According to Mbungwana, this abuse manifests itself at home, in society and in institutions. Mbungwana's boldness to confront such issues is inventive in isiXhosa poetry and places her in the position of a leader, despite criticism of her poetry by conservatives.

Amid the themes mentioned above, Mbungwana creatively and seamlessly weaves in the themes of love and sexuality. Mbungwana displays isiXhosa as an intellectualised language that has an ability to discuss romance, lovemaking and intimacy. In poems such as '*Imilebe yethu*' (pp. 16, 17), '*UManono*' (p. 26), '*Unam wena*' (pp. 26, 27) and '*Bhospelithi wam*' (p. 63), Mbungwana takes us through love, relationship, intimacy, romance and lovemaking in same-sex relationships. It is through this theme that Mbungwana transforms the narrative of isiXhosa poetry. Her boldness to write about this positions her as a game-changer and a pathfinder. In unambiguous language, we see two women take each other to steamy moments that lead to climax and orgasm, succeeding where most men fail.

In terms of style, Mbungwana introduces a shift in isiXhosa poetry. The images, diction and structure she uses are a shift from what we are used to in isiXhosa poetry. In discussing the theme of pain and intolerance, she uses this image to describe motherly love that is blinded by intolerance: '*Qho ngecawa itswele limtyhaphaza inimba*' [Every Sunday onion blinds her compassion] (p. 15). This is a shift from an old phrase, love is blind, where one loves in spite of something. In this sense, intolerance and hatred of one's sexual orientation stand in the way of love and compassion, leaving one blind and incapable of loving in spite of something. In discussing same-sex intimacy, she uses a metaphor of a hill of honey, painting a picture of the pleasures of same-sex intimacy. The image of the hill relates to the difficulties experienced by queer people in society, as society has not accepted the practice of same-sex relationships. Instead of relying on images frequently used in isiXhosa poetry, Mbungwana invents new ones, confirming the intellectual abilities of women.

Mbungwana does not rely on the same structure to discuss certain themes. In discussing the theme of pain, she does not use punctuation marks or capital letters. Furthermore, this unconventional yet meaningful structure is also used to depict how same-sex relationships are perceived by society. Some of her poems do not start on the left margin, revealing that life is not always linear. On page 72, Mbungwana starts a poem titled *'Ihambo'* that spans 16 pages. In almost all the pages, there are half-empty pages. Motinyane (2022), commenting on these empty spaces, argues:

This is unconventional and unfamiliar. However, this is exactly the point: to make the unfamiliar familiar and disturb the order of the day, and to painfully celebrate in many ways the freedom to be different. (p. 93)

In a manner that has been avoided by many poets, Mbungwana, a female isiXhosa poet, takes a bold stand and transforms the narrative of isiXhosa poetry in terms of themes and style. Another poet who speaks in the same vein as Mbungwana is her contemporary, Athambile Masola. In the following section, I discuss her anthology from the perspective of *imbokotho*.

Ilifa by Athambile Masola

Ilifa is Masola's debut poetry collection. In this collection, Masola discusses the highs and lows of life through themes like love, independence, GBV and disillusionment. Masola's anthology has 51 poems, and they are divided into three sections.

Masola (2021:6) uses religious metaphor to discuss the theme of rape. In this poem, titled *'Wakrazulwa'*, she premises her protest against rape on a hymn, *'Rock of Ages'*, and compares the wounds of rape to the wounds of Jesus. As Jesus was wounded by our sins, Gqola (2023:44) notes that *'Her wound, not always visible, is a consequence of another's sinful violence'*. Jesus was crucified by his own people, the Jews. In stanzas 3 and 4, Masola (Ibid) writes:

Ngakumbi umntu omaziyo.
Wagqibela nihleka, nigigitheka
Kumnandi
Kodwa wothuka ephezu kwakho.

Especially the one you know.
 You used to laugh, be merry together
 Having fun
 But you were shocked to find him on top of you

These lines denote that the sinful act of rape is performed by a close person to the victim. This is the fate of many women in South Africa, and Masola (Ibid.) tells their story in a language understood by many, preached and sang by many. Religious imagination has been used in the past by other poets but not in the way Masola (Ibid.) uses it in this poem.

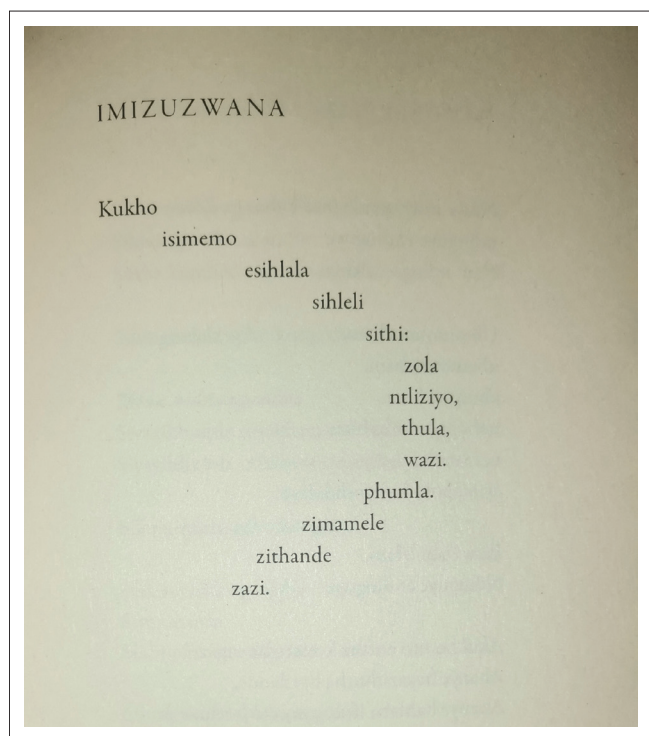
The theme of disillusionment has been discussed extensively in African literature in countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and South Africa (Bomvana 2019; Makhanyane 2020; Ndlhovu 2017; Okune & Timothy 2017; Robbe 2018). These scholars reveal how different genres show failures in leadership, political resistance, ethnic rivalries, the misery of common people, apartheid structures still visible, debt, poverty, diseases, corruption, GBV and neo-revolution. Masola's commentary on the theme of disillusionment brings a woman's perspective. In the last section of her book, she boldly reveals her disappointment in the freedom of South Africa, and in a poem titled *'Ikaka'* (p. 64), she ends the poem by stating: *'le nkululeko yikaka yenkululeko'* [this is a shit of a freedom]. She then further explains her stance in a poem titled *'Edolophini'* (p. 68), where she paints a picture of a sea of shacks in three provinces, Gauteng, Western and Eastern Cape, where human settlement is resembling apartheid times.

In the same vein, Masola (2021) parades her disappointment in post-apartheid South Africa by questioning the leadership, who fail to lead in crucial times. In a poem titled *'Umongameli'* (p. 73), Masola unravels:

Sambona sikude ukuba uliqokobhe lomongameli.
Wabhidwa kukulandela isikhundla sakhe:
umongameli
ukongamela
umongi

We could tell from afar he is an empty vessel
 He failed in fulfilling his position:
 the president
 to preside over
 the caregiver

These are such bold claims about a statesman, yet Masola (Ibid.) was disappointed by failure to lead at such a crucial point. She is referring to a period in August 2019, where over 30 women were killed by men in South Africa in August alone. In stanza 6, she mentions the long silence of the president on the matter, who only addressed the nation on 05 September 2019, and when he did, he made a mistake in his opening remarks. In stanza 4, Masola says it would have been better if he sat down and wept with the nation, because he failed to heal the grieving nation with his words. Such was the disappointment of Masola, many other women and South Africans in general. This poem paints a female poet as a critical thinker, a nation-builder who is not blinded by party politics but who is concerned with solving societal and global problems. Masola shows that the issue of GBV is not to be taken lightly, as it affects women in more ways than one. Other lenses would view Masola as disrespectful, but her voice finds honour in the concept of *imbokotho*, as it grinds acts, speech and social ills in a quest for transformation.



Source: (Masola, 2021:49)

FIGURE 1: Masola's use of unconventional structure.

The last three lines of Masola's book address the land issue in these three short lines:

Andinamfuyo

Andinandlu

Andinamhlaba

I don't have livestock

I don't have a house

I don't have land

The poem is titled 'Ilifa', and Masola is talking about her inheritance. The complete parallelism in this last stanza reveals her protest and disillusionment after independence. Her protest is two-fold. Firstly, it speaks of the plight of women within a traditional setting, where they are denied inheritance because of gender. Secondly, it questions the freedom of the majority of South Africans who lack wealth and have no homes and land. In the new South Africa, debates on the issue of land expropriation continue, yet black South Africans are still marginalised by the economy of the country, live in shacks and have no land.

Like Mbungwana, Masola uses unconventional structure. Some of her poems start on the right margin, like the poem titled 'Rayi Rayi' (p. 66). In this poem, she is writing about the corruption of political leaders. Masola uses a clock's shape as structure (p. 49) to illustrate the seconds to which she refers in a poem about seconds.

With this structure (see Figure 1), Masola (2021) calls for the constancy of the clock in maintaining composure in life.

Conclusions

This article tested the concept of *imbokotho* for use in the study of literary texts about and by women. IsiXhosa poetry was analysed to address the second objective of investigating the concept of *imbokotho*. Based on the perspective of amaXhosa of *imbokotho*, as a grinding stone that transforms objects from one state to the other, an act, speech or person who brings about change in society and who grinds acts that bring about disorder, dissension, discord and hatred in society. This concept allowed me to interpret these texts from a perspective that views women as agents of change, inventors, independent thinkers, critical thinkers, creatives, activists, leaders, problem solvers and nation-builders. In using this concept, I was able to note areas where women are portrayed negatively, as mere sexual objects rather than intellectual beings, capable of attracting people by their minds and not their looks. The two examined anthologies by women that introduced contemporary trends in the writing of isiXhosa poetry through themes and style. Therefore, the concept of *imbokotho* offers critics another perspective in the study of literary texts about and by women.

Furthermore, the concept of *imbokotho* recommends to producers of literary texts a nuance in their writing about women. As they write about women in poetry and other genres, they must consider portraying women as agents of change, inventors, activists, leaders, nation-builders, transformative, independent and critical thinkers, healers and problem solvers. The narrative that continues to paint women as gold-digging, promiscuous and dependent is called into question in the concept of *imbokotho*. In this article, I recommend that writers of literary texts must draw inspiration from the concept of *imbokotho*.

As this study was limited to only one genre and language, there is a need to investigate the use of the concept of *imbokotho* for use in the study of other genres and literatures of other languages. Furthermore, extensive research will need to be done to test the concept of *imbokotho* in the study of literary texts about and by women.

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