

## Review

Innocentia Jabusile Mhlambi (2012) *African Language Literatures: perspectives on isiZulu fiction and popular black television series*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

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This text gives a new approach to African languages and literatures that moves away from traditional theoretical models of structuralism and new criticism. It interrogates artistic expressions that through time embody ‘authentic proper sensibilities of Africans’ (16) in South Africa. Popular art, a loose category that embraces old and new cultural forms and which draws influences from the eclectic South African experience, is also closely analysed as a form of literature. The line between the oral and written is blurred as the significance and relevance of repetition, anecdotes, jokes, allusions, parody, overlaps, migrations and recycling of textual elements is analysed in different contexts. Emerging black films in African languages are also explored as reflective of the contemporary post-apartheid society offering new readings in line with the socio-economic and political realities of the day.

The interplay between tradition and modernity, changing gender roles, subcultures, the role of patriarchy, and the musings and escapisms of subalterns are some of the issues that this text brings to the fore from these genres.

Chapter One, ‘Proverbs in narratives: seeing the contemporary through archaic gazes in *Aphelile Agambaqa* and *Impi Yabomdabu Isethunjini*’ gives short summaries of the two narratives and then explores the central and complex role that proverbs play in them. It weaves through the use of proverbs as an oral art form and as a reading strategy. They become plotting strategies when as titles of narratives they ensure that the narrative follows

already established story lines or routes. Their traditionally embedded moral imperatives and nostalgic laments are woven through topical issues that the narratives raise, like changing gender roles and politics, patriarchy, family and post-apartheid society.

The use of folktale motifs as a way of structuring the moral lessons of the story and the invitation that is usually extended to the reader to apply these to interpreting life is the main focus of the next chapter. Folktale patterns are juxtaposed to traditionalism, its didacticism and new gender patterns; narratives that are heavily indebted to folktales that favour traditional conservatism are presented with a sting in the tail: gender identities have changed “women have agency, make their own decisions; parental influence over offspring is receding and independence and selfhood the new end striven for goal. Selfhood is redefined as not just belonging but being before one chooses to belong. The third section deals with the influence of oral forms like praises and naming. Naming is recognised as an integral part of Zulu culture which becomes not only a stylistic form but a moral, prophetic and self-fulfilling act that is usually encapsulated in a name. Naming, in this case, as explored with regard to Masondo’s detective trilogy, disrupts expectations and de-stereotypes archetypal presentations whilst the stories generally reflect the waning confidence in the South African law enforcement agencies; they successfully deal with the issue in a fresh light through the effective and new use of the naming strategy. For example, new names and meaningful nicknames are invented, while names whose conventional meaning emphasised all that is negative, inferior, dehumanising, mocking, derogatory are totally devoid of such associations here and actually even represent the direct opposite.

The final chapters – ‘A world in creolisation: inheritance politics and the ambiguities of a very modern tradition in two black South African dramas’, ‘Thematic re-engagements in the television series *Gaz’Lam* and *isiZulu literature*’, and finally “‘It is not a crime the way you see it’: Kuyiqhuma Nhlavana’s rewriting of *Yizo Yizo*’s crime discourse and outlaw culture’ – explore new themes in various SA television series that are socially engineered around nation building and social cohesion embedded in neo-liberalist policies. While there is interplay between tradition and modernity, they attempt to provide a platform for contesting African experiences in the post-apartheid contemporary society. Residues of cultural elements are fossilised in the limited creolised middle ground whilst the capitalist success is mediated by a popular discourse. Media almost becomes a tool

that the rich black elite utilises to propagate neo-liberal ideologies; for example, while steeped in traditional culture of arranged marriages, subcultures that include youth migration, finding new lives and new identities in cities as a way out are identified and accepted; on the other hand, female sexuality and inheritance politics still curtail female independence and is built on colonial dominant stereotypes: defiance is characterised by wanton expressions of sexuality.

This text is a fascinating read and an invaluable handbook to all lecturers and students of both African language literature and popular culture in South Africa. The author can only be wished well in her other trail blazing project currently underway: a project on South African black independent film which investigates how this popular art form not only contributes to national memory and mainstream sensibilities but also reflects subaltern society.