

# Fostering Gender Democratisation in Africa through a Critical Analysis of Mphahlele's *Chirundu*

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## Abstract

As much as African women are free to exercise their rights today, they still appear to be constrained and bound by patriarchal, traditional and cultural stereotypes in their communities. This undesirable state of affairs has prompted proactive women to establish Feminist organisations to subvert the *status quo* in the name of gender parity. By contesting this gender space, African women want their rights to be acknowledged and respected. This paper, therefore, aims to harness gender democratisation in Africa through the representation of selected female characters in Mphahlele's *Chirundu* (1979) from a Feminist perspective. It is a qualitative study which is buttressed on the critical analysis of Mphahlele's *Chirundu*. The researcher has employed purposive sampling to select the novel from other novels by Mphahlele because of its relevance to the study. In an endeavour to address this othering of women, Mphahlele recommends an inclusive solution of synthesising traditional and modern values in order to re-imagine a much more equal, vibrant, hybrid, modern African society where there is a peaceful and complementary co-existence between men and women.

**Keywords:** feminism, hybridity, re-imagine, othering, stereotypes, representation

## Orientation of the study

Throughout the world and in Africa, in particular, women have found themselves in disadvantaged situations because of the misguided societal perceptions that they are an inferior species while men are the *herrenvolk*, and therefore, superior. It is unfortunate because this unfounded belief still obtains in many African communities today. It is exacerbated by the institutionalised male dominance which often leads to patriarchy and other related socio-cultural and economic injustices which tend to afford men the right of dominance over women, with women submissively acquiescing to this disempowerment. To this day, some women still feel paralysed to challenge the existing state of affairs despite the efforts by feminist organisations to disturb this entrenched male setup. This article, therefore, endeavours to delineate the role played by selected female characters in Mphahlele's *Chirundu* (1979). It challenges the stereotypical othering of Tirenje and Monde, and their attempt to assert themselves as women in their own right, and not as voiceless and objectified by being addressed as Chirundu's wives instead of being called by their names; Tirenje and Monde. These women seek to disrupt the popular African cultural narrative which elevates the status of men over women in society. This, therefore, means that this article is guided by the Feminist theoretical assumptions which argue for the promotion of the rights of women in society. It (article) attempts to give women the counter-narrative voice of assertiveness against covert and overt socio-cultural issues which affect them.

## Characters as Representations of Reality

*Chirundu* operates on a symbolic level with characters used to symbolise ideas or objects Mphahlele wishes to project. Shaw (1972: 142) describes a symbol as "something used for, or regarded as representing something else". It is, therefore, a word, phrase, or any other expression which has a plethora of associated meanings. These represented phenomena can either be animate or inanimate. Baldick (1990: 30) confirms Shaw's definition of a symbol by stating that a symbol is "anything that stands for or represents something else beyond it – usually an idea conventionally associated with it". By 'something beyond it', Baldick suggests that a symbol is loaded with meaning and therefore, allows for a multiplicity of views from the reader. Morner and Rausch's (1997: 40) definition of a symbol is more apt for this article because it relates directly to literature:

In literature, a symbol is usually something concrete – an object, a place, a character, an action – that stands for or suggests something abstract.

Morner and Rausch imply that the use of symbolism is always intertwined with characterisation because characters are used as symbols in as much as symbols are used as characters. The symbolic delineation of

characters is normally understood through what the author says about these characters, what these characters do and say in the text, and what other characters say about them. This is what crystallises their round or flat nature, qualities and traits to the readers (Mogoboya, 2011:91). Mphahlele has, therefore, used symbolism to fictionalise *Chirundu* in order to save himself from possible arrest by the authorities of the time who would have taken offense at the manner in which he has satirised them in the novel.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Feminism has been employed as a theoretical perspective which has undergirded this study. This theory advocates, *inter alia*, for the democratisation of gender rights in society (Walters, 2005:97). It promotes redress in the gender imbalances of the past, which were mainly unleashed against women by their male counterparts. Mayor (2009: 632) defines Feminism as a “belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men” because of the various impactful ways in which they make contributions to society (Crossman, 2014). Bressler (1994) avers that Feminism revolves around the assertion that men have subjugated women, intentionally or unintentionally, by denying them their basic right of voicing their opinions on all issues which matter in life. Ama Aidoo in Morgan (1984), Mohanty (2003), and Weir (2013) are some of the brains behind the evolution of African Feminism as a tributary of Feminism that seeks to advance women’s vulnerabilities in Africa and African diaspora (Goredema, 2010:34). The researcher has used purposive sampling to select the novel from other novels by Mphahlele because of its relevance to the study. The study is qualitative with data analysed critically.

### **Tirenje as a Symbol of the Struggle for the Emancipation of African Women.**

Tirenje and Monde are Chirundu’s wives whose cultural dilemma does not differ from their husband’s. Tirenje is an educated traditional woman who wishes to move with her culture into the future. Chirundu regards her as such; as a woman who belongs to his past when he was still carving his niche as a teacher and a politician. Through Tirenje, Mphahlele seeks to indicate that Africans should preserve their identity going forward. They should not embrace the future at the expense of their identity. Tirenje is portrayed as a round character in that she starts and ends with the novel and all the major events in the book revolve around her. She is, therefore, a fully rounded character, recognisable, and level-headed, which constitutes what Gill (1995: 130) characterises as “portraiture”.

Tirenje is depicted as a woman who was brought up in a traditional rural milieu. This makes her anchored in the cultural values of her village though she does not agree with all of them. One of those cultural aspects which disturbs her is getting herself involved in a polygamous relationship. She outlines this aspect to Chirundu in their conversation before their marriage: “How can I share my man with another woman?” and “Am I not enough to care for, feed, clothe, and love and give you children” (Chirundu: 45). Tirenje wants her husband all to herself. She does not want to share him with any other woman, a trait which contradicts Africa’s enduring selfless value of sharing. She has adopted the Western value of selfish individualism which encourages the philosophy of one man one wife and one wife one man. She wants individual ownership of her husband and not a collective one. She states: “I don’t hold with polygamy” (Chirundu: 10) to strongly emphasise her position on polygamy. She continues:

Because I am literate. I selected you among many men. I have pegged my piece of land. No woman but me is going to graze in that land. When you know more – when you are literate, I think – I think – how can I say? – I think you become aware that there are certain things that should belong to you alone – a man, for instance. The ‘piece of land’ that she has ‘pegged’ implies Chirundu, her husband, by whose side she has stood during trying times, way before he could even be thought of as a high ranking politician. This stoical rejection of a polygamous marriage is oppositional to the African belief that the first wife is the one who opens and sustains second marriage negotiations for her husband. Tirenje is, therefore, a symbol of an African traditional woman trapped in a Western education which influences her to deny her customs and therefore, her identity. She is at a cultural crossroads because she is an African woman who ‘knows more’, who is ‘literate’. She loves her culture but at the same time she goes against it by abandoning some of its central features. This makes her a symbol of a ‘modern woman’ (Mphahlele and Haarhoff, 1986: 29), who embraces what, to her, is good in the Western culture, such as education and monogamy. As a believer in African culture, Tirenje should have known better that her refusal to get into a polygamous marriage was not going to yield any fruit because her husband is an African man who is an integral part of his culture, hence his expression of interest to marry another wife. As a modern woman, she

is assertive about her rights. She resents the thought that Chirundu might have married her, not out genuine love, but in order for him to only satisfy his ‘country pleasure’ (Chirundu: 63).

Tirenje displays her insightful knowledge of African culture when she opts to resolve her marital distress with her husband, Chirundu, in the African way after finding out that he was cheating on her. Cheating on her, because the adverse effects of Western influence on her makes her regard her husband’s polygamous relationship with Monde as infidelity. She fights her battle emotionlessly, with dignity and integrity, factors which are the hallmarks of a true African woman. Unlike Monde who characterises a true modern woman, Tirenje fights only to have her husband back home to her and not to share his property should it happen that she wins the case. Thus, she harbours no vengeance against Chirundu and Monde, which indicates that she is a true African woman whose character is deeply spiritualistic and not materialistic. She follows the traditional route of involving the relatives from both sides in an attempt to resolve the extramarital conflict. This illustrates that she is a woman who respects her culture because in the African tradition, if there is conflict between or among people, relatives, particularly elderly ones, of the warring groups are usually called together to come and discuss ways and means of resolving the misunderstanding. This stems from the fact that Africans grow up with the knowledge that “you can’t solve problems all by yourself” (Mphahlele and Haarhoff, 1986: 25), because in Africa, people are united in their individuality. In other words, people are not islands but a community. Their challenges are, therefore, not theirs but the community’s. Like a loyal, well-taught African woman, Tirenje waits for her husband to come back home to her with the hope that the elders will amicably bring an end to the conflict. After realising that the traditional route of resolving the conflict has failed, she does not give up. She resorts to the modern legal approach in an attempt to win her husband back. She has a strong will, an enduring spirit which symbolises the “endurance of Africa herself” (Johnson, 1984: 111). Conversely, her recourse to the European court indicates the crisis of wishing to get the best out of both systems which the current educated Africa elite faces, often with dire consequences because all indications show that Africa has become a victim of “western aspirations” (Thynsma, 1989: xiv). Trying to please two worlds has never been a good thing because it is always difficult to equally satisfy both of them. This identity conflict goes on even during the proceedings of her (Tirenje’s) own court trial with her husband when she, irrespective of the ongoing Western court trial, goes back to the traditional approach by requesting Mupwa, Chirundu’s cousin, to still go and talk to Chirundu on her behalf, the aim being to, again, resolve the conflict. She further takes her case back to the African court for hearing, which manifests her profound regard for African culture and identity. The African traditional court she took her case to was presided over by the elders of the community. They discuss the case but the Western court could not reverse its judgement. This is an attempt, by Tirenje, at benefiting from both cultures. This, in the beginning, confuses Tirenje in terms of which court should preponderate over the other and which value system must come before the other. She ultimately opts for both of them which shows the inevitability of the co-existence of the two cultures. It is a cultural mixture of traditional court of ‘the ancestors of Chirundu and Mirimba’ and European courts comprising of “judges” and “prosecutors”. Mphahlele mentions:

‘Will the accused please rise?’

Twelve months in prison, the judge pronounced. No option of a fine. Suddenly a shriek seemed to hit the roof, then the walls. Before I could know where it came from *mai wamung’ono* Tirenje had reached the Prosecutor’s seat banging hard on his desk and beating on her chest. On top of this she was wailing, ‘My man, bring back my man! I want my man! What do you want to know about us? If you had let me speak yesterday. I would have told the whole story how far we had come together. The ancestors of Chirundu and Mirimba know but I did not bring up this case to give you a football to play with. I wanted him to learn that I am the right woman for him (Chirundu: 107).

Tirenje’s hopes of getting her husband back are dashed when Chirundu is sentenced to ‘twelve months in prison’. This is a destroyed hope of bringing African identity back, her pride back. Mphahlele demonstrates that the external influence on African culture and ways of life is present in all aspects of African life. The prison sentence does not help Chirundu correct his bad ways but instead, it hardens him to become more determined to divorce Tirenje. This also suggests that Western courts, through their trial systems, are punitive and hardening and not corrective and rehabilitative, as African conflict resolution system of negotiation is. Tirenje suffers from a bitter reversal of expectations because she thought, in her simple and naïve mind, that the court will help bring them back together as husband and wife and not further drive them apart. Her wailing after the sentence attests to this: “My man, bring back my man!”. This indicates her shallow understanding of European culture. Chirundu’s imprisonment does not dampen Tirenje’s spirit of fighting for him. She declares that the battle has not yet ended, it is only beginning: “Me, I am going to begin again, I will build another house. I am not afraid anymore” (Chirundu: 155). She is a courageous woman, a woman who is a “symbol of Africa’s strength”

(Thynsma, 1989: xvi). Her undying spirit is an African spirit, Africa who is prepared to fight for her cultural reclamation to the last man. Thus, her desperate fight to restore her marriage and the imminent loss thereof, shows a high possibility of African cultural assimilation by the European forces. Africa should fight this unsavoury possibility for the benefit of her posterity.

It is because of Western influence that Tirenje's fight for her man is based on selfish intentions. It is individualistic because she wants him back on her own terms, which is un-African. In the African past, a man would wrong his wife(ves) countless times but she/they would embrace him as hers/theirs as long as he is still there for them. Lawino, in p' Bitek's *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (1972), is such an African woman who is prepared to accept her husband Ocol back on his own terms. Lawino has not been to school and as custom would have it, she happily agrees to be a senior wife to her polygamous husband Ocol who, like Chirundu, is also a politician. Lawino gladly accepts Clementine who is Ocol's second wife from the city. Unlike Lawino, Tirenje finds polygamy unacceptable because of her Western education. This also shows the extent to which Western culture has eroded, not only the African family unit, but her cultural beliefs as well. Chirundu's unscrupulous behaviour upon ascending to political power also indicates the corruptive nature of political power not *de facto power*.

### **Monde as an epitome of greed**

Monde is delineated as a city woman whose belonging to the present qualifies her to be a suitable wife for the famous politician that Chirundu has become. She, unlike Tirenje, is portrayed as a woman without culture, a city woman who does not have any African roots to tap sustenance from. Johnson (1984: 111) observes: "Throughout the novel she is associated with city life and with Western/European values". Nothing is mentioned about her people, that is, where she comes from, her parents, grandparents, relatives, brothers and sisters. She just drops onto the scene out of nowhere. It is little wonder because her name, Monde, which is a label name, has a direct bearing on her character, a point which Gill (1995: 143) confirms: "there are novels in which the names suggest the nature of the characters". Monde is a French word for "world" which implies that she is a wanderer, a person without a place of abode, without a belonging. It also indicates the influence of the world on African culture. Monde is an African but knows little or nothing about Africa, let alone her culture. She obtained her secretarial qualification from Britain where she also adopted Western culture. Her assimilation into the British culture has alienated her from the African culture, thereby making her a foreigner in her own country. She abandoned her cultural ways while she was in Britain which reveals her shallowness of African cultural knowledge. Monde, therefore, symbolises Africa being transported to another world, with little means of getting back to her complete self. She marries Chirundu in a Western way. There is no *lobola* (bride price) negotiations which have been entered into between the two families, let alone payment of a bride price itself. Theirs is a marriage of convenience in that Chirundu marries her to satisfy his own carnal pleasure whereas Monde marries Chirundu for the purpose of boasting her social ego and status. Their marriage does not, therefore, have a solid foundation and basis. Monde is painted as a flat character. Her character shallowness is made clear when readers meet her in the middle of the book when Chirundu is already an accomplished politician. She does not even know, let alone care, about the woman who was behind Chirundu during his formative years as a politician.

Chirundu finds it difficult to accept her as an organic African woman, hence his remark that she "had become a habit *he* could not shake off; a convenient habit" (Chirundu: 64). He observes a missing African link in her, an inadequacy in her demeanor. He acknowledges this lack of completeness in her: "Yet I felt something missing in Monde. Something unnameable. Maybe something that keeps a woman's feet on the ground, as Tirenje's were" (Chirundu: 47). "Something" which is missing in Monde is her African heritage which is the essence of her identity. Monde goes on to show complete ignorance of African hospitality gesture when she coldly welcomes Chirundu's visitors into her house and does not even bother to offer them any food to eat. Chirundu and their visitor, Moyo, take it upon themselves and quickly prepare sandwiches to save Chirundu from embarrassment. Monde unashamedly says that 'they do not cook lunch on Saturdays because the cook is off' (Chirundu: 135), to her husband's disgrace. African women must cook, literally and figuratively, for their husbands. A woman who is not able to cook for her husband cannot be a fulfillment to him and his household. Thus, an African woman, must, however busy she may be, never rely on a domestic worker for the welfare of her household as this might have far-reaching consequences for her family. Monde is blind to this common African knowledge because of her European airs. She is only good at appearing in public places with Chirundu as a *trophy wife* who gives him a good public image because she "knows how to smile for people in high places, knows how to walk like white people, takes out a handkerchief for everything that comes out of her face, tears, mucous, saliva so as not to remove the paint" (Chirundu: 63-64). Unlike Tirenje, Monde's education does not preclude her from accepting Chirundu's offer for marriage though she knows that he is a married man. This suggests that an African woman will always be one irrespective of the borrowed robes she tries to wear. The

cosmetic life which Monde tries to lead will melt with time. This means that in order to get out of this cultural crisis, Monde must just go back to her original self, her real African self without a make-up. Monde's lack of backbone is shown in her running away when the country is plunged into labour riots. She flees without even thinking of the support she has to give to her jailed husband, Chirundu. She does not even bother to defend the burning household either. In other words, she abandons her marriage. Her rival in marriage, Tirenje, has instigated and joined the riots in an attempt to still fight for what is rightfully hers, which is Chirundu. Monde's flight from the riotous mob is actually a flight from Tirenje as it clear that she cannot stand up to her. This indicates lack of commitment to her marital relationship. In other words, their marriage is not a treasure to her, something worth fighting for. All these weaknesses and dearth of depth in character are attributed to the British influence she has internalised at the expense of her African identity (Mogoboya & Montle, 2020). Though despicable in character, Monde is an object of commiseration because she is a product of a system of acculturation by foreign forces. She is, nevertheless, still a beautiful daughter of Africa and hopefully, must have learnt a lesson and will, therefore, mend her ways. It is not late.

### Conclusion

This article has explored the role played by selected female characters in Mphahlele's *Chirundu* (1979). In the novel, Mphahlele portrays Tirenje and Monde as two African women whose characters are antithetical to each other in that on the one hand, Tirenje fights for her marital rights as an African woman while on the other hand, Monde fights for hers as a selfish and greedy woman. One common trait between these two women is that they are not voiceless. They speak up against the *status quo* on patriarchal issues of polygamy, monogamy and bigamy. In the end, Mphahlele recommends that in order for Africa to be vibrant and prosperous, she should reimagine an inclusive and hybrid solution which encourages synthesis of traditional and modern values in which there is a peaceful and complementary co-existence between men and women.

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