

Theme as Portrayed in F.A. Thuketana's Selected Novels

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ABSTRACT Focusing exclusively on the theme, this paper investigates Thuketana's central idea in each of his three novels selected for this study. The theme, as the dominant idea, is one of the most important aspects of the novel because it guides the narrative and points to the values in the narrative. More importantly is that Thuketana's themes reflect the social, religious and cultural circumstances of the society. Furthermore, his novels cover a wide range of themes that are relevant to today's society by portraying it with its anxieties, challenges and agonies. In a nutshell, these literary works are influenced and inspired by the burning issues of the day.

INTRODUCTION

Before analyzing Thuketana's themes, it is imperative to understand what is meant by 'theme'. A theme is defined as the central idea, the basic issue with which the novelist or playwright is concerned, and on which he comments through the medium of his story and his plot (Heese and Lawton 1988: 126)

This study benefits from Mtebule's (2011) research on the comparative analysis of Xitsonga novels with special attention to the difference between Christianity and culture. The study looked at the impact of Christianity and culture on the characters of the selected novels, namely, *Xisomisana*, *Xona hi xihhi?*, *Sasavona* and *Mibya ya nyekanyeka*. The views are now examined, of a number of writers in order to understand the main objective of literature. Farouk Asvat, in his column 'Creative Arts', comments on the view held by the Arabian writer Yusuf Andris when he says that "From the beginning of his literary career Andris has been concerned to portray life as he saw it, with all its anxieties and blemishes. As a writer, Andris sees himself as the social lungs for the people to breathe through" (*Sowetan*, 26 August 1987). Andris is of the opinion that the value of literature lies in portraying life 'with all its anxieties and blemishes'. In other words, literature is meant to respond to the challenges and agonies facing people.

Jean-Paul Sartre, quoted by Piniel Viriri Shava (1989:1), remarks that literature, for it to be meaningful and relevant, needs to reverberate at every level of human and social existence. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1981: ix) maintains that a

writer and a surgeon have something in common—a passion for truth. Prescription of the correct cure is dependent on a rigorous analysis of the reality. Writers are surgeons of the heart and the soul of a community.

According to this assertion, the writer, through his literary work, has the responsibility to heal the wounds of a community. The writer should respond and react to economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles with vigor, integrity and hopefulness. Bill and Masunga (1983:21) quote Alexander Solzhenitzyn (1967) saying that a literature that is not the breath of life for the society of its time, that dares not communicate its own pain and its own fears to society, that does not warn in time against threatening moral and social danger, does not deserve the name of literature, it is only a facade.

This implies that society should learn from literature of its evil and good deeds. In this regard one feels justified in saying that the writer has no choice but to portray life as he/she sees it from different angles. Chinua Achebe, as quoted by Ngugi wa Thiongo (1981:6), maintains that the writer is concerned with 'the burning issues of the day'.

METHODOLOGY

As the nature of the study dictates, this paper is mainly a content analysis of the various themes in the selected novels. The purpose of employing this approach is to achieve an in-depth understanding of themes of the selected literary texts.

Literature Review

Waseem (2013:264) is of the view that theme is regarded as the hallmark of great literature. According to Waseem (2013), literary works should be judged on the extent to which they depict the 'universal human condition'. This implies that any literary text should have a theme that appeals to the sensibility of readers in that it relates to them on a personal level and depicts their feelings and emotions. Ryan (2014) writes about emerging themes in Young Adult (YA) dystopian literature. According to Ryan (2014:30), YA dystopian literature is a genre that has been on the rise since the appearance of *The Hunger Games* trilogy written by Suzanne Collins. Writers use utopian ideas in their works to setup the ideal world for their characters, even though that world is highly unlikely, or physically or socially impossible.

The present paper investigates the themes of Thuketana's three different novels as indicated in the abstract.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the researchers found that the power of prayer is reflected in all the selected novels.

The researchers also found that all the themes in the three selected novels are still appealing and relevant to the readership as if they have just been recently written.

The Theme of Xisomisana

In *Xisomisana*, where one sees Christianity versus traditional beliefs, the author reveals that life is not impossible or futile if one believes in God the Almighty. This theme is evident when Yingwana comes back home from Johannesburg. Yingwana is critically ill. He is therefore taken to a traditional healer. Despite drinking *muti* and living in accordance to Phisana's rituals, Yingwana's illness worsens to the extent that Xisomisana and Moyasi are summoned to go and search for a more powerful traditional healer. The writer portrays Phisana's failure as follows:

"Vusiku byebyo vuvabyi byo namba byi tinyika matimba. Pho a byi twa musi lowu o orheketisiwile, lowu nga ya tata mahahu. Yingwana a nga helelanga hi ku etlela. Ku konya

ka kona a ku ri loku a ku hlomula mbilu rhurhi! Ina yi va phulani-phulani" (p. 63).

(That night the illness worsened. Due to the smoke he had inhaled, which filled his lungs Yingwana never slept a wink. His groaning was heart wrenching. Yes, he was critical.)

Yingwana's ever-deteriorating condition indicates that Phisana's herbs are not effective. The writer is in pain portraying this ugly picture of Phisana's dismal failure to heal Yingwana:

"Hi siku leri thandlamaka, a pfuka a swek-eriwa murhi wa Phisana, wu kandzeriwa hi ro hlungu, a va a nwisiwa mpundzu, nhlekanhi ni madyambu, kambe swi nga pfuni nchumu, a wongi murhi wa kona wo byi pfurhetela" (p. 63).

(On the following day, Phisana's *muti* was prepared, mixed with another herb, then he had to take it in the morning, afternoon and evening, but it did not help, it was as if the *muti* was worsening the illness.)

One is made to believe that the use of Phisana's *muti* has, in one way or another, worsened the illness. Despite the fact that Phisana is a distinguished traditional healer in the community, and is held in high esteem by other *muti* men and the society at large, he ultimately fails to show his vast experience in treating different illnesses. This implies that people who believe in *muti* are just wasting time and money:

"Swi ya swi ya, vuvabyi byi tinyika matimba. Mifututu ya Phisana yo tshikiwa hi ku vona leswaku a yi nga pfuni nchumu. Vuvabyi a byi nga telanga ku tlhela. Swa Yingwana a swi nga ha tivikani, ni ku humela ehandle swi sungula ku tsandza. Nkarhini wolowo a ku nga ha languteriwi nchumu eka yena ehandle ka rifu - a a vabya wanuna" (p. 69).

(It went on and on and the illness got worse. Phisana's herbs were abandoned when it appeared that they were not of any help. The illness was not ready to abate. Yingwana's condition got worse; he was now even unable to go outside. At that time nothing was expected from him except death - the man was very ill.)

After the failure of the traditional healer, a western doctor cures Yingwana's illness. The narrator suggests to the reader that traditional healers are a failure when compared to their western counterparts, whose medication is far better than the *muti*. When Xisomisana eventually meets with Yingwana, the narrator remarks that:

"Loko ndzi n'wi vutisa hi tlhelo ra vuvabyi bya yena, Yingwana a hlamusela leswaku a

laphe hi mulungu. A ku sale ku fika mulungu un'wana wa le ka Manjoro, mulungu loyi a a ri n'anga. A a hamba a rhendzeleka hi mangwa a rhwale nkhwama wa mabodlhela ya mirhi, a ri karhi a tshungula lava vabyaka. Van'wana a a va byela ku ya kwale ka Manjoro a ya va tshungulela kona" (p. 225).

(When I asked him about his illness, Yingwana explained that a White man cured him. A certain White man arrived at Manjoro when we had left; this White man was a doctor. He used to move around on horseback carrying a bag of medicine bottles, treating ill people; some he referred to Manjoro's where he would treat them.)

The medication Phisana had given Yingwana actually does not seem to heal when compared to that of the western doctor which doesn't even last for a week before Yingwana is healed. The theme in *Xisomisana* is therefore portrayed through the use of contrast between modern and traditional ways of life.

Xisomisana also believes in divination. This becomes apparent when she is accused of witchcraft. She agrees to be taken to the diviner who will eventually spot the 'real witch'. After appearing before the king of the country, *Xisomisana* faces what appears to be imminent death. Her narrow escape from the jaws of death is presented to the reader as follows:

"Un'wana wa lava va Valungu, a tlula xikan'we a fika laha a ndzi ri kona, a ndzi khoma hi voko a ku: "A hi fambe n'wananga, ku xaniseka ka wena ku herile." (p. 216).

(One of the white men jumped and came to where I was, he took me by the hand and said: "Let's go my child, your suffering is over".)

It should be remembered that divination and throwing of divine bones is anathema in Christianity. When *Xisomisana* meets the missionaries, they condemn the use of divining bones as unchristian:

"... u tshika hinkwaswo leswi a wu swi endla. Swilo swo kota tinhlolo, byalwa ni hinkwaswo leswo biha..." (p. 220)

(You should abandon everything that you used to do. Things like bone throwing, consuming alcohol and everything that is bad...)

The Theme of *N'waninginingi Ma Ka Tindleve*

The theme of *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve* is 'crime does not pay'. The title of this novel (He who does not listen) refers to Phati-

mana. Born to a religious and humble family where human life is respected, Phatimana is expected to live and lead an exemplary life, which is free from crime. He is supposed to live his life in line with Christian norms and values. But instead of surrendering his life to Jesus Christ the Savior, Phatimana chooses to rub shoulders with criminals and thieves. The narrator says:

"...a va hamba...va tumbelela vanhu...va va tekela swa vona". (p. 8).

(They used to waylay people and take their possessions.)

In light of the above statement, it becomes quite obvious to the reader that crime is Phatimana's daily bread.

In order to bring out the theme of *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve*, Thuketana makes use of interaction between Phatimana and both, his mother, N'wa-Ndzheko and Reverend Nkuna. The Reverend and N'wa-Ndzheko can be regarded as the bearers of acceptable social values. It is evident in the entire novel that N'wa-Ndzheko and Rev. Nkuna carry the burden of rebuking and warning Phatimana to stop making friends with hard-core criminals such as Galachana. Despite all their attempts to persuade Phatimana to abandon the life of crime, their advice falls on deaf ears. Ironically, despite their kind advice, he gets deeper into undesirable terrain, that is, getting enmeshed in the world of crime. N'wa-Ndzheko questions Phatimana's association with Galachana as follows:

"...xikwelekele lexi u nga na xo na va-Galachana i xa yini loko u nga ri muyivi? ...xana u tsakisiwa hi yini ku famba ni makhamba wena u nga ri khamba?" (p. 29)

(... What is the conspiracy that you have with Galachana and his group if you are not a thief? ... What amuses you in the company of thieves if you are not a thief?)

The above quote further shows that Phatimana is constantly warned that crime does not pay. This is the advice Phatimana usually gets from people who have seen the different episodes of life. But Phatimana claims:

"Phela ndzi tshunxekile ku tihlawulela vanghana lava ndzi va tsakelaka" (p. 28)

(I am free to choose friends that I like.)

After a series of successful robberies, Phatimana, and his criminal friends are unable to satisfy their basic needs. They ultimately make up their minds to intensify their criminal actions in

order to boost their empty coffers. They end up choosing a very disastrous action, like, abduction. This culminates in the abduction of Maluleke's daughter, Khensani. At this juncture, Phatimana and his disreputable cohorts are unaware that they are digging their own graves. Instead of living in luxury, Phatimana and his colleagues feel uncertain of their safety.

Despite having accumulated a lot of wealth from the abduction, Phatimana lives in hiding. Life becomes a hazard for Phatimana, in that he cannot live a free life. While seeking sanctuary in Rev. Nkuna's pastoral home, Nkuna reminds him of the days when Phatimana used to blow the trumpet for himself. But it is now too late to recall such wonderful times when he had plenty of time to seek help.

As a result of his indiscretion, Phatimana is hunted high and low by the police. With the help of his fiancée, Stella, Phatimana manages to flee from the hands of the law. Phatimana is transported as a 'corpse' to a place of safety:

"... a ku ri ni bokisi leri a ri rhwale mufi. Hinkwavo ka vona a va ambale swa ntima, vavasati va hume hi swinchalana swa ntima hinkwavo, swi tikomba handle ka ku kanaanisa leswaku a va heleketa ntumbu." (p. 197)

(... There was a coffin bearing a corpse. All of them were dressed in black, all women had black shawls; it showed without doubt that they were accompanying a corpse.)

Unfortunately, the truck transporting the 'deceased' gets involved in a horrible accident. Phatimana is lucky to be alive but sustains severe injuries, and as though that was not enough, a cobra bites him. Phatimana's cunning life ends in bitter tears. It then becomes evident that the one who grows weeds has no choice but to reap weeds.

Phatimana thereafter pays a heavy price for failing to take advice. It is true that crime does not pay, as Phatimana loses his life in the prime of his youth. Another lesson to be learnt is that one should listen to whoever gives advice, because life without advice is empty and meaningless.

In *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve* the subsidiary theme, which supports the main theme, is that one must not mix with bad friends. It is well known that no one who lives for himself lives fully and it is against this background that one should make friends. Friendship opens up a

world of great ideas. In *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve*, one comes across Phatimana who fails to make a good choice as far as friendship is concerned. His failure to make good friends lands him in a sea of crime. As indicated earlier on, Phatimana is brought up in a Christian family and has all the chances of becoming one (Christian). But because of his bad choice of friends, Phatimana becomes a hardened criminal.

The Theme of Ndzi Ngo Tinciki!

Ndzi ngo tinciki comments on the power of love as opposed to forced marriage. This theme is portrayed through the use of contrast between Manayila's and Ntekele's behavior. Manayila's refusal to marry Muzayiwe drives a deep wedge between her and Ntekele. The air of mistrust thickens as a result of Manayila's refusal to allow the proposed marriage to take place:

"Ku nga ri mina, mina yena swi nga antswa ndzi ku tinciki, ku ri ni ku tekiwa hi Muzayiwe lowa xikhalabyana, majaha swi karhi swi lo vuya." (p. 133).

(Not me, I would rather hang myself than be married to an old man like Muzayiwe, whereas young men are abundant.)

Manayila is opposed to the idea of marrying Muzayiwe. Besides Muzayiwe's age, she is also opposed to the idea of a forced marriage where love would be scarce like water in the wilderness. Ntekele tends to forget that the driving force between two partners is neither money nor luxury, but love. The writer reveals the theme of this novel through Manayila's words:

"Ndzi ta pfumala rirhandzu, wu nga nchumu wa nkoka ku tlula ni rifumo." (p. 169).

(I would lack love, which is more important than wealth.)

But Ntekele refuses to change his mind and allow Manayila to make her own choice as far as her life partner is concerned. Ntekele lacks vision and therefore is driven to the edge of insanity by his love for money. As a money-grubber, Ntekele chooses to employ a one-sided attitude and dictates terms for his daughter:

"I ntiyiso leswaku rirhandzu i nchumu wa nkoka n'wananga, hambu yi ri Bibeke yi vula tano, ntsena tsundzuka rikitse ra mina leswaku rirhandzu a hi hinkwaswo, munhu u fanele ku ehleketa na kona ku tshamiseka loko a tekiwa." (p. 170).

(It is true, my child, that love is an important thing, even the Bible says so, but remember, my last born child, that love is not everything, you must also think of comfort when you get married).

As the story progresses Ntekele's overall plan becomes clear. In order to satisfy his desire to live in luxury, he becomes very reluctant to accept advice from his minister of religion, Chavani:

"Tsundzuka tatana Ntekele, tsundzuka leswaku a xa ha ri xona xikhale laha vatswari a va hlavulele vana va vona mindyangu leyi a va fanele ku tekiwa kumbe ku teka eka yona. Swilo swi hundzukile." (p. 163).

(Remember, mister Ntekele that this is no longer the olden days, when parents chose the families in which their children should marry. Things have changed.)

Ntekele is not aware that forced marriage usually leads to broken families, because there is unreturned love between the two parties involved. He even fails to acknowledge that lack of love between two parties may have a negative impact on their future.

Another disturbing feature is that Manayila is still in her teens and it would be a heavy burden to marry a polygamous man like Muzayiwe. To add salt to the wound, Muzayiwe is past his prime in terms of age. In other words, his days of sharing a life with Manayila are numbered:

"Tsundzuka tatana Ntekele, tsundzuka leswaku Muzayiwe u ni tshengwe, naswona i wa masiku..." (p. 163)

(Bear in mind, mister Ntekele, bear in mind that Muzayiwe is a polygamist, besides he is old...)

Rev. Chavani and Ntekele are at loggerheads concerning Manayila's forced marriage to Muzayiwe. Chavani is strongly opposed to Ntekele's suggestion to allow Manayila to wed a complete stranger, because the first time the readers come across him was when Ntekele met him at the shebeen. Rev. Chavani views Ntekele's stance as senseless:

"Ku rhandza a swo dyondziwa tatana Ntekele, kambe i nchumu lowu ngo titela ha woxe. Hikokwalaho a swi twari ku sindzisa n'wana ku tekiwa hi munhu wo ka a nga n'wi rhandzi, u ku u ta dyondza ku n'wi rhandza hi ku tshama na yena." (p. 164).

(Loving is not learnt, mister Ntekele, but it comes automatically. Therefore it is not fair to

force your daughter to be married to a person she doesn't love, thinking that love will come with time.)

Ntekele tends to turn a blind eye to the fact that love should be seen as the driving force behind every successful marriage. No single marriage can survive all the storms of life if it is not founded on and grounded in true love. Love is the cornerstone of any marriage. Without it, marriage cannot flourish and flower as expected.

In the end, Ntekele realizes his fault. He shoulders all the blame for having prevented his daughter from choosing her life partner without any interference. His eyes open very late. To prove that the power of love overwhelms everything, Manayila and Jamboti are miraculously reunited.

Through a theme, which deals with the power of love, the writer is trying to show his readers that love is the source of happiness. Manayila's consistency leads to the conclusion that love is the only foundation on which a happy marriage can be built. From this theme, the new and old generations can learn that the choice of a life partner should never be shifted to any person other than the one who has to carry that burden. Let such choice be enjoyed by both parties, with the exception of parents who are only invited by the said partners after they would have done their homework. One also learns that love of money and pride can lead one to kill one's offspring. Ntekele's love for luxury tempted him to sell his beloved child to a total stranger. The lesson to be learnt is that one should be pleased with the one bird in hand rather than want the two in the bush. One also learns that failure in whatever one does should in itself not frustrate oneself. One must never in daily living forget to leave room for disappointment, and hopefully learn from such experiences.

In *Ndzi ngo tinciki* there is a subsidiary theme, which can be outlined as the treatment of a woman as a minor. Ntekele lacks the disposition to know and understand that a woman is equal to any man. The only obvious difference is that a woman belongs to the fairer sex and is often not as muscular as a man. Ntekele also undermines the rights of his family members. His family members, especially Manayila, are denied the opportunity to exercise their rights. Ntekele forgets that nowadays women are in the forefront of the struggle for gender equality. In a nutshell, everyone should get a fair deal regardless of sex.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is imperative to mention that there are some points, which overlap as far as theme is concerned in Thuketana's novels. For example, the power of prayer is reflected in all the three novels.

The researchers are justified in saying that Thuketana, through the use of contrast as well as other techniques, has successfully managed to organize the different themes portrayed in his three novels. Therefore, the researchers can say with confidence and in appreciation, that Thuketana has successfully developed his themes by creating conflicting situations, which illustrate his themes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that more research should be carried on other literary devices that have received least attention, for example, the impact of milieu in the development of characters with special reference to Xitsonga novels.

NOTES

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