Proverbs as employed in T. Msibi’s short story Phumani Nelokhambi in Z. Motsa’s Khulumani Sive

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ABSTRACT

This article is a critical analysis of proverbs that are identified in the siSwati short story ‘Phumani Nelokhambi’, contributed by Thembekile Msibi to Khulumani Sive by Zodwa Motsa (2004). The concepts of ‘short story’ and ‘proverb’ will be defined as part of the introductory section of this discourse. Thereafter, a summary of the short story will be provided, to lay a good foundation. Then, the dominant proverbs in the story shall be identified and listed before the actual analysis. While the various domains of the proverbs will be alluded to in the discussion, the proverbs will not be categorised into these. Each proverb will be critically analysed by focusing on its origin, structure, literal and figurative meanings in general, and its meaning in the context of the story. The latter will also comprise of the effectiveness of the proverbs in the narrative, the author’s intentions and some cultural aspects which are highlighted.

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Introduction

While Msibi uses proverbs in an artistic manner in her short story, so far, no research has been conducted, analysing this aspect of the story. Antones-Dlamini (2021), on whose doctoral thesis this article is based, is the only one who has so far done so. It is then for the lack of such research and the intensive use of proverbs in this piece of work that this study is conducted, aiming at revealing the beautiful manner in which the proverbs are employed.

A short story, according to Abrams (1999: 286), is a brief work of modern prose fiction in which the types and narrative techniques, as used in the novel, are also applicable. Mamba (2009: iv) concurs that a short story is a brief tale that focuses mainly on one or two key elements. These elements being referred to are the plot, character, point of view, setting, theme and/or style. Hendry (1991: ii) defines the short story by firstly tracing its history. He states that the short story is a modern literary genre that started around the time of Edgar Allan Poe, and which has developed through the early part of the Twentieth Century into a recognizable literary form, incorporating some of the general elements of all fiction and some others particular to itself.

The brevity and conciseness of the short story set it apart from other forms of prose fiction, such as the novel. Hendry (1991: 183) further highlights that the brevity of the short story demands precise expression, which makes the language economical as in a poem, and densely charged with meaning. All this shows that the short story is indeed restrictive in its form and fiction through which the elements such as plot, theme, character and setting are interwoven.

Other prose forms, which are categorised together with the short story, include the novel, novella or novelette, the essay, the tale and anecdote. Abrams (1999: 286) briefly defines the novel as long prose fictional form which organizes the action, thought and dialogue of its characters into the artful pattern of a plot. He continues to define the novelette as a short narrative which can be in both verse and prose and is one of the oldest and most widespread of literary forms (Ibid.). He further defines the tale as a story that focuses on

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the course and outcome of the events while the anecdote is an unelaborated narration of a single incident (Ibid.). Therefore, the short story differs from all of these forms because of its distinct compact structure. The great intensity of the short story distinguishes it from the novel. The essay does resemble the short story because of its brevity and economical language but it is more descriptive and argumentative than a short story, which is a narrative. Vilakati and Sibanda (1997: 7), who discuss types of essays, draw a demarcation line between it and the short story by revealing that essays are more descriptive, argumentative, dialogic and situational.

Toews (2019: 25) highlights the difficulty some scholars have encountered pertaining to the definition of proverbs. Madumulla (2001: 257) agrees that the proverb has bothered scholars of paraemiology for a long time, such that even the ‘father of paraemiology’, who is Archer Taylor, preferred to identify and describe the proverb by the use of its characteristic features. Madumulla (Op cit.) also mentions that Ruth Finnegan does the same as Taylor. However, in spite of all these difficulties, Mayr (1912: 957), Okpewho (1992: 230), Vilakati and Sibanda (1997: 54), and Kamera (2001: 212), make efforts to define proverbs. Vilakati and Sibanda (1997: 54) consider proverbs as “wise words or sayings that have been put together and used to enrich speech or when acceptable and well-known truths have to be communicated to members of society”. Kamera (2001: 212) also states that proverbs are “terse and self-contained pithy statements or sayings of folk wisdom which enjoy communal acceptance as truths.” Okpewho (1992: 230) concurs with Kamera, that the proverb is a piece of folk wisdom expressed with terseness and charm.

Mayr (1912: 957) highlights that the wisdom of a nation is evident in its proverbs, as he witnesses in his isiZulu collection, that proverbs depict how shrewd amaZulu are. Okpewho (1992: 230) communicates that age and experience put African elderly people in a better position to understand the full meaning of the wisdom and truth found in the proverb, so as to pass it to the younger generation. That is why proverbs have developed throughout generations and are still part of every form of communication in African communities up to today. Without proverbs, interactions will lose colour, shape and form. Dlaminii et al. (2006: 43) explain that all Africans like to use proverbs to display their expertise and to be precise in what they mean. This is stressed by Thwala (2017: 38), who highlights those proverbs are a core of isiSwati (or African) culture as they contain the wisdom of the nations, the general outlook of the life of the people and their socio-cultural systems.

As Finnegans (2012: 379) defines African proverbs by considering their structure, she states that they are rich in imagery and succinct expressions on which more elaborative forms can draw. Dlaminii et al. (Op cit.) further elaborate that proverbs are usually collected together with idioms and riddles, then, put into one large pot of oral prose, yet still they have some poetic aspects within them. Thus, these distinct features make the proverb unique.

Proverbs, as they have been used to enhance oral communication, have found their way into written texts. Proverbs are also “characterized by depth, seriousness and brevity” (Kamera 2001: 213). This makes their usage in literature effective as they are grammatically complete units and are used to warn, advise, criticise, educate, tease and ridicule mankind. Alimi (2012: 121) and Hendry (1991: 183) agree that proverbs can be used as literary techniques to “portray the author’s personality, literary background, way of life, community’s beliefs, practices, values, norms, fears and concerns”. Therefore, the article shall explore, in detail, how the author of the short story under study achieves this, by employing proverbs.

Theoretical framework

The Relevance Theory will form the base of this study because it is simple, clear, logical, concise and relevant. The Relevance Theory, as summarised by Toews (2019: 7), is a cognitive theory of communication which attempts to explain all forms of communication, both explicit and implicit. Toews (Op cit.) stresses that meaning and utterances are context bound, so the forms of language used to communicate are not always enough in themselves to get the intended meaning of an utterance, so, there must be operations involved to help people infer such meanings. Thus, Sperber and Wilson (1995: 260) propose two principles of Relevance. The first one highlights that “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.” Toews (2019: 16) explains that this principle means that the major goal of the human brain is to break down perceptions of the world into understandable pieces that are relatable to each individual’s experience. The human mind naturally assesses perceptions in a way that will make sense to the individual.

The second principle states that “every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.” (Ibid.). Toews (Op cit.) explains that this means that when a speaker is attempting a communication act, it will be worth the cognitive effort to process it and there is an optimally relevant interpretation. When a proverb is uttered, for example, the hearer will interpret the utterance as best fits the current context and that, while it may seem irrelevant on the surface, there may be a deeper meaning that the speaker wants to imply. Thus, this theory will be applicable to this study as it has been tried and tested and more so because the study deals with literal and figurative expressions. It also works through implicit and explicit communications and considers the importance of context. These are discussed below.

Implicit versus Explicit Communication

Toews (2019: 17) states that The Relevance Theory claims that communicative utterances carry meaning through explicatures and implicatures which are related to what is explicit and what is implied in the utterance. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995: 182), an explicature is a proposition derived from the logical form encoded by the utterance whilst implicatures are premises or conclusions which are communicated by the utterance but which are not developments of the logical form of the utterance. According to relevance
The Importance of Context

Wilson (2009: 45) states that context alone can change the message. Toews (2019: 32) also argues that all communication happens at a specific time and place, and between specific people. Therefore, all these factors will influence the interpretation of utterances. Toews highlights the shortcomings of most proverb collections which are mostly lists of isolated utterances, absent of context. He further notes that, as much as the meanings can be clear in these compendiums, the range of their possible uses may not be. He notes that these collections focus on the base meaning which is the non-figurative paraphrase of the proverb, the stable general truth of the proverb that is understood by the language community. Thus, Toews’ aim matches the aim of this study, in which both demonstrate how context influences the use and understanding of proverbs.

Summary of the Short Story

The story, ‘Phumani Nelikhambi’, is about a married woman, LaMphondvo, who loses her husband in a car accident and is faced with a lot of problems. Her husband leaves no inheritance but a pile of debts. Creditors are on her case, so she is thinking of mourning for a short period of time so as to soon look for a job. This does not sit down well with her in-laws because this is taboo in siSwati culture during the era presented in the story. She requests for a family meeting but she becomes so nervous on the fateful day. It is her main day for kuguqcula (end of the one-month seclusion for widows) but she does not seem happy or relieved. She is also expecting her brother to come to the meeting and dreads seeing one of the creditors who threatened to come on that particular day. She keeps thinking about what her rude sisters-in-law will say. The weather is not good too. A storm is brewing. The time for the meeting comes and the eldest member of the family, Mkhulu Matsenjwa, challenges all the family members by stating the facts of LaMphondvo’s situation as it is, and then asks if anyone has a better plan. Unfortunately, no one does and the storm gets worse, resulting in all her in-laws running heller skelter to their houses. LaMphondvo is left with her brother and sister. Her brother advises her to think carefully about her decision of leaving her in-law’s home to look for a job. The story ends with the arrival of the long awaited no nonsense creditor. The proverbs that are found in the story are:

i. Live lijikile (The country or world has changed)
ii. Inhlitiyo wawungatsi itawuphuma ngemlomo (It was as if the heart would come out of the mouth)
iii. Ekwendzeni kukamkhatsali (The in-law’s place is a tiring place)
iv. Umntfwana longakhali ufela embelekweni (A child who does not cry dies in the baby carrier)
v. Umhlaba sewuhleti ngeludzengelo (The earth is now supported by a clay piece)
vi. Live lingenanhlako (A country without the head)
ii. Sihlala ndzawonye sidla emajwabu (The one who sits in one place eats elastic meat)
vi. Lukhukhu yajukulu umlomo (The chicken’s beak was cut off)
ix. Ludlwaphu lolunganuki nasetiko (An extremely poor person who does not even smell in the fire)

Analysis of the Proverbs

The following is a critical analysis of the proverbs identified in the short story. Due to limited space, only seven of the proverbs are discussed, which are inhlitiyo wawungatsi itawuphuma ngemlomo (it was as if the heart would come out of the mouth), ekwendzeni kukamkhatsali (the in-law’s place is a tiring place), umhlaba sewuhleti ngeludzengelo (the earth is now supported by a clay piece), live lingenanhlako (a country without the head), sihlala ndzawonye sidla emajwabu (the one who sits in one place eats elastic meat), ludlwaphu lolunganuki ngisho etiko (an extremely poor person who does not even smell in the fire), and inkhukhu yajukulu umlomo (the chicken’s beak was cut off). They are chosen because of their artful contribution to the plot and theme of the story.

Inhlitiyo wawungatsi itawuphuma ngemlomo (It was as if the heart would come out of the mouth)

The proverb is sourced from observing people’s behaviours and emotions. It depicts a person who is extremely frightened. The persona is heard explaining to the listener how frightened the person talked about was. This is observed in the simile sihlabane njawonye sidla umiqwabu (the one who cries in the sand) and implying that the past tense, depict an ongoing conversation between the two people. The persona uses different tenses well to describe the emotions of the particular person. Hence, itawuphuma is in the future tense (as shown by the future morpheme /-u/) and it mimics how the past action was about to happen.

Literally, the proverb portrays an image of a heart that would come out of the mouth, which is hyperbolic. A frightened person’s heart beats faster and even visibly on the chest, which is not very far from the mouth. That is why the action is exaggerated as if the heart would come out. Figuratively, the hyperbole depicts a visual image of the terrified person so as to show how extreme the emotions were.
In the story ‘Phumani Nelikhambi’, the proverb is directed to LaMphondvo who is suffering silently because of her constant anxiety. It is an important day to her in which she has come out of the house after the one month’s seclusion period. It is also the day for the meeting whereby she, her family and in-laws would discuss her unusual request. As the cleansing process continues, she is doing a lot of thinking and is worried about how the day will unfold. Her fear makes her heart to beat hard and fast, hence the use of the proverb: “Inhlitio kuLaMphondvo wawungatsi itawuphuma ngemlomo.” (Motsa, 2004: 108) (It was as if LaMphondvo’s heart would come out of the mouth). This creates tension and anticipation in the story as the reader wants to find out why she is so anxious and what her request will be. The proverb has taken the past tense as the narrator tells the story according to the author’s style.

**Ekwendzeni kukakmkhatsali** *(The in-laws’ place is a tiring place)*

The proverb above states bitter facts and portrays emaSwati’s cultural values and norms. It is always quoted when advising young girls who are ready for marriage so as to prepare themselves mentally. Looking at the way the proverb is structured, one notices how the locative ekwendzeni (the in-laws’ place) is used. It is derived from the noun umendvo (marriage). Ekwendzeni is an adverb of place and the proverb sounds as if the location or the place of marriage is the one that is problematic, instead of the marriage itself. This implies that the in-laws’ place is really one where most of the problems erupt. This is true because, culturally, when a woman marries, she stays with her in-laws permanently, until she dies. Here, she would encounter a lot of problems because living with people who are not completely blood related to her is bound to cause some challenges.

The word kukamkhatsali (is a tiring place) is also an adverb of place and it sounds like the place belongs to someone, as indicated by the adverbial morpheme /-ka/- (at). There is an element of juxtaposition in the proverb because both words are adverbs of places referring to similar situations but described differently. Kamkhatsali is the place of the in-laws where the bride will get tired. So, the supposed person referred to here is called Mkhatsali, which implies that the in-laws are tiring (bayukhatsalisa) because they have many demands and rules that the bride has to abide by. Kukhatsala is an action nominal or a verb which can have various interpretations depending on the context. It can refer to fatigue, anger, shock and disappointment. All these meanings are applicable to marriage. Hence, the proverb depicts the close relationship between getting married and getting tired or disappointed. Another idea is that of the irony of young people expecting marriage to be a bed of roses yet, in actual fact, there are many challenges one faces. Thus, these expectations often end in dejection (kukhatsala).

Literally, the proverb is about the in-law’s place which is assumed to be tiring. There are many reasons that can make a woman suffer from fatigue at her in-laws. These include the chores she is expected to do such as cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, weeding fields, bearing and taking care of her children as well as everyone else’s needs. Figuratively, the proverb reflects that marriage is not easy but full of challenges, especially for women in patriarchal societies. Therefore, the proverb intends to warn young women about the challenges of marriage, so that they think carefully before they commit themselves.

In the story, the proverb is used by LaMphondvo as she is deep in thought about the family meeting which is just about to begin. She reflects about her life in marriage and thus concludes that, indeed, elders are right when they say marriage is really challenging. She has just lost her husband who had a lot of debts she was not aware of. After citing the proverb, she continues to narrate more of the challenges she has been facing, which include the fact that, according to culture, a married woman has to follow protocol if she has problems in her marriage and wants to communicate them to her in-laws. Thus, the proverb highlights LaMphondvo’s current situation which builds more tension in the story and evokes emotions of pity. She is also portrayed as a character who suffers from inner conflict because she over thinks and her heart palpitates due to the fear of the unknown. She is scared of her in-laws’ anticipated reaction after hearing about her proposal to mourn for a shorter period and, at the same time, she is afraid of the creditor who will come to demand money from her, which she does not have.

LaMphondvo is portrayed as a representative and a spokesperson of all the emaSwati women. That is why she laments her and the rest of the women’s plight in marriage when she says: “… Labadzala basuke bacinisile nabatsi ekwendenzi kukamkhatsali, ngukagobagugu.” (Motsa, 2004: 109) (… The elders have all along been right when they said marriage has a lot of challenges). The author portrays her as a woman who is brave enough to even suggest to her in-laws that she wants to mourn for three months, something which was taboo in siSwati culture back in the day. This decision makes her fearful of the anticipated reaction of her in-laws but she remains strong. She suffers from internal conflict but, at least, she is lucky enough to get the family to meet and discuss the matter. The author indicates that if all women were to have such bravery and face issues head on, things could actually work in their favour.

**Umhlaba sewuhleti ngeludzengelo** *(The earth is now supported by a clay piece)*

The proverb above states bitter facts and is derived from observing nature. The verb sewuhleti (it is now supported), which is in the present perfect tense, depicts the present state of the earth. It shows that this is a matter of urgency as anything can happen because of the instability of the earth. The object on which the earth is said to be supported (lu dzenge lo) is actually a tiny piece of clay that is usually kept after the breaking of a clay pot. In siSwati traditional lifestyle, this piece has many uses such as being a dog or a cat’s plate, a plate for crushing herbs and roots, amongst others. The syntactical structure of the proverb looks interesting, in that, the first word umhlaba (earth) has three syllables (um-hla-ba) and the next word sewuhleti (is now supported) has four syllables (se-wa-hle-ty) and the last one ngeludzengelo (by a clay piece) has five syllables (nge-la-dze-ngel-lo). The increase of the syllables as the proverb
is uttered seems to suggest the sense of urgency with regard to the matter of the instability of the earth. That is, as time goes on, the earth is becoming even more unstable and anything can happen if nothing is urgently done about the situation.

The base meaning of the proverb is that the way of doing things in the world is changing from good to bad, which means that people are losing touch with their humanity or moral values. Literally, the proverb depicts the image of the earth as unstable, since it is supported by a tiny object which can break anytime. Figuratively, the proverb refers to the changing times and the different ways of doing things. The changing times and ways of doing things that are happening on earth, are the reason for the use of the image. The earth is a metaphor for the people living in it. The instability, as portrayed by the visual image of the clay piece, symbolises the effects of the changing times and unusual way of doing things. If the earth is unstable, that means danger is looming as it (the earth) can collapse at any time.

The collapsing, as insinuated by the metaphor of the clay piece (ludzengelo), which is hyperbolic, symbolises the moral decay that will come as a result of people doing as they please. Thus, the proverb acts as a warning as it is pronounced by an elder; Mkhulu Matsenjwa who is full of wisdom, in the story. He uses it at the beginning of his speech to compare and contrast the different lifestyles of people nowadays and those of the past. He exclaims at the changes he has observed nowadays by using the proverb as he expresses surprise like one who prophesies doom. He is an instrument that will bring change in the family as he challenges the family members’ thinking and way of doing things. His speech arouses more tension and pushes the story to the climax. Some of the highlights of his speech and the proverbs he uses are as follows:

“Kuyevalaka bantwabumani, nami ngiyamangala kutsi kantsi vele umhlaba sewuhleti ngeludzengelo” (Motsa, 2004: 111)

(I understand my children; I am also surprised that things have really changed.)

Mkhulu Matsenjwa is a respected elder who possesses ultimate wisdom and is believed to solve any kind of problem in the family. His speech is full of facts and it challenges all the family members. According to Dlamini et al. (2006: 196):

“... Indzaba nase ijutjwe ngumnumzane isuke seyi ifike ekuciseni, futi kute longeca livi lakhe ngoba ngayena mehluleli lomkhulu.”

(… When a matter has been concluded by the head of the family, that is the end of it, and no one can go against it because he is the judge.)

This is why the author uses the elder as the wisest person, who weighs issues as they are, instead of taking sides and being overcome by emotions. Masuku et al. (2008: 37) concur that a mkhulu (grandfather) in the home may be seen as weak but he still deserves respect as the leader who has authority and deals with all issues pertaining to everyone, as well as livestock. He is also responsible for consulting the ancestors and taking care of traditional medicines and rituals. Therefore, Mkhulu goes back in time to look at how things were done during his time of growing up, as a way to compare and contrast the past and present, so that the family can come up with a practical solution. Kamera (2001: 213) also highlights that elders are knowers in our communities and they stand behind the proverbs and sanction truths expressed by and conveyed in them.

Live lingenanhloko (A country without the head)

This proverb depicts the way of life of emaSwati and the importance of a leader or a king in the country. In the siSwati culture, the king is a very important figure, who exists for his people and the people exist for him. This means that both parties are crucial for the kingship institution to thrive. The proverb depicts a visual image of the country, as it is personified. The country is portrayed as a human being with body parts. The head is the most important part because it comprises of other parts which are crucial for the body to function well, such as eyes, nose, ears, mouth and it encompasses the brain. Nobody can survive without the head.

Basically, the proverb means that the country has no king, whether temporarily or permanently. Literally, the proverb portrays a country like a body that is headless, which means that it is as good as dead. The body cannot function without the head and vice versa. Figuratively, the proverb reflects that the absence of the king, as the head, is cause for concern. This is because, if the king keeps leaving the country, as Mkhulu Matsenjwa says, there could be danger to his people. A lot can happen in his absence, just like when parents are away from a homestead and children can get up to a lot of mischief.

Mkhulu uses the proverb as he continues with his speech to depict a vivid image of the king during his many travels. He makes an example of the king nowadays in comparison with past kings who did not travel frequently. He does this to elaborate on the changing times and ways of doing things:

“Sikhule sati kutsi inkhosi ayihambahambi nje isiyile live lingenanthloko, kodwva lamahla Silo semaSwati sihamba mihla le. Angitsi lokuhamba kwelihubele, ngiko lokwakhela lakaNgwane ligama nebuhlobo emaveni, kabe vele siSwati sisho sitisi, ‘sihlala ndzawonze sida emajwabu.’” (Motsa, 2004: 111)

(We grew up knowing that the king does not travel frequently and leaves the country without a head but nowadays the king travels frequently. Indeed, his travels are helping our country in terms of international relations because emaSwati believe that ‘a person who stays in one place achieves nothing.’)
Mkhulu Matsenjwa’s use of the two proverbs above (live lingenanhloko and sihlala ndzawonye sidla emajwabu) demonstrates the comparison between his life when he was growing up and the life led by the people at present. He is doing that for the purpose of creating a vivid picture and stating facts as they are, without being biased. He even makes an example of the king who is the people’s leader, as a way to convince everybody that what he is saying is supported by evidence. Mkhulu Matsenjwa is a true liSwati man and he is portrayed as a wise person indeed, just as everyone perceives him as a solution provider.

Sihlala ndzawonye sidla emajwabu (One who sits in one place eats elastic meat)
The proverb also depicts people’s way of life and it states bitter facts as a way to discourage laziness or lack of productivity. EmaSwati are naturally active and productive people. That is why the habit of staying in one place is discouraged. Inactivity can be interpreted in many ways in emaSwati society. It can be a sign of laziness, lack of interest or, in extreme cases, sickness. All these situations are negative and can have bad effects. ‘Sihlala ndzawonye’ is a person who likes to stay in one place and does nothing. The person is named after his or her actions, which (naming) is common amongst emaSwati.

The use of the noun prefix /si-/ depicts that the person is ridiculed because of his or her undesirable actions. Normally, the appropriate prefix for personal nouns is /um-/ as in umpendi (painter), umfundzi (student) and umVangeli (evangelist). Some examples of nouns that begin with the prefix /si-/ are: sidli (a glutton), sihanbi (foreigner or traveller) and siphingi (adulterer). All these nouns are derogative to demonstrate that the use of the prefix is associated with negativity. The noun emajwabu describes elastic and tasteless meat which no one likes to eat. Notably, the repetition of the syllable /si-/ in the proverb produces an internal rhyme which beautifies its form and emphasizes on the actions of the said individual.

Literally, the stagnant person portrayed in the proverb is assumed to be unproductive, so he or she will end up eating rejected meat. This kind of meat is tasteless and no one likes it. The plurality of the word emajwabu shows that the person will eat the bad meat for a long time if he or she does not change his or her ways. Figuratively, the person who likes to stay in one place is portrayed as one who is lazy to work or fails to come up with ideas to improve his or her life, or he or she is less interested in exploring new things. Thus, the outcome of such actions, as portrayed by the symbol of emajwabu (elastic meat), can make one to miss out on a lot in life, which can result in one depriving oneself of a comfortable lifestyle. The use of the metaphor of meat proves just how emaSwati value and enjoy it. Culturally, eating meat frequently is a sign of an abundant lifestyle because for one to have it, one must first own domestic animals such as cows, chickens, goats, pigs and more.

In the story, the proverb is used by Mkhulu Matsenjwa as he illustrates on the benefits of the king’s travels. He is highlighting that even though some people are uncomfortable about the king’s frequent travels; this is actually benefitting the country because, if he were to stay in one place, nothing good would be achieved. The author uses the proverb and the example of the king to portray LaMphondvo’s situation and request as nothing beyond the ordinary.

Ludlwaphu lolunganuki ngisho etiko (An extremely poor person who does not even smell in the fire)
This is a hilarious proverb that originates from observing people’s way of life. Poor people are often despised in societies. That is why the proverb ridicules an extremely poor person. The poor person’s situation is being portrayed in a hyperbolic manner to show a vivid picture to the listener. The noun ludlwaphu (a very poor person) is extreme in that the normal one is luphuya (a poor person). Thus, if a speaker wants to depict someone’s dire situation, he or she can use ludlwaphu (a very poor person) instead of the normal luphuya. The former can either be used humorously or derogatively, depending on the context.

The phrase lolunganuki nasetiko (that does not even smell in the fire) is also hyperbolic on its own and it elaborates on how poor the person referred to is. Literally, it portrays an image of a log that is too dry such that it does not even produce any smelly smoke in the fire. The repetition of the /Il/ sound produces consonance which results in a nice rhythm.

Figuratively, the proverb uses an extensive hyperbole to depict an extremely poor person. The word ludlwaphu (a very poor person) is extreme on its own and the image of a dry log makes the poor person’s situation worse than it originally is. All logs produce thick and smelly smoke when burnt but the one referred to here has been stripped of everything that could make it smell. Therefore, the hyperbole and the metaphor of the dry log serve to evoke sympathy to whoever is listening.

In the story, the proverb is used by Mkhulu Matsenjwa to describe his poor status as an old man who is unemployed. He says: “Mine ngiludlwapho lolunganuki ngisho etiko” (Motsa, 2004: 111) (I am an extremely poor person that does not even smell when burnt in fire). He expresses himself during the family meeting, as he is challenging his family members to voice out their ideas on how to help LaMphondvo settle her husband’s debts, if they refuse to allow her to look for a job. He explains that he is extremely poor so he cannot help her in any. He compares himself to an extra dry log that does not even smell when burnt. He portrays himself in this humorous way to suggest that he has no capacity to stand in LaMphondvo’s way because he has no money to offer her. He indicates that his poverty situation is so ridiculous to a point where he sees himself as useless, monetary-wise. This is effective in terms of convincing or coercing his family members to make a good decision based on facts, instead of emotions. This clever way of describing his poverty situation also depicts his creativity, wisdom and sense of humour. The sense of humour helps to ease the tension in the room.
The author, Msibi, uses the proverb to portray Mkhulu Matsenjwa as an honest elderly person who is full of wisdom because he judges situations based on facts instead of emotions. Msibi also shows that, mostly, the elderly in her society are poor, so they do not have the power to make financial decisions. Thus, Mkhulu Matsenjwa accepts this as a fact, which is why he seems to understand LaMphondvo’s plight. Msibi sends a message to all in-laws to be like Mkhulu and see facts as they are and not stand in the way of women’s freedom, if they can see that they have no solutions to their problems. Therefore, women and widows, in particular, should be set free and allowed to fend for their children, instead of being punished in the name of culture.

**Inkhu khayajwana umlomo** *(The chicken’s beak was cut off)*

The proverb is sourced from observing the behaviour of animals. It indicates that someone cut off the chicken’s beak. EmaSwati are farmers who rear various domestic animals, including chickens, which they slaughter occasionally for enjoyment. The front and unpainful part of the beak of a live chicken gets cut off when the chicken has a tendency of eating eggs and plants in the fields or gardens. The cutting off of the beak makes it to be blunt and unable to break the shell of an egg. Without this part, the chicken’s beak becomes useless, as far as breaking eggs is concerned. Thus, it is some kind of punishment for its wrongdoing. The proverb is used in the past tense to illustrate a past incident. It does not specify who cut off the chicken’s beak, in order to generalize on the action, since anyone can be a victim of such a circumstance.

Basically, the proverb refers to someone who could not say anything at a particular point in time, when he or she was expected to speak. It intends to ridicule or shame such a person for the surprising behaviour. Literally, the proverb depicts an image of a chicken that has just had its beak cut off for the tendency of eating eggs and plants. This is a pitiful scenario and a harsh punishment. Figuratively, the act of cutting the chicken’s mouth, hyperbolically and metaphorically, shows the sudden loss of words by the individual in question. The chicken’s mouth, therefore, is a metaphor for the culprit who could not express himself or use his mouth, as if it was cut off. The reasons for one to behave in this manner can include sudden embarrassment, guilt, shame, or ignorance on the subject discussed. Most of the time, people experience loss of words when they get questioned about bad behaviour. When they discover that the bad deed they committed in secret is exposed, they, in shock, often do not have a way of defending themselves and keep quiet when questioned about it. For their lack of response, they get associated with a chicken whose beak has been cut off.

The proverb is used by Mkhulu Matsenjwa in the story, to describe the family members’ loss of words when the no nonsense creditor had come to demand his money after the death of LaMphondvo’s husband. Mkhulu is reminding the family members of that past incident, to show them how incapable they were of helping LaMphondvo in that situation. That is why the proverb is in the past tense.

He continues to challenge his family members as follows:

“... Tsine njengemndeni sinaliphi likhambi?... Phela sasikhona sonkhe nakafika lendvodza yelihwanca. Sathula, inkhukhu yayajwana umlomo ...” *(Motsa, 2004: 111)*

(… We as a family, what solution do we have? ... Indeed, we were all here when the bearded man came. We were all quiet like a chicken whose beak was cut off … )

Mkhulu Matsenjwa’s speech above challenges his family members even more by the use of the proverb, which reminds them of their past actions and failure to solve the problem at hand. The flashback acts as a reminder to everyone who may be quick to judge the widow about her request to mourn for a short period, so that she can go and work. Mkhulu is challenging those who are quick to judge to think carefully before doing so, especially because no one seems to have a solution to LaMphondvo’s problem.

By using the respected elder in the family, the author achieves her purpose because Mkhulu does not take sides but reflects on the issues as raw as they are. Even the king, who is above reproach, is mentioned as a leader who seems to be breaking the rules, by occasionally travelling to gain something for his nation. This means that breaking tradition once, for the benefit of the people involved, may not be such a bad idea. This is a bit surprising to be mentioned by a senior member of the household, who is assumed to be traditional, but the author is sending a message that being rigid does not help in dire situations. There should be exceptions sometimes, as culture is supposed to be dynamic. This is the author’s plea to the whole society to come up with concrete solutions to issues involving widows and women in general. One can conclude that, indeed, Msibi demonstrates bravery, as a woman, by using literature as a weapon to fight the injustices in her society.

However, as much as the story challenges culture and traditions, there are some positive elements which are upheld. For example, LaMphondvo performs all the rituals associated with widowhood and she demonstrates respect for her in-laws at all times. She knows and even acknowledges the fact that she has to go through the relevant channels for her matter to be heard. She also admits that, according to culture, her two children are not enough as her immediate family. That is why she even invites her brother for support, as well as her sister who has been with her all along. During the meeting, she humbles herself and is graceful as she looks down all the time. She knows that as a widow, she has no voice but her brother has to speak on her behalf. She remains calm and composed like a true liSwati woman, even when her brother-in-law and sister-in-law start to insult her. This proves that one does not need to be disrespectful, aggressive or violent to achieve her purpose but to exercise wisdom.
Conclusion

This article has critically analysed various proverbs which have been identified in the short story; ‘Phumani Nelikhambi’ by T. Msibi, in Z. Motsa’s Khulumani Sive. It has been observed that, indeed, these proverbs are used by the author to suit the context in terms of the plot, theme and subject matter. Some of the proverbs expose certain character traits which are liked or disliked by emaSwati while others also portray the societal values and norms which are slowly diminishing but still upheld by some. It has also been noted that, indeed, the author makes use of these proverbs as vehicles through which she addresses the burning issues in her society, as a means of finding a way forward towards the anticipated change, regarding women matters. The author gets the platform to express her views, attitudes and concerns on issues that affect her and the society she lives in. She portrays some customs and traditions well, so that the coming generations can learn about them and continue to practise them. She also criticises some of these traditions, which she feels are outdated and no longer serve the people.

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