





## **Patriarchy, Women and HIV/AIDS in Mapalala's *passed Like a Shadow***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although HIV/AIDS affects both men and women, the infection rate amongst women over the years outstrips the number of men contracting this disease. The gravity of the situation has prompted many African writers to use the ready-made materials on HIV/AIDS in their society to create works of art. The purpose of this paper is to examine Bernard Mapalala's short story "Passed like a Shadow" in relation to the HIV/AIDS scourge, focusing on how the story represents the women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The paper argues that the story identifies patriarchy and its attendant problems as the primary contributing factor to the rapid spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic amongst women.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since it was reported in the 1980s, more and more African women are becoming infected with HIV/AIDS. Following its fatality, the disease has attracted the attention of many people. In fact, many disciplines such as politics, sociology, and anthropology have discussed at length the causes, impacts and prevention measures of this deadly disease.

#### **The story "Passed like a Shadow"**

The struggles to combat HIV/AIDS have not remained a concern of the above disciplines only. Literary studies have also picked up the gauntlet because authors are increasingly making HIV/AIDS the subject of their fiction. In Tanzania, Bernard Mapalala's "Passed like a Shadow" focuses on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, especially in relation to its effect on the women. In this short story, Mapalala's shares his own experiences about this fatal disease. Set in the fictitious area, Kachwamba, of East Africa, the story dwells primarily on the effects of the disease. The story traces the origin and

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spread of the disease. Specifically, Mapalala in "Passed like a Shadow" focuses on the impact of HIV/AIDS on African women.

#### **Patriarchy, women, HIV/AIDS and the story**

The short story's primary theme is that patriarchy in many African societies makes the men the primary culprits in the spread of the disease. Scholars assert that the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS is rooted in patriarchy (Mcfadden, 1992; Messer, 2004). It is argued that patriarchy and its attendant problem catalyse the spread of HIV/AIDS since it promotes gender inequality between men and women, poverty, masculine and feminine stereotypes (Fox, 2002), which eventually make the women vulnerable when it comes to the spread of HIV/AIDS. In many African societies, patriarchal practices shape and perpetuate gender inequality, which in turn results into women contracting HIV/AIDS. The factors include the men's reckless behaviour and the women's disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, which put them at the receiving end. Focusing on Mapalala's "Passed like a Shadow", this paper argues that it is the story's contention that, by empowering men at the expense of women, patriarchy makes women more vulnerable to the HIV/AIDS infection.

"Passed like a Shadow" presents two families: the family of Adyeli (the husband) and Amoti (the wife) and the Family of David's father. Adyeli and Amoti have a formal marriage. The couple once loved each other. But as time progresses, their relationship is strained. Despite the problems, Amoti remains a kind, humble, caring and responsible mother. She is a conventional African wife who abides by traditional customs. In a traditional African society, a woman is responsible for domestic chores. In fact, in many African societies women are put firmly in the domestic sphere with a primary responsibility of rearing children and housekeeping (Bailey, 2005).

In the story, Amoti, the wife of Adyeli is overburdened with work and, as a result, begins to grow weak. Adyeli, the husband is a renowned headmaster in Fort Portal. Although they are in a monogamous marriage, Adyeli lives in a traditional system, which gives man powers to decide on matters related to married life. In "Passed like a Shadow", male characters cling to traditional values, oblivious to issues of gender equality. They want to have extra-marital relationships while expecting their spouses to remain faithful. Beauvoir (1989) points out those patriarchal systems condemn women to chastity and fidelity but give males sexual licence. Because of patriarchy in Africa, a man can have extra marital affairs without being subjected to social stigma (Beauvoir, Ibid). In this sense, directly or indirectly men are allowed to have sex outside their marriage but never the women.

In the story, Amoti as an African woman is confined to house chores. For generations, as noted by Nakawombe (1996: 43), women's 'proper sphere' has been home "with its associated cardinal virtues of domesticity, piety, purity and submissiveness." From the beginning of the story Amoti is

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portrayed as a silent woman. Whenever, she wants to contribute ideas her husband Adyeli silences her (p.3). This is a clear indication of the way patriarchy system operates. The story shows how sex differences rationalise oppression.

Amoti's life as has been the case of many African women is defined by the ideology of domesticity (Tamale, 2004). Her tasks include producing children, caring for the family and taking care of the domestic sphere. Through the portrayal of Amoti, the story shows a woman's place in the society for patriarchy ascribes some social tasks to men and others to women, excluding women from certain roles (Nakawombe, Ibid). Amoti is always busy and tired. She fetches water far from her home, cares for children and does many domestic chores. Despite all these tasks she attends her husband to his needs. She truly loves her husband and honours her marriage.

On his part, Adyeli is a Headmaster who spends his time in the office and at a local drinking club. Adyeli has extra-marital affairs with other women. Adyeli's extra marital affairs are situated in cultural and social practices. In terms of culture, the masculinity tendency among the Kachwanga influences him to look for other women. Also Adyeli is after social reputation of seeking modern life styles. It is here where the author narrates with a bitter tone how adultery and the infidelity of men lead to the contraction of HIV/AIDS. The story narrates the way Adyeli is drinking heavily and has left his home. He now lives with Birungi, a woman he drinks with. When the Bishop hears this scandal from people Adyeli is fired from job. He now has no job. He sells the land left by his parents. When the money is finished, the woman-Birungi deserts him. He goes back to his wife-Amoti. He is already infected with HIV/AIDS.

In a one-men and one-woman Christian marriage, couples need to respect their marriage. Christian guidelines insist that the communion of love between God and people extends to the marriage covenant "which is established between a man and a woman" (Paul John II: 18). Christianity requires a man and a woman commit themselves totally to each other until death doth part them. Thus, Christians view idolatry as a prostitution, infidelity as adultery and disobedience to the law as abandonment of the spousal love of the lord (Paul John II: 19). But because Adyeli is influenced by patriarchal norms of his society, he does not adhere to these principles. When Adyeli is informed by the counsellor that he has contracted AIDS, he admits that he had unprotected sex with more than two women:

"I can't believe it," he [Adyeli] said. "It can't be true." "You don't have to say that, Adyeli" The well trained AIDS, Counsellor told him politely.

"But where can I have got it?" He asked defensively. "How many sexual partners do you have, Adyeli?"

Adyeli tried to make a lie, but he could not because the councillor happened to be a next-door neighbour.

"You know I have got two women"

"Didn't you have partners somewhere else?" The councillor questioned.

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A film reminded Adyeli's mind about the other partners he had at the local drinking club... (p. 24).

Since Adyeli picks up women at a pub after having a drink, one can deduce that the drink is responsible for his reckless behaviour, hence responsible for his contracting the disease. But in the story, Adyeli also admits that the cultural norms of the Kachwanga influence him to have other women to quench his sexual desires (p.29). Other characters such as David's father are also womanisers. David's father is an important man both in the government and in the Kabaka's Council, who uses his social position to have sex with women. His son, David, for example, tells Atwoki (son of Adyeli) that his father is very social and good at picking girls up (p.33). Again, like Adyeli, David's father infects his wife and their house-girl with HIV/AIDS. The two women end up in their death-beds waiting for their deaths.

Both Adyeli and David's father irresponsibly spread HIV/AIDS. But their behaviour is encouraged by patriarchy since they have the socio-economic status they can abuse, and their society pays a blind eye to such reckless behaviour. In this representation, the story casts women as victims of this patriarchal system. The faithful wives of Adyeli and David's father contract HIV/AIDS from their husbands. Although both Amoti, the wife of Adyeli, and the wife of David's father are aware of their husbands' infidelity, they are unable to resist their sexual advances because Kachwanga cultural norms demand that they please their husbands at any cost. As Anyanga (1996:211) notes, almost all religions—Christianity, Islam or traditional—“require a woman to obey a husband in all matters.” In this sense, “a woman cannot say no to sex even if she knows that her husband has tested HIV-positive” (Anyanga, *Ibid*).

“Passed like a Shadow” shows that patriarchy oppresses, controls and dehumanises women. Female characters are presented as marginalised individuals forced into positions of helplessness because traditional cultural values and norms silence women; in addition, they lack the economic muscle that men tend to have because of their privileged status. As result, Amoti, the wife of Adyeli and the wife of David's father do not object to have sex with their husbands for fear of breaking traditional customs. Contextually, the story appears to suggest that women should be given power to control their bodies and reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS to save the lives of married women.

But as the short story illustrates, the problems in African traditional communities are deep-rooted. Payment of the bride-price wealth, for example, turns many of the economically disadvantaged women into slaves. In Kachwanga culture, the persons who bargain for the bride-price are males. The Kachwanga assert that a suitor must pay the dowry to the bride's family and kindred for the marriage union to be formalised under customary law. Though the spirit behind such dowry is to unite two families and clans through marriage, the implication of such dowry has far-reaching implications especially for the woman. In “Passed like a Shadow”, apart from enriching themselves (since the males take hold of the dowry), the male

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characters turn the spouses into subservient partners since they have to fulfil their marital responsibilities to justify the dowry men paid for them. The story appears to suggest that dowries make the women vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS since they feel obligated to be at the mercy of their husbands who have paid their families dowries (which many African families dread returning once the marriage breaks down).

The undesirable consequences of the bride-price are further emphasised in the projection of Vicky, the daughter of Adyeli's late sister. Vicky does not know the identity of her real father and her mother died some years back. As a result, her uncle Adyeli has raised her up. Coming of age and about to get married, her fiancé Aneka has to pay the bride price to Vicky's uncle as tradition demands. Adyeli thus believes his fortune is "soon to change with the looming huge dowry" (p.10). Because of envy, Adyeli's wife Amoti does not want to see Vicky married to an affluent man. Her uncle Adyeli, on the other hand, wants Vicky to be married by 'anything' provided that 'thing' pays a good dowry (p.10). Whereas Amoti is influenced by envy, Adyeli is influenced by power and greed; the interest of Vicky in this case comes last. When Amoti and Vicky discuss Aneka, Adyeli intervenes:

Shut up both of you...I'm the only person who puts on trousers in the room. I'm the one to make decisions. This is what I have decided: I don't care who marries Vicky, whether it's person, a cow or a donkey. All I want is the dowry. I'll fix the bride-price and this man will cough it out. Once that's settled then I will have no objection. (p.10)

This shows the way patriarchal system operates. Adyeli's words show the power of men over women. In African societies a man is taught to be aggressive as a leader of the family so that he is feared and should be listened to. Chinweizu (1990: 12) notes that "aggressiveness is the hallmark of the male power". Adyeli's behaviour show masculine and dominance towards the two women-Amoti and Vicky.

It is argued that African men instituted the practice of charging dowry in an effort to belittle women by equating them to whatever value they attach to the bride-price (Mashambazhou, 2009). Consequently, Adyeli charges Aneka, Vicky's fiancé, an exorbitant and ridiculously high dowry, which he fails to pay. The man decides to abandon Vicky for he knows that he cannot marry her without paying the dowry. In turn, this makes Vicky start looking for another man. Vicky ends up contracting HIV/AIDS because of being denied an opportunity to marry someone she loves. Vicky becomes a prostitute:

From that day on her eyes were on the hunt for the person she wanted. She borrowed clothes and shoes from her two friends. She started putting a lot of makeup. Vicky changed, she became extra beautiful. Men started chasing her up the way flies chase rotting meat. She started being conceited...She attended discos and dances, spending the whole night out... (p. 20).

Through Vicky's characterisation, the story raises two issues. The first one is that the patriarchal system is exploitative because it gives no freedom to a woman to choose and decide on matters relating to her own marriage.

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The story appears to suggest that Vicky could not have contracted HIV/AIDS if she had been allowed to marry the man she loved. She becomes a prostitute because of the frustrations of being forced into a loveless marriage, and in the process contracts HIV/AIDS. The second issue is that the dowry practice needs to be reformed so that it is beneficial to both partners.

The implied reform in the story appears connected with the abuse of the dowry system by men in the contemporary society. Traditional African societies originally treated dowry as a symbolic gesture, a token of appreciation to the bride's family for raising the bride (Okafor, 2009). In today's society, however, economic interests have taken precedence over the societal values attached to the practice. Under the new changes, males, the heads of families, benefit from these transactions, whether monetary or in kind. Adyeli's attitude towards dowry demonstrates that the bride-price has lost its symbolic gesture and turned into a money-making venture. The story suggests that prioritising the dowry at the expense of the bride-to-be's interest further marginalises the women, and in this case puts them at the mercy of the dreaded HIV/AIDS. Though it is the male, Akena, who fails to foot the inflated dowry, it is Vicky, the female, the victim, who ends up contracting HIV/AIDS.

Through Vicky and Abooki, "Passed like a Shadow" demonstrates the difficulties poor women face in a male-dominated society. After Vicky's marriage bid falls through because her uncle quotes an unrealistic dowry for her fiancé, he sends her to work in a plantation picking tea-leaves. Even then her uncle confiscates all her earnings, which he uses to pay for the school fees of his children. Desperate for money, Vicky becomes a prostitute. Thus the once decent, innocent, and conservative virgin girl, Vicky is forced by circumstances to become a woman of questionable morals. The girl who once dreamed of a happy marriage that would safeguard her social status now finds herself confronted with a dark reality. Her friends, Tusiime and Kunihira, advise her to face the reality in the face of abject poverty and forget about reputation. Kunihira tells Vicky:

Reputation? Now what is your reputation? Is being a virgin a reputation? If you would be a minister, or a land lady, or a tea factory owner, I would call that reputation. You say reputation? Is your reputation now feeding you? Look how poor your dress is. You must be the most poorly dressed girl in Fort Portal. Reputation my foot! (p. 18).

Tusiime adds:

As for me I shall sleep with any man to make money. Life is not easy. There is no short-cut. Even girls who are university graduates are doing it. Vicky, you can't be smarter than the rest of the people in the world. You have to face facts. Beauty can make your life different. Think of it Vicky. It is time you made some smart move. Put your love for sale and forget about your uncle (p.18).

Usually poverty leads to prostitution as a means of survival (Gillepsie, 2006). The story exploits this age-old wisdom to portray the plight of

women in a patriarchal society. For female characters this also spells doom for them since they become easy targets for HIV/AIDS.

The dialectical relationship between HIV/AIDS and poverty is a focal point of many social and anthropological studies. People living in poverty are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS than those living in relative affluence. Poverty is associated with weak endowments of human and financial resources. These include poor education, income and assets (UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM, 2004). Whereas both genders are victims of poverty, the most adversely affected group is that of women, especially in the developing world where African communities are located. Although African women work in the farms, sell fruits and vegetables, and provide basic necessities for their families, they get a raw deal and end up the least economically empowered because men historically control the productive labour and resources of women (Gordon, 1996). In this sense, land productivity benefits men more than it does women. It can, therefore, be said that poverty is shaped by gender relations. As a social disease, HIV/AIDS is reflected in the lack of social power for women.

Vicky is victimised by the Kachwanga patriarchal social structure. Her uncle creates conditions that make it impossible for her fiancé to marry her. In addition, the same uncle abuses the authority society accords to him as the male head of the family to grab the wages she earns while working in the tea plantation. She becomes a prostitute—or commercial sex worker—as a last resort. When she does get married to a rich man, as a third wife, she ends up contracting HIV/AIDS in that marriage. Before she dies, she warns her cousin, Abooki:

‘My dear sister, I wish to counsel you one thing. Don’t go after money’...Then she raised her voice, ‘don’t go after money. Money will kill you. You better get married to a beggar Abooki, provided you love each other (p.42).

The assumption here is that Vicky would not be tempted to be a third wife of a rich man if she was financially secure; poverty robs her of her freedom of choice. Hence the HIV/AIDS she contracts is a result of the poverty to which she has been condemned.

In “Passed like a Shadow”, women are also portrayed as victims of violence, especially rape, which in turn contributes to their contracting HIV/AIDS. In line with sociological studies that associate the growing incidences of HIV/AIDS infection amongst women with sexual violence such as rape, the story projects the women’s vulnerability and the male-attitudes as contributory factors. Scholars have confirmed a strong correlation between sexual and other forms of abuse against women and a woman’s chance of contracting HIV/AIDS (UNIDS, 2006). Scholars like Bartaree and Marshall (1991) assert that the acts of raping are influenced by the psychology of machoism society accords men in a male-dominated social structure. On the other hand, Feminist theory contends that the occurrence of rape is a result of social power structures and masculine gender roles (Rose, 1977; Dworkin,



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1989). This is a traditional notion based on the socialisation of men as aggressor and women as passive prey (Gold and Villari, 2000).

"Passed like a Shadow" demonstrates how rape is rooted in the patriarchal structure. Abooki, the daughter of Adyeli and Amoti, is a decent virgin girl who has an advanced secondary school certificate, but who finds herself at the mercy of patriarchy. Her father Adyeli dies of AIDS and she is single-handedly left to nurse her mother, who is gravely ill with HIV/AIDS-related ailments. Abandoned by her brother, she is jobless and "all the big people who could help her demanded body pleasure before they could do anything" (p.44). In abject poverty and without a job, how can she take care of her dying mother and herself? John, a neighbour from a rich family, gives Abooki money with which to run the home. He also showers her with presents. Because she has no choice, Abooki accepts whatever John gives her. In a demonstration of male-power, John rapes her, believing he has earned that right of robbing her of her virginity by having given her money and presents. Though Abooki does not eventually contract HIV/AIDS like other female characters, she suffers the trauma of rape, especially the nagging fear of contracting the dreaded disease through forced vaginal penetration:

Abooki was very much worried from that day [she was raped] onwards. The blow was too much to bear. She remembered Vicky, how miserable she had been before she died. Pictures flashed on her father's final moment. Both people had cruelly suffered before they died. Her mother was also in a very bad situation. Abooki felt that she would end up with the same fate. From that day she hated John and she never wanted to see him again... 'My God,' she cried, 'I am finished.' Worse still she feared pregnancy. She was sure that either of the two tragedies had befallen her [HIV/AIDS and pregnancy]. Even if I might be lucky not to have AIDS, she thought, still no man will want to marry me because of the pregnancy. Her world had crashed unexpectedly... (p. 44).

The vulnerability of both Vicky and Abooki is in part attributable to the economic structure that favours men and in part to the gender-defined roles and repressive codes of conduct defined by the patriarchal system. Such vulnerability makes them susceptible to contracting HIV/AIDS. As women, Vicky and Abooki have limited access to resources such as education, land and the lucrative job opportunities. For these female characters, contracting HIV/AIDS is not just a matter of choice but also a product of the oppressive patriarchal system that privileges men over women.

### **CONCLUSION**

The conclusion of the story suggests several ways of combating HIV/AIDS. These include "abstinence for unmarried people and mutual love and loyalty among married couples" (p. 47), the only hundred percent protection guarantee from acquiring HIV/AIDS. Using the character Jonathan, the counsellor, the story also urges people to go back to the African traditional

values that encouraged chastity and preservation of virginity. Here, the author is gender-biased for he appears to place the HIV/AIDS burden solely on women. Karambani (2006) notes that many African cultures allow men to perform sex even before they are married but strictly forbid women from such sexual indulgence. Nakawombe (1996: 43) adds that, for centuries the ills of society are blamed on women for the reason that women are sources of impurity and death. Moreover, Wollstonecraft and Kelly (2009) explain that whether it is to sustain culture or values women are the foremost to be used as scapegoats in the wider patriarchal design. According to Wollstonecraft and Kelly, modesty, chastity, culture and values are specific to women's world. In "Passed like a Shadow", the patriarchal system affects women. Instead of calling African societies to uphold the girls' virginity, the story should also encourage African societies to change the male-chauvinistic tendencies that favour men and strive for gender parity in everything, including treatment of genders when it comes to sexual matters since double-standards tend to affect the women even more.

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